**Prelaw at Pitt-Johnstown󠄀**

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Advising booklet for undergraduates   
who may be interested in law school   
and a career in law-related professions

**‘Prelaw’ is not an academic major**

First of all, we need to clarify our terminology - ‘prelaw’ is not a field of academic study or discipline or an undergraduate major but rather signals a direction or an aspiration, such as “I want to be a lawyer” or “I plan to go to law school.” In broad terms, the American Bar Association (ABA) does not recognize specific courses or a specific undergraduate major as peculiarly appropriate as preparation for law school and actually encourages a diversity of academic interests at the undergraduate level. Surveys indicate that law school applicants come generally from social science fields, such as political science (20%), criminal justice (6%), psychology and history (5%).  However, since many colleges and universities and most high school guidance counselors continue use the term ‘prelaw’ when discussing various academic and career directions with students, more clarification is needed.

‘Prelaw’ is most appropriately used as an indication of a planned career direction.  It says in effect “I hope to attend law school after I have completed my undergraduate degree.” It also signifies an interest in focusing one’s curriculum choices on courses that emphasize verbal, written, and analytical skills. Some students and their parents think the term ‘prelaw’ refers to a set pre-professional curriculum akin to pre-medicine or pre-pharmacy.  However, these are traditional pre-professional programs that have an established (and required) sequence of science-based courses that must be completed with high grades to be considered adequately prepared for graduate study in a medical field.

In this sense, law schools are markedly different from schools of medicine.  The ABA is careful to stipulate that law schools expect no set curriculum of undergraduate study and prefer no particular major. Students typically enter law school from a wide variety of undergraduate fields and while most seem to major in one of the social sciences, many come from the humanities (literature, communications, languages, philosophy), the natural sciences (psychology, biology, geology, mathematics), and business (management, information systems).  Some enter law school after completing an Education degree, such as in secondary education certification in social studies; some may enter after completing their undergraduate degree in engineering. A smaller number enter law school after several years in an unrelated profession.

Law schools encourage undergraduates to pursue diverse courses of study at the undergraduate level because the study and practice of law involves so many dimensions of society, and the more understanding an undergraduate brings to the study of law, the better. Study in a combination of fields, such as completing a dual majors, a tangent or unrelated minor or a certificate program, and any form of extra-curricular experience, including study abroad, would indicate breadth in a student's undergraduate training.

Because ‘prelaw’ is not considered an academic major, all undergraduates who consider themselves ‘prelaw’ will eventually choose a major, a course of academic study, that suits their interests and abilities, such as political science, economics, history, English literature, biology, business, etc.  At the same time, they are best advised to choose elective courses that will develop their basic analytical capacities (see below) in general preparation for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and first-year law courses.

**Why do you want to go to law school?**

It is always interesting to find how many students who profess an interest in going to law school know very little about the law as a profession or law school as an academic experience.  Some are attracted to the law because a member of their family is an attorney, others by the status of having a law degree or simply being able to gain admission to law school, and still others because they assume law is a lucrative profession in which one can seek his own level of ambition. Others may see a law degree as a stepping stone to a parallel career, such as corporate work, legislative or executive staff work or elected political office.  And some are attracted by the intellectual intrigue of the law, a fascination with the legal maze and language or the complex doctrinal arguments over the origins of constitutional or statutory law..

But let's face it - law school is basically three years of postgraduatetraining which is very demanding, if not intellectually, then certainly in terms of the sheer range and volume of academic work required.  And it holds*no promise*of a guaranteed and fulfilling position after completion (‘a job’) as many anecdotal accounts have shown in the last couple of years.  Oftentimes, those practicing in the legal profession are involved in what can only be portrayed as *legal research*, not only on nuances of state law regarding a particular client but also with title searches, wills, and bill collection, school district debt structure, and local government ordinances regarding sewer lines and employee contracts, a far cry from the U.S. Supreme Court or televised portrayals of the legal profession. In practice, one’s first years in the profession can be far short of lucrative; most will not start in the $80-100k range unless you get attached to and move up within a large law firm (where there is stiff competition) or find a geographical and specialized niche of practice where your level of knowledge and experience is rare. And to be candid, law school is *expensive*, upwards from $150,000 over three years not counting living expenses like room and board. Why law school? That's a serious question, one to be seriously considered.

