

# Pre-Law Handbook

## Buffalo State College

Interested in pre-law at Buffalo State? Please contact Kelly Boos in the Office of the Dean, School of Natural & Social Sciences, Classroom Building A113, (716) 878-6434, [booskg@buffalostate.edu](mailto:booskg@buffalostate.edu)

### Considering Law School?

There are several factors that prospective law school students should consider:

- You should have a high GPA (at least 3.0 but preferably higher) when you begin your junior year. Law school admissions are competitive and a low GPA will work against you. Obviously the higher your GPA, the better your chances of admission. However, a high GPA, in and of itself, will not be sufficient. It must be based on achievement in serious and challenging courses.
- You should be a serious student who works hard. Law school is difficult. The course work will require much more effort than anything you have done as an undergraduate.
- You should think carefully about your decision to attend law school. Completing post-graduate work requires dedication, so if you are not completely devoted to studying law, you might want to think twice about attending law school.
- You should be prepared to take the LSAT, a standardized test that consists of logical reasoning, analytical puzzles and reading comprehension. You may pick up a copy of the registration booklet in the Career Development Center.

### Choosing a Major / Developing Skills

Persons thinking about law school frequently ask what subjects they should take, or what majors they should select as preparation for law school. In most circumstances you must have an undergraduate degree to be admitted to law school. However, law schools do not require any particular course of study or major as a pre-requisite for admission. Studies show there is no correlation between undergraduate major and success in law school. The American Bar Association does not recommend any particular group of undergraduate majors or courses that should be taken by those wishing to prepare for legal education.

The best major for you is the one in which you are most interested. Good grades are important criteria for admission to law school and chances are you will do well in a field that you enjoy. What law schools will look for is whether your course of study was a rigorous intellectual experience, which demonstrates that you have the academic skills and the intelligence to pursue a legal education.

There are things you can do to prepare yourself, not only for law school, but also for the legal profession. A broad liberal education that includes the humanities and social sciences will be helpful. A list of recommended courses is attached. You may wish to take Business Law, Constitutional Law, Government, or courses with an international perspective, to determine that you are indeed interested in legal issues. Keep a balance in your educational experiences and explore a variety of subject matters. You should take courses that will help develop your communication and thinking skills. You should also seek out courses that require you use your analytical and problem-solving skills, constructing factually sound and logically consistent arguments.

There are important skills and values, and significant bodies of knowledge that can be acquired prior to law school and that will provide a sound foundation for a sophisticated legal education.

- **Analytical and Problem Solving Skills** - Students should seek courses and other experiences that will engage them in critical thinking about important issues, that will engender in them tolerance for uncertainty, and allow them experience in structuring and evaluating arguments for and against propositions that are susceptible to reasoned debate.
- **Critical Reading Abilities** - Your undergraduate education should include substantial experience at close reading of critical analysis of complex textual material. Critical reading abilities may be acquired in a wide range of coursework, including literature, political or economic theory, philosophy and history. Potential law students should be aware that the study and practice of law require the ability to read and assimilate large amounts of material, often in a short amount of time.
- **Writing Skills** - Language is the most important tool of lawyers and law students, and they must be able to draft clear and concise documents and to craft coherent and convincing arguments. You should seek experiences and courses that will require rigorous and analytical writing, including preparation of original pieces of various lengths 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 success in law school and the practice of law. Lawyers must also have excellent listening skills if they are to understand their clients and others with whom they must interact daily. Students should seek to improve their basic speaking and listening skills, such as by engaging in debate, making oral presentations in class or speaking before groups in the community.
- **General Research Skills** - Students entering law school must be able to perform significant library research and analysis of large amounts of information obtained from that research. You should be experienced in planning research strategy, undertaking substantial library research, analysis, organization and presentation of a reasonable large amount of material.
- **Task Organization and Management Skills** - The study and practice of law requires the ability to organize large amounts of information, identify objectives, and to create a structure for applying that information in an efficient order to achieve desired results. The requisite experience can be obtained through undertaking coursework that require substantial research and writing or through the preparation of major reports for a civic organization.
- **The Values of Serving Others and Promoting Justice** - Each member of the legal profession should be dedicated both to the fulfilling the objectives of others, honesty, competently, and responsibly, and to the goals of improving fairness and quality of justice in the legal system. Thus it would be beneficial to have some significant experience in which the student has devoted substantial effort toward assisting others. Participation in public service projects and similar efforts at achieving objectives established for common purposes can be particularly helpful.

