

PRE-LAW AT UVM

PREPARED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Information and Suggestions for Freshmen, Sophomores, Transfers And Those Beginning to Think about Law School

As an undergraduate, the first step of several to getting into law school and becoming a lawyer is to formulate a plan of study with the advice and guidance of advisors. Approach the task systematically; you do not have to make any hasty decisions. Avoid being overwhelmed by the unfamiliar university curricula. Your first two years as an undergraduate give you some flexibility, and you and your friends can explore different offerings and think about various careers. As you determine in which direction you want to go with your career, you will determine whether the legal profession is for you. Again, build a superior academic record every semester since that is a prerequisite for advanced study in any field. A strong academic record provides you with opportunities for the future, whatever your ultimate career choice.

And yes, it's a good idea to start thinking about these issues now. The following are some suggestions for planning your undergraduate years:

1. Start your "homework" by reading and studying the *UVM Undergraduate Catalogue*. Learn about the required courses all students have to take to earn a degree. Read about majors which may potentially interest you and the additional courses required for those majors.
2. Once you are familiar with the UVM curriculum options, you will be able to talk knowledgeably with your academic advisor. When you have questions pertaining to pre-law, make an appointment to talk to one of the department's pre-law advisors.
3. The College of Arts and Sciences office (Waterman) has information about curriculum requirements, and can give general useful advice which will help you be a successful student.
4. Visit Career Services (E Building of the Living and Learning Center). Make an appointment to talk to a Career Counselor if you are struggling to decide among career options.
5. Assistance with improving your study skills and writing may be found in the Learning Cooperative within the Academic Support Program, located in the Living and Learning Center. A strong academic record and excellent writing skills are essential to law school, so you should strive as early as possible to become a top student.
6. Familiarize yourself with the resources of the Bailey Howe Library, particularly the Reference Room. Reference Librarians are trained to help students and scholars find information, including materials pertaining to careers. Librarians also have prepared bibliographies about many subjects, including the law.

Developing Your Credentials

1. Grade Point Average

You will need a high grade point average (3.5 or higher – and the higher the better) in a demanding major subject and other substantive courses. While students can at times recover from a poor freshman year, you should be aware that it becomes increasingly difficult to improve your overall GPA as your freshman and sophomore years progress, due to the increasing number of earned credit hours you will be trying to overcome. In short, “making up” for a poor freshman year is one of the most common issues pre-law advisers encounter in students. Do your best to avoid this problem in the first place.

There isn't really a set group of classes that you “have” to take in order to apply to law school. Don't try to get to law school by taking all the law related courses you can find. You don't “need” to take all of these courses, and the law schools will not really be “expecting” you to take them. By the same token, however, it is useful to take two or three law related courses to see if you like working in the subject area and have some experience reading a bit of case law.

More importantly, you want to take courses that will challenge you as a student, so that you can develop the skills you will need to succeed in law school (and in law practice). The law school may not be looking for specific courses, but they are looking for specific skills. We will have some suggestions for your course planning as it relates to skill development a bit later.

2. LSAT Scores

You will need a high score on the Law School Admissions Test, commonly called the LSAT. This means that your score must fall in the 85th percentile or higher (which means that you did better than 85 percent of those taking the exam). This national exam provides admissions committees with a yardstick for measuring all candidates on the same scale.

The LSAT is not an achievement test (examining you to find out what you know). It consists primarily of written passages which describe different scenarios which the test taker must read rapidly and then answer a series of multiple choice questions. The exam is timed by sections and puts a premium upon rapid reading and a quick grasp of the reading. You may wish to look to old LSAT exams to familiarize yourself with the format. Such exams are easy to get from various commercial publications. You can also ask career services or a pre-law advisor about the exam. We recommend that students take at least one (if not several) practice exams.

During your early years at UVM, you do not need to be directly concerned with the LSAT, which most students take at the end of the Junior year (in June) or early in the Senior year (late September or early October). At this point, the best thing you can do to prepare to do well on the exam is to take courses that develop and sharpen your reading, comprehension, and analytic skills. The courses mentioned above should help in this endeavor. In fact, the Law School Admissions Council which prepares, administers, and grades the exam, claims that the best preparation, according to their studies, is a demanding courseload which develops reading and analytic skills over your many years as a student.

3. Work/Internship Experience

It is often helpful to provide a personal record of accomplishments above and beyond your academic record. The law is an activist profession, and you must demonstrate that you have been connected to the real world while earning your degree.