It may be surprising to learn that many law degree holders never take the bar exam and never practice law. Instead, they move into non-legal careers, either because desirable positions in law are scarce where they wish to reside or because their interests or personal circumstances have changed.  This more noticeable after the economic recession following the 2008-2009 financial crash when many law firms and legal departments of corporations responded by downsizing dramatically, glutting the legal marketplace with a large number of unemployed mid-career and early-career lawyers. Consequently, portrayals of the professional market for new law school graduates ranged from very competitive to very pessimistic.

What is the prognosis now, over a decade and a half later? It seems that the marketplace for law graduates remains *very competitive* and law school students are advised to augment their general legal preparation with *specific skills sets, externships, and areas of focus*. Those who graduate with a law degree and are 'ready-to-go', i.e. have a bundle of skills already developed and documented, are more competitive than those who have a generalized law degree (suitable for local practice) or are 'ready-to-train.' Leaner law firms do not have the time, the resources, or the inclination to in-house train (or apprentice) new lawyers as before.

First and foremost, realize that law is a *profession* and a *vocation*.  It primarily trains you how to do research in specific legal fields, which is the bread-and-butter of most legal practices. It also emphasizes methods and approaches in a fairly conventional course of academic study, involving a lot of sheer dog-work, plowing through and mastering legal doctrines and case law in various fields. Most attorneys will admit that law school itself, especially in the first-year core curriculum, is far less interesting than the actual practice of law. Students who as undergraduates were fascinated by legal complexities of case arguments before the Supreme Court become somewhat dulled by the basic legal formulas and procedural terminology emphasized in first-year law school. In fact, many who have gone to law school testify they found more intellectual stimulation in their applications of the law in specific cases *after* passing the bar and entering a particular field of litigation than in law school classes themselves (except perhaps in second-or-third-year specialty courses taken out of interest).

As an undergraduate, you should consider whether you might really be interested in law school no sooner than in your junior year. Too often, entering freshmen declare they are*prelaw* without much familiarity with the profession or the notion of the law and our experience has been that a majority of *prelaw* entering freshmen change their direction of study and their major by the end of their sophomore year. That's OK - sorting out one's interests and career options is a rite-of-passage in undergraduate education. Furthermore, a number of graduating seniors who apply to law schools had originally intended (as entering freshmen) to pursue an entirely different career direction. It is not unusual for post graduates, e.g. with a Masters degree in an academic field, to shift career direction and enter law school.

An undergraduate liberal arts college like Pitt-Johnstown provides a wide range of opportunities and directions for intellectual pursuit and academic curiosity and freshmen should not mentally lock themselves into a single career direction before they even begin.  In many ways, college-level study in a particular field - such as history or biology or English literature - is far different and more challenging than in high school and requires a *disciplined focus* and an *academic interest*to successfully navigate a chosen major without the additional burden of having a pre-selected career direction.  So, why law school?  It is a question to becarefully considered, over a period of time and experiencing college study in various fields.  Too often, the question is resolved too early - an aspiration to a professional career is fine, just take your time finding out which direction is for you.

**How can you prepare for law school?**

A prelaw course of study appropriate undergraduates would best include *broad and diverse exploration in the liberal arts and sciences,* emphasizing exposure to a range of academic disciplines, analytical approaches, and modes of expression. This is the gist of a baccalaureate program. Because the specific elements of the profession of law are taught in law school, the undergraduate program need not and should not include focused courses in those facets of the law unless one is exploring how the law relates to other aspects of society, e.g. media and the law, criminology, forensic science, etc.  In that sense, *where* one goes to undergraduate school (the choice of this college versus that college) or *what* one majors in (history versus English literature) may be less important.

Successful law school applicants from Pitt-Johnstown have been in academic majors which require *analytical reading* and emphasize *sophisticated argumentation and communication skills,* or at least have taken extensive course work in such disciplines.  It is not required that prelaw students major in political science; it is simply a matter of circumstance and interest that many*prelaw*undergraduates are also interested in politics, public policy, or the political process, and tend to take courses in those areas.

