

## **LIFE AS A LAWYER...**

### **It's Not What You See on TV... It's Much More!**

Often, a person's idea of the practice of the law reflects what appears on television shows. The intricate plot lines and flashy television characters depicted on these shows describe only a small number of lawyers, clients and cases. In the real world practice of law, the work of lawyers may not be as glamorous as portrayed on television, but it is just as important and rewarding.

In the most fundamental way, a lawyer is responsible for making sure that every American and everyone living in America receives justice. The law touches every American, every important idea, and every important right and responsibility we have as citizens living in a prosperous and free country. Most lawyers say that they chose to practice law because the law impacts nearly every moment of people's daily lives. Think about it...

- The law affects the safety of your school bus, your family car and the food you eat.
- The law protects you from harm from criminals and those who might harm you by carelessness.
- The law governs who can be your teacher or who might judge a case if you ever go to court.
- The law brings order and fairness to the very complex world in which we live.

Because of these widespread effects of the law, lawyers also have the opportunity to help others in almost every financial and social condition. Many lawyers who are happy in their profession say it gives them the opportunity to do something good for people in the community, while earning a good living for themselves and their families.

But, you may wonder, am **I** the type of person who should consider becoming a lawyer or pursuing a related career in the legal field?

Read on to learn whether a career in the law may be for you.

### **How Do I Become A Lawyer?**

Law is a profession. This means that a person cannot simply decide to be a lawyer or a judge and begin working as one. The profession of law, as any profession, requires special study and training, good character, a license granted by the state Supreme Court and adherence to a special code of good conduct. Some of the hallmarks of the legal profession are the respect, professionalism and ethics that lawyers demonstrate in their actions, whether in court, counseling a client, or dealing with other lawyers in cases that do not require court proceedings. In order to operate our complex legal system, lawyers perform as advisors and as advocates but also as judges, arbitrators, mediators and lawmakers. About ten percent of lawyers nationwide work for various governmental agencies. Increasingly, a higher percentage of law students are women.



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**Lawyers** - In order to practice law in Pennsylvania, a lawyer must pass a bar exam given by the state Supreme Court, must show character to the Board of Law Examiners, and must prove that he or she has earned a Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree from a law school.

**Judges and Law School Professors** - Only a very small percentage of lawyers become judges at any level or teach the law in law schools. Judges in Pennsylvania are elected to the bench, based upon the qualifications and skills they have demonstrated in their practice of law. Pennsylvania is home to seven law schools, all of which have outstanding faculty dedicated to instructing future lawyers. Pennsylvania's law schools are:

- James E. Beasley School of Law of Temple University, Philadelphia
- Dickinson School of Law of The Pennsylvania State University, Carlisle and State College
- Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law
- Duquesne University School of Law, Pittsburgh
- University of Pennsylvania School of Law, Philadelphia
- University of Pittsburgh School of Law, Pittsburgh
- Villanova University School of Law, Villanova
- Widener University School of Law, Harrisburg campus, Harrisburg (Widener has a Delaware campus, too)

### **How Should I Prepare for Law School?**

One of the reasons for the richness and variety in the law is that some portion of law practice utilizes nearly every type of skill and academic background. The broad richness of law practice includes such widely different people as a law-trained person with a doctorate in biochemistry who does patent work on the latest genetic medicines, to a lawyer with excellent personal and counseling skills who works with crime victims in a prosecutor's office, to a skilled violinist who can use law training to represent musicians, bands and orchestras.

There are many areas of specialization within the practice of law. If you become a lawyer, your career can reflect your special interests as a person. Some lawyers practice in a number of areas of the law, but there are others who focus solely on areas of law in which they have a special interest.