## Acquiring Knowledge

There are generic types of knowledge that one should possess in order to have an appreciation of the legal system in general, to understand how disputes might be resolved, to understand and apply various legal principles and standards and to appreciate the context in which a legal problem or dispute arises. Some types of knowledge that are most important and that would most pervasively affect one's ability to derive the maximum benefit from a legal education include the following:

- A broad understanding of history, particularly American history, and the various political, economic and cultural institutions that have influenced the development of the plurality that presently exists in the United States;
- A fundamental understanding of political thought and theory, and of the contemporary American political system;
- A basic understanding of ethical theory and theories of justice;
- A grounding in economics, and an understanding of the interaction between theory and public policy;
- Some basic mathematical and financial skills;
- Logic skills;
- A basic understanding of human behavior and social interaction; and
- An understanding of diverse cultures within and beyond the United States, of internal institutions and issues, and of the increasing interdependence of nations and countries within our world.
- See appendix for a list of suggested courses.

Indeed, you should endeavor to expose yourself to a variety of subjects, including various areas of the social and natural sciences and the humanities. A sensible strategy is to take a manageable number of challenging courses each semester and to do as well as possible in those courses. Wise students will regard their undergraduate instruction as the first fully conscious step toward a lifetime of learning. Law school is a second step. You should plan your undergraduate program with a variety of alternatives in mind, only one of which is law school. Admission is competitive, and no one student is guaranteed a place in law school. All pre-law students should constantly re-evaluate their career goals and should always be willing to consider alternative careers.

## Factors in Law School Admission

- **GPA and LSAT** - Two primary factors affect your chances of being admitted to the law school of your choice: your grade point average (GPA) and your Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) score. Law schools vary in the weight they accord to each, but some schools give LSAT significantly more weight. Thus, it is important to maintain a high GPA, and to prepare thoroughly for the LSAT. Kaplan Test Prep offers a one-time free LSAT exam to assess your

strengths and testing skills. Visit <http://www.kaptest.com/lsat> for more information. The Law School Admission Council (LSAC) has resources such as review books and practice exams available for purchase. Most schools will take account of trends in your undergraduate performance; if you had a bad first year and then improved your grades, this will be noted.

- **Letters of Recommendation** - most law schools require 1-3 or more letters of recommendation. These letters should be from professors, supervisors of community service experiences and employers who know you well enough to comment on your abilities, work habits, character and ability to succeed in law school. Letters from professors, internship supervisors or employers are most appropriate. At least one letter should be written by a professor who can assess your academic potential for law school. The online Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS at <http://www.lsat.org/>) provides a letter service included in their fees. The Career Development Center also has a reference file service for your convenience, to keep your references on file.
- **Varied Experiences** - Law schools are interested in relevant experience that shows motivation and a capacity to succeed in non-academic environments. You will often find lawyers engaged in activities on behalf of their churches, neighborhoods and communities. Lawyers are looked to for organizational skills and for leadership. You can begin to develop these skills during your undergraduate experience by participating in extracurricular activities. We highly recommend you complete an internship or volunteer work related to politics or law. Buffalo State College students have opportunities to work in Albany or Washington for a semester, and many local politicians have internship opportunities available. Student government is another excellent experience for students interested in pursuing legal careers. Whatever the activity, it needs to indicate meaningful community involvement, leadership and responsibility to have any influence in the admissions process. If you are waiting several years after graduation to apply to law school, as many students do, this work experience will be considered.
- **Personal and Academic Integrity** - Law school applications require you to report any criminal convictions and often ask for confirmation of good standing from the Dean of Students.
- **Your Personal Statement** - The importance of your personal statement cannot be overstated: Your personal statement will be used to distinguish yourself from other applicants with similar numbers and backgrounds. The weight given to the personal statement in the admission process varies among law schools, but from the viewpoint of most admission committees, the personal statement has two important functions: first, it is a sample of the applicant's ability to write clear, coherent and concise prose free from grammatical and mechanical errors; second, it is a source of information about the applicant's background, objectives and decision making skills. You should draft your statement with both goals in mind. The essay becomes an exercise in lawyer-like argumentation and advocacy.