Your undergraduate study can, in this light, be seen as*preparation for graduate**study* (in this case, graduate study in law) and as such should emphasize the skills critical to that: analytical thinking and communication. It is a relatively easy to seek out courses of study that are less challenging and yield the best grades. However, taking one course in logic and two courses in freshman English composition is not sufficient preparation for law school.  *Language skills* are developed through reading and writing in a meticulous and continuous manner, and obviously avoidance of undergraduate courses that emphasize further development of those skills may boost one's grade point average but not prepare you for law school. Literacy on a sophisticated level is an *acquired* trait, not an inherited one, something that develops *over time* rather than something one is born with.  In simple terms, students who fill their undergraduate curriculum with easy and undemanding courses tend to cheat themselves in the long run.

Also, high achievement at the high school level does not automatically translate into college success or more specifically signal a natural intellectual and analytical ability to enter graduate training in the law. This perspective tends to see a student's undergraduate career as simply a ‘holding action' before entering law school. That would be a lost opportunity. Students who coast through their undergraduate careers - seeking out only the courses of least resistance, classes with the least reading, the easiest testing, or require no lengthy research papers - may accumulate a record of high grades but very little analytical development beyond that with which they graduated from high school. That is not only an ill-considered way of preparing for law school, worse yet it squanders the opportunities an undergraduate career provides to pursue interests and gain a broad education.

**What is the Pitt-Johnstown record in law school admissions**?

Pitt-Johnstown’s record of graduates gaining admission to law schools is very good - to date over 120 of our political science alumni have completed their law degrees, passed the bar, and entered the practice of law. Broadly speaking, students who had appropriate grades and competitive LSAT scores have been offered law school admission, often to more than one school. Our graduates have gained admission to and graduated from the best law schools in the Mid-Atlantic region (Pittsburgh, Dickinson/Penn State, Duquesne, Case Western, Widener Commonwealth, Temple, Drexel) and over the past four decades from law schools in the top tier (Harvard, Pennsylvania, Cornell, Columbia, Virginia, Duke, Notre Dame, Texas, Wake Forest). So, our political science students have been competitive with undergraduates around the country for law school admissions, and their LSAT scores indicate their preparation at the undergraduate level is quite adequate.

To be completely honest, the record also indicates a small percentage of graduates who have been rejected by all law schools to which they applied.  This occurs because they either had weak credentials (academic record or LSAT score or both), made an ill-considered choice of schools (applying only to law schools for which there was only a marginal chance of admission), or narrowed themselves to a particular geographical region (like ‘Pittsburgh only’ or ‘close to home’). As a rule, mid-range law schools (so-called 'Second 50') expect a minimum overall grade average (GPA) of 3.4, somewhere between a B and B+, and a LSAT score in the 70th percentile (158 or higher); more competitive law schools look for students at higher ranges than that. In most cases, students who persist in applying to law schools even though their grade average is below 3.0 and/or their LSAT is below the 25th (140) percentile are turned down. There are of course exceptions, with less competitive (the ‘second 100’ or a small number of ‘for profit’) law schools considering and sometimes accepting those students.  An applicant with high grades and a low LSAT score, or a high LSAT score and low grades, presents an unusual case and law school admissions committees consider them for marginal admission, typically accepting the higher LSAT student than the higher GPA student. But that may be changing as law schools have discovered that evidence of academic perseverance and high grades is actually a good predictor of first-year law success.

In sum, the record indicates that Pitt-Johnstown is a solid and appropriate undergraduate college in which to prepare for the study of law.  It offers a wide range of courses of study, many of which demand the further development of analytical thinking and communication skills.  In this, Pitt-Johnstown is similar to many quality small colleges and has a record of successful admissions to the full spectrum of the nation's law schools.  As with all colleges, the Pitt-Johnstown curriculum presents an *opportunity to prepare* for the study of law; it does not provide a guarantee of law school admission.