Many kinds of experiences fit into this category. Many government agencies (federal, state, and local) offer internships which often consist of summer jobs and may even last for a semester. Another possibility is to find a job in a law firm, which would allow you to see the law from the inside while adding to your resume. You may want to be a member of a community service project, or join university clubs and, if possible, be an officer in the club. In short, law schools want to see some meaningful experiences on your application forms.

A word of caution. Extracurricular activities will not make up for a mediocre academic record or a low LSAT score. While experiences add strength to an outstanding academic record, **the two most important factors that affect whether you will be accepted to a law school are your undergraduate record and LSAT score.**

Feel free to visit the Law School Admissions Council website, www.lasc.org, for more information about the LSAT and the admissions process.

Other Academic Considerations

You should not only be thinking about the “hard data” like grades, test scores, and extracurriculars that will be a large part of your law school application. You must also be thinking about how you intend to develop yourself as a student. Focus on the following:

1. Skill Development

Regardless of your major, the courses you take should develop your skills in three basic areas: (1) comprehension and use of language, (2) understanding American institutions and human values, and (3) developing the ability to think logically and analytically. Without getting very specific (since a wide variety of courses address these objectives), a few general suggestions may help you make decisions about courses:

Language development is essential for effective speaking and writing. You will benefit from courses which help you express yourself using an extensive vocabulary in correct grammar and syntax. Both oral and written presentations must be clearly organized.

Courses in English composition and expository writing help you polish writing skills, and courses in English and American literature help your language development. Courses in public speaking and debating give you confidence to speak and think on your feet, something all lawyers have to do.

Lawyers need to understand American institutions, and they must have insight into the values people hold and how people think. You can learn about American institutions by taking courses in Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Psychology, Religious Studies, and Sociology. Many law schools expect students to understand and appreciate the relevance of economic theory to the study of law. Courses in Microeconomics can help students attain some of this background as undergraduates. In a slightly different, but related area, many students find an introduction to accounting useful in reading and integrating financial documents.

Above all, lawyers must be able to think critically and make judgments. The lawyer regularly is confronted with problems; he or she must be a problem solver. Sound advice to clients is the way a lawyer builds a reputation. Many of the course options listed above – Political Science, English, History, Sociology, etc. – help to sharpen your critical thinking ability. Courses in the Philosophy Department in logic and ethics are also relevant.

2. Foster Relationships With Your Professors

Upon applying to law school (or any other post-graduate education), you will need strong, personalized letters of recommendations from at least two of your undergraduate professors. While brown-nosing of your professors is a transparent and (frankly) annoying approach, you need to develop relationships with the faculty, if for no other reason than you need to have someone who can write an informed letter about you, one which shows that the writer knows you personally, is familiar with your work, and can comment with authority about what you are capable of accomplishing. A letter that looks like a fill-in-the-blank exercise (“*Student A took my class last year, and did very well. Student A seems smart, and will probably do well in law school.*”) does you no good. But a letter that talks glowingly about a particular project you researched, or a paper you wrote that answered a question in an interesting way, and that also talks about how the recommender discussed your work with you and saw how your work evolved ... a letter like that is pure gold.

And of course, if you develop those relationships with the faculty, if you have those intelligent conversations with your professors, you will probably have your intellectual curiosity stimulated. That in turn means that you may start examining different topics in different ways ... which will contribute to your growth as a student, a scholar, and a person.

Finally, sitting in the back of a large lecture hall will get you no purchase here. Taking smaller classes, being engaged in class discussions, and performing well in the class will help.

Conclusions

Since you will not have enough spaces in your program to take many of the courses mentioned above, it is very important that you take adequate time to determine your major and the supplemental courses best suited for you based on your strengths and weaknesses as a student. As a general rule, take courses which appeal to you, since we all tend to do better if the subject matter is of interest.

Important: If you are not already, you should become computer literate. Within a few years, this may become a prerequisite for admission to law school. Some law schools already require evidence that you are comfortable with technology; a growing number require you to own a PC and/or laptop. One law school has altered its curriculum so that students buy no books, accessing all study materials through personal computers. You should take appropriate courses in Computer Science, whatever major you choose.

This information should help you begin your own pre-law curriculum. If you have read it carefully, you should realize that the requirements for law school can be met by being committed to a comprehensive plan of undergraduate study. You have options, and it ultimately is your responsibility to make the right choices for you. Don't hesitate to use the extensive university support system to guide you through your four years here.