The final product should be carefully written, grammatically accurate, neatly typed, and concise. Where given, prescribed length limitations should be followed strictly. Where no length is suggested, the statement should be approximately two double-spaced typed pages, although in some cases shorter or longer essays may be appropriate. Because most people find it difficult to write about themselves without sounding either overly modest or self-important, an objective edit is almost essential. Production of a statement with which you are ultimately satisfied may take several drafts. Information and guidance on writing your personal statement is available from your advisor or staff of the Career Development Center.

Personal statements usually have the most favorable impact on the reader if they are organized on a particular theme and are logically constructed emphasizing the applicant's strengths. You should describe in concrete, illustrative detail why you wish to be a lawyer. Identify experiences which display your motivations or decisions which have led you to this career choice. Ideally, the reader has no alternative but to draw the conclusion that the applicant is truly outstanding and would be a valuable addition to the law school. It's better not to arrive at such a conclusion explicitly in your statement, but to make it modestly implicit in all that you say. It is also important to note a fine line between a personal statement and too much self-disclosure. For this reason, it's often wise to save apologies or explanations concerning your apparent weak spots for another place in the application, rather than letting them detract from the positive impact of your personal statement.

- **Where to Apply, How Many Applications to Submit** – As soon as you determine your interest in a legal career, begin researching law schools. The LSAT/LSAC website: <http://www.lsat.org/> features the Official Guide to ABA Approved Law Schools which provides an online searchable database of law schools and their admissions criteria. Compare your credentials against the schools you are considering. You should choose a few “dream” schools that might be a reach for you, a few realistic schools, and a few safe schools.

### **Timeline for Pre-Law Students**

#### Freshman Year:

- \_\_\_ Identify yourself with the Pre-Law Advisory Committee
- \_\_\_ Assess yourself and work to strengthen less developed areas
- \_\_\_ Look into extracurricular activities that interest you

#### Sophomore Year:

- \_\_\_ Strengthen writing, analytic and logic skills
- \_\_\_ Begin to build instructor / supervisory relationships for letters of recommendation
- \_\_\_ Consider leadership in your extracurricular activities

#### Junior Year:

- \_\_\_ Review Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) and LSAT materials online at <http://www.lsat.org/>.
- \_\_\_ Register for June LSAT
- \_\_\_ Prepare for LSAT **at least** 6 weeks in advance. The best preparation for the LSAT is the three years of college education which you have completed prior to taking the exam.
- \_\_\_ Begin identifying appropriate law schools
- \_\_\_ Finalize your personal statement – see the Career Development Center for advice
- \_\_\_ Take the June LSAT
- \_\_\_ Receive LSAT score (4-6 weeks after test)
- \_\_\_ Review law school choices in light of LSAT scores. Obtain applications or complete online applications. Don't forget materials for fee waivers, financial aid and/or scholarships
- \_\_\_ Register for October LSAT if appropriate

## Senior Year:

- \_\_\_ Request letters of recommendation from two or three faculty members, internship supervisors and/or employers with whom you are acquainted. The purpose of the recommendation is to assure the law school that you are a conscientious and mature student and the most useful letters will come from faculty members who are familiar with your work
- \_\_\_ We encourage you to register with LSDAS by the end of September of your senior year at the very latest (assuming you want to enter law school the following fall)
- \_\_\_ Review personal statement
- \_\_\_ Receive and complete financial aid materials (FASFA)
- \_\_\_ Take October LSAT if appropriate
- \_\_\_ Prepare application according to deadlines. Have all applications (including LSDAS Report and letters of recommendation) complete and mailed by Thanksgiving. Law schools begin to consider applications soon after Thanksgiving under rolling admissions policies, so it is to your advantage to have your application complete and on file by then. This will also make it easier on you, and will give you time to correct any problems that might occur at the law school, such as the misfiling or loss of required forms
- \_\_\_ Begin to consider alternatives to law school (Plan “B”)
- \_\_\_ Duplicate all forms, applications and correspondence for your own files
- \_\_\_ Call law schools to be sure your applications are complete
- \_\_\_ Let pre-law advisors know your results and decision

### **If at first you don’t succeed...**

In any given year, the volume and competitiveness of applications mean even good candidates with good credentials do not get into law school. What should you do if you do not get into the law school of your choice and consequently decide that you will not attend law school? One alternative is employment for a few years between initially applying and reapplying to law school. Or you may decide that a career in law is not, after all, even the profession you want. You might now consider one of the other professional degree programs such as masters of Business Administration (MBA) or Masters of Public Administration (MPA) or management programs in the areas of public, civil regional and urban planning, health and public health administration and social work. You might consider graduate programs in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences and reapplying at a later date.