Finally, a word of caution. On the whole, law schools do a good job in preparing students for the practice of law, from general concepts to particular applications. While many first-year courses are standard (property, torts, contracts, civil procedure, legal writing, etc.), students in their second and third years have the opportunity to expand their familiarity and expertise on one or more of those areas by their course selection. This becomes almost a matter of taste (if you like contracts, take advanced courses in contracts!) or reflects your calculation of professional mobility. That mobility may be expanded by becoming a *generalist* for those seeking local practice or a *specialist* by seeking specialized training, writing, internships, etc. within a legal niche. Be aware however that one can aim to develop expertise in a 'hot field' (in recent years that has been entertainment law and intellectual property) only to find the market more saturated by the time one emerges from law school. What does this mean for you? It means your choice of law school might best be guided by the *range* of curriculum opportunities it provides.

Recognize that law school *is what it is* - professional training for legal practice and research. That's what law school provides, its stock-in-trade. Is there a *job* out there waiting for you? Who knows? Is it law-related or one that assumes legal training? Maybe. Sometimes generalized legal training ends up being a stepping-stone to a career in business or politics, or nonprofit administration, in health care or legislative analysis in government. One recent study, for example, estimated that about a quarter of law school graduates who passed the bar never actually entered legal practice. Law school prepares you for all kinds of career directions you may not anticipate.

One thing has been apparent from the record of Pitt-Johnstown political science graduates who have gone on to complete their JD and entered legal practice - they followed their interests. They were interested in law "eyes wide open," went to law school, finished, passed the bar, and went into practice, usually within the first year. Some may have subsequently changed career direction, e.g. out of law into business in some cases, from public sector law to private sector, or out of law into academe in others. But they followed their interests and it worked out.

**What’s going on in the legal marketplace?**

One of the consequences of the 2008-2009 economic recession was a precipitous drop in employment in law firms, from the largest mega-firms to medium-sized firms in large cities, to even smaller firms working in non-metropolitan cities and towns. Many practicing mid-career lawyers - seasoned associates in their thirties, forties and even early fifties who were not yet corporate partners and the highest paid cohort within firms without having any capital investment in them - were thrown into the marketplace within a short time span. Some responded by starting their own firms or forming partnerships, others sought lower-level and lower-paying positions in smaller firms (many of which were not hiring), still others attempted to move into governmental or legislative positions. For firms that were still hiring, newer JDs, while less experienced, were far cheaper than the many available mid-career attorneys. That pattern has largely leveled off now but entry into the profession is still highly competitive.

Parallel to that was a moderate shrinkage in the market for certified paralegals, those with postgraduate training from the range of programs that emerged some thirty years ago to provide law firms with lower-level skills and credentials to do basic legal research. As the market for new lawyers became more competitive, law firms found they could hire new JDs at lower scale and, as long as the prospects for entry-level positions remained tight, new JDs often took those positions, at least temporarily, to be employed in the profession.

And the nature of legal work has also undergone change. With the emergence of private agencies specializing in specific aspects of legal work to which legal firms could ‘job-out’ work on a specialty basis, it is not unusual for new JDs to find temporary employment in such agencies. Also we see a trend in states licensing legal technicians to provide a limited scale of legal advice and assistance to clients who cannot afford legal counsel, estimated to be as high as 90% of those needing legal advice.

Responding to increased competition for entry level positions and the fact that law firms were no longer willing to traditional in-house apprenticeship training of new JDs, law schools have added emphasis on these ‘ground-level skills’ so graduates are in effect ‘ready-to-go’ as hirelings. This has included practical experience such as in internships, externships, clinics, and other community-related services that would bolster resumes for those entering in a profession. And most law schools have developed practitioner tracks, second and third year courses often leading to certification in a practical specialization area, such as governmental or non-profit.

**Has that impacted law school admissions?**

The competition among the higher-rated law schools for qualified freshman law students has become more intense, as rumors of a shrinking market or a market with less-interesting and more mundane tasks caused a noticeable five-year decline in the number of college students taking the LSAT and applying to law school, a trend that continued through 2015 but then recovered. During this period, law schools already committed to a certain number of seats in their freshman class were under greater pressure to recruit from the shrinking undergraduate pool and to retain matriculates into their second and third year. Many law schools tempered their formula-based admissions policy based on a stock LSAT/GPA index and gave greater consideration to a wider range of qualifications. Lesser competitive schools lowered their LSAT profile for entering freshman classes, meaning more schools are accepting applicants with LSAT scores in the 140-150 range. With a shallower pool of potential applicants from which to choose, some schools have offered more scholarship aid. Some at the least competitive schools have fared less well and seen real drops in enrollment over a period of years, forcing them to lay off faculty and close extension campuses. Ironically, the same market saw a short-term spurt in enrollments among the small number of for-profit law schools, which were far less competitive for admission and fairly expensive. But that demand has waned, especially with reports of very low bar-passage rates among their graduates.