- Administrative Law
- Aeronautical and Space Law
- Business Law
- Civil Litigation
- Criminal Law
- Education Law
- Environmental, Mineral and Natural Resources Law
- Family Law
- Intellectual Property Law
- International and Comparative Law
- Labor and Employment Law
- Municipal Law
- Public Utility Law
- Real Property, Probate and Trust Law
- Solo or Small Firm Practice
- Tax Law
- Workers' Compensation Law



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Law professors and deans agree that because of the wide range of legal problems and areas of practice, there is no single pre-law curriculum that is best. However, they also agree that in your secondary school and college study, you should build skills, values and knowledge, including:

- analytical and problem-solving skills
- critical reading abilities
- writing skills
- oral communication and listening skills
- general research skills
- task organization and management skills
- the values of serving faithfully and civilly the interests of others while promoting justice.

Thus, the best preparation for law school is to build your confidence in yourself by seeking any activity in secondary school and college in which you can show and build your leadership skills.

No matter what your specific academic interest, it is very useful to build your skills in solving problems and thinking for yourself. You will increase your chances of law school success if you develop your critical reading abilities and gain experience in closely reading and doing critical analysis of increasingly complex written material.

Another critical skill for law school success is good communication skills, particularly the ability to listen closely and to speak and write clearly, logically and persuasively. These skills are tested near the end of college, when those who wish to attend law school take the Law School Aptitude Test [LSAT.] Law schools require the LSAT, because these scores aid the schools in measuring the likely success of applicants for admission.

Law professors and practicing lawyers also stress that success in law study and the practice of law requires a broad practical knowledge of how our political system works, how our country's economic system works and how it interacts with the political system. Having good basic math and financial skills also are a plus. In addition, the possession of an appreciation for and understanding of different people's lifestyles and beliefs are valuable basic skills that point to success in law study and in the practice of law.

### **What Happens in Law School?**

Law school, which is usually a three-year (or four-year if you go part-time, as some do) program, is designed to build your skills at legal research, legal writing and analysis. Law school study also promotes the mastery of the most basic areas of the law to provide important foundations for later practice and further self-education in areas of practice of interest to you. Law study requires committed and disciplined study skills and a major personal commitment of time and money for law training.

Increasingly, those who graduate law school do not enter traditional law practices. Indeed, over the past years, trends show that an increasing percentage obtain a law degree to aid them in business, other professions or their entrepreneurial efforts. According to a recent pamphlet published by the National Association of Law Placement:

*"Law school can be an exciting challenge-filled three years that paves the way to a rewarding career with endless options...While all of those beliefs about law school can be true, they are not true necessarily. Individuals who believe that law school guarantees big money, a wide range of options and security may find the reality of a law degree doesn't match the promise."*



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In other words, not everyone can find a suitable job in the law or one that pays as much as expected. Taking the time, risk and expense of legal training is a serious decision that you need to evaluate carefully before making a commitment to law school study and law practice.

### **What Other Opportunities Are Available in the Legal Field?**

While pursuing a career as a lawyer may not suit your abilities or temperament, you may be interested in pursuing a career related to the legal field.

A paralegal performs legal research, helps draft and analyze documents, works to prepare cases for court and does other work to assist lawyers. Paralegals often attend special schools after high school or after earning an associate's or bachelor's degree in college to gain the skills they need to serve effectively in the modern legal system. However, paralegals are not allowed to advise legal clients or appear in court.

Generally, legal secretaries focus on preparation of the actual documents created by lawyers or paralegals. They also meet and greet the public, file legal files and materials, and maintain a lawyer's schedule.

Non-lawyer support persons, such as skilled legal researchers, court workers and law firm administrators also play an important part in today's legal system. Generally, these positions provide interesting and important work and a good salary.

### **How Can I Get More Information?**

Web pages you may find useful:

- American Bar Association Legal Education Web site - <http://www.abanet.org/legaled>
- American Bar Association Legal Opportunity Web site - <http://www.abanet.org/cleo>
- Internet Legal Resource Guide - <http://www.ilrg.com/pre-law.html>
- National Association for Law Placement - <http://www.nalp.org>

Or call the American Bar Association (800) 285-2221 for a variety of books on law practice and law as a career. One book of particular interest, and a good source for additional resources about law school and practice is *A Life in the Law*, published by the ABA Division for Public Education, I.S.B.N. number 1-57073-436-4.

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