### **Useful Websites**

<http://www.buffalostate.edu/offices/cdc/grad.html>

<http://www.lsac.org/>

<http://www.abanet.org>

<http://www.abanet.org/cleo>

<http://www.abanet.org/legaled/prelaw/prep.html>

<http://www.lawschoolbound.net/>

[http://www.yahoo.com/Law/Law\\_Schools](http://www.yahoo.com/Law/Law_Schools)

<http://www.finaid.org>

<http://www.ed.gov>

**Law School Resources**  
Available in the Career Development Office

- Asher, D. (2000). *Graduate admissions essays*. Toronto: Ten Speed Press.
- Camenson, B. (1997). *Real people working in law*. Chicago: VGM Career Horizons.
- Camenson, B. (1998). *Careers for legal eagles and other law-and-order types*. Chicago: VGM Career Horizons.
- Falcon, A. (1998). *Planet law school: what you need to know (before you go)...but didn't know to ask*. Honolulu, HI: Fine Print Press, Ltd.
- Kaufman, D., Dowhan, C. & Burnham, A. (1998). *Essays that will get you into law school*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Services, Inc.
- Law School Admission Council. (1999). *Law school admission reference manual*. Newton, PA: Law School Admission Council, Inc.
- Law School Admission Council. (2001). *2001-2002 directory*. Newton, PA: Law School Admission Council, Inc.
- Margolis, W. (Ed), Arnone, A. (Ed) & Morgan, R. (Ed). (2002). *Official guide to aba-approved law schools*. American Bar Association.
- Munneke, G. (2001). *Opportunities in law careers*. Chicago: VGM Career Books.
- Peterson's. (2002). *Graduate programs in business, education, health, information studie, law and social work*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Thompson Learning, Inc.
- Shapo, H. & Shapo, M. (2002). *Law school without fear: strategies for success*. New York: Foundation Press.
- Southard, J. (1998). *Paralegal career starter: finding and getting a great job*. New York: LearningExpress.
- Stewart, M.A. (2002). *Perfect personal statements*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.
- White, T.O. (2002). *LSAT success*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.

## The Pre-Law Advisement Committee

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### Suggested Courses with Legal Content Please check for pre-requisites

ANT 384 Culture, Social Control and Law

BUS 334 Business Law I  
BUS 335 Business Law II

CHE 312 Chemistry and Criminalistics

COM 400 Communication Law

CRJ 101 Introduction to Criminal Justice  
CRJ 210 Criminal Law and Procedures  
CRJ 203 Crime, Ideology, and the Administration of Justice  
CRJ 204 The Correctional Process  
CRJ 307 Comparative Criminal Justice  
CRJ 406 Constitutional Issues in Criminal Justice

CRJ 425 Race and the Administration of Justice  
CRJ 430 Gender and the Administration of Justice

ECO 360 Introduction to the Economic Analysis of Law

HIS 341 African Americans & Civil Rights

HTR 470 Legal Issues in Hospitality

PHI 301 Wealth and Justice  
PHI 304 Philosophy of Law

PSC 220 Development of American Constitutional Law  
PSC 320 Civil Liberties  
PSC 350 Introduction to Legal Thought  
PSC 420 Contemporary Constitutional Issues

SOC 380 Sociology of Crime  
SOC 382 Sociology of Law  
SOC 383 Sociology of Crime and Punishment  
SOC 384 Sociology of Murder  
SOC 390 Juvenile Delinquency

#### Other Relevant Courses

COM 205 Introduction to Oral Communication  
COM 306 Public Speaking  
COM 321 Rhetorical Criticism

ENG 250 Literary Criticism  
ENG 300 Writing for the Professions  
ENG 301 Advanced Composition  
ENG 402 Advanced Creative Writing

PHI 103 Introduction to Logic  
PHI 106 Critical Thinking