

Preparing For Law School

Prepared by the Pre-Law Committee of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar

Introduction:

- No Single Path

There is no single path that will prepare you for a legal education. Students who are successful in law school, and who become accomplished professionals, come from many walks of life and educational backgrounds. Some law students enter law school directly from their undergraduate studies without having had any post-baccalaureate work experience. Others begin their legal education significantly later in life, and they bring to their law school education the insights and perspectives gained from those life experiences. Legal education welcomes and values diversity and you will benefit from the exchange of ideas and different points of view that your colleagues will bring to the classroom.

Undergraduate Education:

The ABA does not recommend any undergraduate majors or group of courses to prepare for a legal education. Students are admitted to law school from almost every academic discipline. You may choose to major in subjects that are considered to be traditional preparation for law school, such as history, English, philosophy, political science, economics or business, or you may focus your undergraduate studies in areas as diverse as art, music, science and mathematics, computer science, engineering, nursing or education. Whatever major you select, you are encouraged to pursue an area of study that interests and challenges you, while taking advantage of opportunities to develop your research and writing skills. Taking a broad range of difficult courses from demanding instructors is excellent preparation for legal education.

A sound legal education will build upon and further refine the skills, values and knowledge that you already possess. The student who comes to law school lacking a broad range of basic skills and knowledge will face a difficult challenge.

Pre-Law Advisor:

Undergraduate institutions often assign a person to act as an advisor to current and former students who are interested in pursuing a legal education. That individual can help you with researching and identifying law schools to which you may want to apply. If you are still attending undergraduate school, your prelaw advisor can be helpful in selecting courses that can help you achieve your goal.

Core Skills and Values:

- * Analytic / Problem Solving Skills
- * Critical Reading
- * Writing Skills

- * Oral Communication / Listening Abilities
- * General Research Skills
- * Task Organization / Management Skills
- * Public Service and Promotion of Justice

There are important skills and values, and significant bodies of knowledge that you can acquire prior to law school and that will provide a sound foundation for a legal education. These include analytic and problem-solving skills, critical reading abilities, writing skills, oral communication and listening abilities, general research skills, task organization and management skills, and the values of serving faithfully the interests of others while also promoting justice. If you wish to prepare adequately for a legal education, and for a career in law or for other professional service that involves the use of lawyering skills, you should seek educational, extra-curricular and life experiences that will assist you in developing those attributes. Some brief comments about each of the listed skills and values follow.

Analytic / Problem Solving Skills

You should seek courses and other experiences that will engage you in critical thinking about important issues, challenge your beliefs and improve your tolerance for uncertainty. Your legal education will demand that you structure and evaluate arguments for and against propositions that are susceptible to reasoned debate. Good legal education will teach you to "think like a lawyer", but the analytic and problem solving skills required of lawyers are not fundamentally different from those employed by other professionals. Your law school experience will develop and refine those crucial skills, but you must enter law school with a reasonably well developed set of analytic and problem solving abilities.

Critical Reading Abilities

Preparation for legal education should include substantial experience at close reading and critical analysis of complex textual material, for much of what you will do as a law student and lawyer involves careful reading and comprehension of judicial opinions, statutes, documents, and other written materials. As with the other skills discussed in this Statement, you can develop your critical reading ability in a wide range of experiences, including the close reading of complex material in literature, political or economic theory, philosophy, or history. The particular nature of the materials examined is not crucial; what is important is that law school should not be the first time that you are rigorously engaged in the enterprise of carefully reading and understanding, and critically analyzing, complex written material of substantial length.

Writing Skills

As you seek to prepare for a legal education, you should develop a high degree of skill at written communication. Language is the most important tool of a lawyer, and lawyers must learn to express themselves clearly and concisely.

Legal education will provide you with good training in writing, and particularly in the specific techniques and forms of written expression that are common in the law.

Fundamental writing skills, however, must be acquired and refined before you enter law school. You should seek as many experiences as possible that will require rigorous and analytical writing, including preparing original pieces of substantial length and revising written work in response to constructive criticism.

Oral Communication and Listening Abilities

The ability to speak clearly and persuasively is another skill that is essential to your success in law school and the practice of law. You must also have excellent listening skills if you are to understand your clients and others with whom you will interact daily. As with writing skills, legal education provides excellent opportunities for refining oral communication skills, and particularly for practicing the forms and techniques of oral expression that are most common in the practice of law. Before coming to law school, however, you should seek to develop your basic speaking and listening skills, such as by engaging in debate, making formal presentations in class, or speaking before groups in school, the community, or the workplace.

General Research Skills

Although there are many research sources and techniques that are specific to the law, you do not have to have developed any familiarity with these specific skills or materials before entering law school. However, it would be to your advantage to come to law school having had the experience of undertaking a project that requires significant library research and the analysis of large amounts of information obtained from that research. The ability to use a personal computer is also necessary for law students, both for word processing and for computerized legal research.

Task Organization and Management Skills

To study and practice law, you are going to need to be able to organize large amounts of information, identify objectives, and create a structure for applying that information in an efficient way in order to achieve desired results. Many law school courses, for example, are graded primarily on the basis of one examination at the end of the course, and many projects in the practice of law require the compilation of large amounts of information from a wide variety of sources. You are going to need to be able to prepare and assimilate large amounts of information in an effective and efficient manner. Some of the requisite experience can be obtained through undertaking school projects that require substantial research and writing, or through the preparation of major reports for an employer, a school, or a civic organization.

The Values of Serving Others and Promoting Justice

Each member of the legal profession should be dedicated both to the objectives of serving others honestly, competently, and responsibly, and to the goals of improving fairness and the quality of justice in the legal system. If you are thinking of entering the legal profession, you should seek some significant experience, before coming to law school, in which you may devote substantial effort toward assisting others. Participation in public service projects or similar efforts at achieving objectives established for common purposes can be particularly helpful.

General Knowledge

In addition to the fundamental skills and values listed above, there are some basic areas of knowledge that are helpful to a legal education and to the development of a competent lawyer. Some of the types of knowledge that would maximize your ability to benefit from a legal education include:

- * A broad understanding of history, including the various factors (social, political, economic, and cultural) that have influenced the development of our society in the United States.
- * A fundamental understanding of political thought and of the contemporary American political system.
- * Some basic mathematical and financial skills, such as an understanding of basic pre-calculus mathematics and an ability to analyze financial data.
- * A basic understanding of human behavior and social interaction.
- * An understanding of diverse cultures within and beyond the United States, of international institutions and issues, of world events, and of the increasing interdependence of the nations and communities within our world.

Conclusion

The skills, values and knowledge discussed in this Statement may be acquired in a wide variety of ways. You may take undergraduate, graduate, or even high school courses that can assist you in acquiring much of this information. You may also gain much of this background through self-learning by reading, in the workplace, or through various other life experiences. Moreover, it is not essential that you come to law school having fully developed all of the skills, values and knowledge suggested in this Statement. Some of that foundation can be acquired during the initial years of law school. However, if you begin law school having already acquired many of the skills, values and knowledge listed in this Statement, you will have a significant advantage and will be well prepared to benefit fully from a challenging legal education.