To lure potential applicants, law schools not only emphasize the diversification of their curriculum (the ‘preparedness’ of their graduates for legal practice) but also the employment success of their graduates, focusing less on one or two bright stars and more on their broader placement *rates* -- the percentage of their graduates who passed the bar and secured law-related jobs, in positions requiring JD-level skills, within a certain time frame, such as within nine-months of graduation. A well-publicized spillover of this reporting is that now every school does it and there has been some exaggerated placement rate reporting, raising issues such as what is ‘law-related work,’ what is ‘full-time employment,’ and what kinds of work actually requires JD-level skills. You will also find some exaggerated reputational surveys, using selective measures to show that little-known schools were actually considered of higher reputation or better placement than perhaps Harvard or Yale. You can look over these data in each law school’s ABA-required *509 disclosure report*. This illustrates that law school applicants are more and more concerned about their potential employability *after* graduation from this or that law school.

**I have heard that there is a 'crisis in legal education' – what’s that all about?**

Commentary in the mainstream media and on legal blogs continues to scrutinize trends in market demand for lawyers. As law schools admit more students and charge higher tuition, paid for by higher levels of accumulated (often government-guaranteed) student debt, the question arises whether they are churning out JDs at a far higher rate than the shrunken market might warrant. And if so, do law schools have a societal obligation to ‘scale back’ their numbers of graduates to match the current demand level, or will market forces make that inevitable? One of those market forces would be unemployment among qualified lawyers, many of whom may be carrying student loan debt. One op-ed piece in the New York Times decried high employment rates among recent law graduates who held an average indebtedness of $88-127,000 accumulated over three years. With over 70% of their revenues coming from tuition, law schools are peculiarly dependent on full enrollment in their entering freshman classes, and yet job prospects for their graduates seem on aggregate seem to be pessimistic. That sameTimes piece expressed astonishment that for-profit law schools, with doubled class sizes and producing huge per graduate indebtedness, seemed to be thriving even though their graduates reportedly produced weak passage rates on bar exams. This, the author claimed, was *the crisis in legal education*.

So what exactly might be the crisis? Is it a crisis in quality or quantity of law school graduates? On a practical level, it is argued that law schools need to offer more real-world skills and experience, better debt counseling and disclosure about student loan programs, they should ‘come clean’ about their actual costs and more carefully and honestly advertise the placement of their graduates. This amounts to making college seniors more knowledgeable consumers of a law education, and the volatility of the recruiting market has pushed all schools in those directions. Virtually all law schools have now built all these aspects into their curriculum. Yet even with all the information about these issues swirling around, over 30,000 college graduates still take the LSAT and occupy seats in law classes in schools ranging from the very top tier to those languishing in the far less prestigious ‘second-100.’ And many are employed soon after graduation, if not necessarily in the type of job of their first choice.

As reported in the legal blogs, a few schools have been sued by unemployed graduates for consumer fraud or misrepresentation and negligence in advertising or by reporting (e.g. to U.S. News and World Report which publishes widely-publicized law school rankings) exaggerated reputations or graduate placements and thereby enticing matriculation by unsuspecting law freshmen. Respondents and others have argued that the most blatant and outrageous claims would not be considered credible by any reasonable person so let the buyer beware! But underlying those case arguments is a more basic issue -- whether law schools are offering a product for which there is a diminishing yield on what has become a significant investment. Put another way, are law schools meeting their public responsibilities to the marketplace or to individual students?

Let’s start at the most elementary level, whether the law curriculum that is offered is solid and reputable. -Is the instruction skilled and knowledgeable, is the sequence of learning appropriate, and does a graduate walk out with a bona fide law degree that advertised exactly what it was – three years of sequenced training in legal research and adequately prepared for the bar exam? If the answer is *yes* (as it would be for most if not virtually all accredited law schools), then we can raise a second, related issue, whether the graduate is able to gain employment in law within the first year of graduation that suits his interests and locational preferences? That, candidly, is where a lot of the crisis lies, irrespective of the cost of law school and how students pay for it.

Let's grant that law schools produce a bona fide curriculum-based product. Some schools are better at it than others. Some have more prestigious instructors or higher rates of success in placing graduates in better positions. Some also offer a range of advanced or specialized course work and practical training in one or more legal subfields of practice, such as environmental law, media and communications law, or intellectual property. Placement of graduates may or may not be simply a matter of a law school's reputation, making law schools with the highest reputations (top 25, top 50) the most attractive destination albeit at a higher cost. But on the whole, *a law degree is a law degree*. All students complete basic courses in torts, property, civil procedure, and legal writing. Whether law students go into criminal law or intellectual property after their first year is a matter of their choice (and taste), some influenced by what field they anticipate will be the new ‘hot’ field (growing area of legal practice). Others may choose to remain essentially generalists and move into a market niche through practice after graduation, often quite accidentally. Clearly, the marketplace for entry-level lawyers is very competitive, perhaps more so if one is geographically tied by circumstance or preference. But if a law degree advertises its content accurately, what has changed is the legal market and the nature of legal work. This is the heart of the matter. For years, the legal blogs (such as [*abovethelaw.com*](http://www.abovethelaw.com/)) have been examining and debating how the profession has changed and what it will look like in the future -- it might be a good idea to check them out.

This table provides a representative list of the over 120 political science graduates that completed law degrees and entered legal practice of some type (see code).

Code to graduates’ areas of legal practice:

PP-private PS-public sector FIN-finance practice

HC-health care INS--insurance BUS-private enterprise

EDUC-education NP-nonprofit

Law School/JD Field Location

Albany 12 INS Baltimore MD

Capitol 86 PP Columbus OH

Capital 86 FIN New York NY

Case Western 09 BUS Mayfield OH

Cornell 06 PP Philadelphia PA

Dayton 83 PS Trenton NJ

Dayton 94 PP Allison Park PA

Dayton 00 PP Pittsburgh PA

Delaware 09 PP Wilmington DE

Dickinson 89 PP Carlisle PA

Dickinson 80 PS Bedford PA

Dickinson 97 HC Harrisburg PA

Drexel 20 PP Philadelphia PA

Duquesne 04 PP Hagerstown MD

Duquesne 83 PP Los Angeles CA

Duquesne 13 PP Latrobe PA

Duquesne 14 PP Yardley PA

Duquesne 97 PP Somerset PA

Duquesne 16 PP Pittsburgh PA

Duquesne 18 PS Ebensburg PA

Duquesne 09 PP Manassas VA

Duquesne 93 EDUC Lisle IL

Duquesne 19 NP Pittsburgh PA

Duquesne 96 HC Catawissa PA

Florida Coastal 13 BUS Jacksonville FL

Florida Coastal 02 PS Leonardtown MD

Fordham 05 PP New York NY

Hastings 83 PP Santa Barbara CA

Northeastern 11 PP Warren PA

Notre Dame 79 PP Atlanta GA

Ohio Northern 13 PP Pittsburgh PA

Pennsylvania 97 PP Pittsburgh PA

Pennsylvania 84 PP Pittsburgh PA

Pittsburgh 16 PP Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh 05 PP Columbus OH

Pittsburgh 78 HC Covinca CA

Pittsburgh 98 FIN Cleveland OH

Pittsburgh 20 PP Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh 03 BUS St. Mary’s PA

Pittsburgh 93 EDUC Philadelphia PA

Regent 15 NP Vancouver WA

Richmond 97 PP Richmond

Richmond 86 PS Washington DC

Stetson 10 PP Tampa FL

Syracuse 87 FIN New York NY

Temple 78 PP Lansdale PA

Thomas Cooley 95 PP Johnstown PS

Thomas Jefferson 11 FIN San Diego CA

Villanova 97 PP Philadelphia PA

Virginia 81 PP Pittsburgh PA

Wake Forest 03 PS LaPlata MD

Widener 20 BUS Austin TX

Widener 99 HC WASHINGTON dc

Widener 17 INS Philadelphia PA

Widener 09 PP Woodbridge VA