

THE POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR AND CAREERS IN THE LAW

Kim Quaile Hill, Ph.D.
Cullen-McFadden Professor of Political Science



Texas A&M University

June, 2010

A publication of the Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, 77843,
with the support and assistance of the Texas A&M University Career Center.

THE POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR AND CAREERS IN THE LAW

This document is an introduction to and information guide for how an undergraduate political science major might pursue a career as an attorney or in another field with a law degree. It surveys a number of fundamental topics that a student with this ambition should consider and explore. This document will not tell you everything you need to know to pursue this goal. It is only an introduction to what you should think about and do. Nor will it guarantee you a job in this field. The advice here, however, will help you think about whether a legal career is right for you and how to prepare for a position in this field.

How is a Degree in Political Science Appropriate for a Career in the Law?

You may be uncertain about the answer to the preceding question, but you should understand the value of a political science degree for a legal career. Such an understanding will help you fashion the rest of your educational, extracurricular, and employment record to enhance your career prospects.

There are several ways by which a political science degree is valuable for a legal career. First, one should remember that this degree is one in the broad field of education called the *liberal arts*. A liberal arts undergraduate degree has also been the most common one among students planning to go to law school. Law schools themselves do not recommend particular undergraduate degrees, but more often a broad undergraduate education. Yet a survey of working attorneys in 2000 found that a liberal arts degree was recommended most frequently as the preferred one for future attorneys, as reported by Robert Half Legal, a firm offering job search services for lawyers. In this survey of attorneys from the largest legal firms around the nation 34 percent of the respondents said that a liberal arts education was the optimal one for lawyers, while another 9 percent singled out specific social sciences like political science which are customarily included in the liberal arts in American universities. Thus 43 percent of the survey respondents chose one or another liberal arts education as the preferred one for a legal career. No other undergraduate major got anywhere as large an endorsement. For example, the second preferred degree was business, but it was chosen by only 24 percent of the respondents.

What distinguishes a liberal arts education? Such an education introduces students to the fundamental knowledge in art, the humanities, and the social sciences that has traditionally set apart the most learned members of society. Increasingly, such knowledge also encompasses an understanding of diverse cultures around the world, the place of the United States in the larger world, and the challenges and opportunities for our nation both at home and abroad. Thus a liberal arts student will share this knowledge with other learned members of his or her society. Because law is one of the most honored learned professions, it is especially appropriate that lawyers share such knowledge with other highly educated members of society.

Liberal arts educations are valued for other reasons, as well. They provide instruction in critical thinking skills from several disciplines. They emphasize intellectual creativity. And they offer students considerable opportunities to enhance their writing, public speaking, and other communications skills. As this document explains below, all these skills are especially valuable for members of the legal profession.

In addition, most of the coursework in political science at Texas A&M is meant to educate students in *how to study politics scientifically*. The majority of political science professors are social scientists who study politics with the intention of creating scientific knowledge. POLS 209 is an introduction to the scientific study of politics, and much of your upper-level coursework adds to what you learn in POLS 209 about how politics is studied scientifically.

Learning the scientific study of politics can be of value for attorneys in two ways. The scientific method is one rigorous approach to logical and critical thinking, a skill of notable value for attorneys. Second, many legal cases draw upon one or another kind of scientific knowledge for evidence. An understanding of how such knowledge is created and its strengths and weaknesses can be valuable for attorneys representing clients in such cases.

Many undergraduate majors in political science also take courses in *political theory*, the philosophical study of politics. Coursework of this kind also enhances one's intellectual skills, especially for logical and critical thinking.

Political theory also helps one explore normative questions about what role government should have in society and what role citizens might play in government. Knowledge of the latter sort is important to citizens of a democratic nation, but it is relevant, too, to many questions of concern to the law.

Political science courses will also teach you much about *everyday political processes* in the United States, other nations of the world, and international organizations. A factual understanding of election processes, lawmaking procedures in the U.S. Congress or other similar institutions, the ways interest groups attempt to influence law and public policy – and knowledge of a host of comparable topics – can be valuable for many kinds of legal careers.

Your degree in political science can equip you with much of the kinds of knowledge outlined above. For that knowledge to be useful for a legal career, however, you must recognize its relevance for your career ambitions and learn to articulate its relevance to prospective law schools and employers in a compelling way. Acquiring the many benefits of a liberal arts and political science education, further, is not guaranteed. *You* must take your coursework seriously, choose some courses specifically for the particular knowledge and skills they can provide, and consider what extracurricular activities can further enhance your education and skills.

Thus you cannot claim to a law school or to a future employer that simply because you have a liberal arts degree, you have all the skills listed above. You must craft an academic and extracurricular record during undergraduate school that documents and substantiates your educational and skill levels. More specifically, a liberal arts degree will be of little value if you have an undergraduate transcript with mediocre grades, little other demonstrated evidence of the competencies and skills listed above, or recommendation letters that cannot vouch that you have those competencies and skills.

What Do Attorneys Actually Do? What Skills Do They Need?

Law is one of the oldest learned professions, that is, a vocation that requires unusually specialized knowledge and that carries with it high social respect. At the same time, attorneys can be thought of as business professionals who provide legal services and advice to their clients or employers. Lawyers typically work in business offices, and many aspects of their work life are like those of other business professionals. They associate with other business professionals, work in professional settings such as their own offices, offices of their clients or employers, courtrooms, and law libraries.

The work life of attorneys is also shaped by the type of legal practice they have and whether they work in solo practice, a small law firm, a large firm, or in government or business. About a third of all attorneys work in solo practice, although only about five percent of recent law school graduates do so. Most recent graduates work in private law firms, while about a third of all attorneys do so. About 20 percent of attorneys work in government, 3 percent in non-profit organizations, and 9 percent in business firms (NALP Foundation 2004, 25-27). Some attorneys do considerable trial work, while others rarely or never enter courtrooms.

Attorneys in small firms and in solo practice typically specialize in either criminal or civil law, but they are especially likely to work on different kinds of cases within these broad specialties. Attorneys in larger firms are more likely to specialize, and the range of specialty fields is wide. For a useful and informative list of legal specialties see the web site <http://www.lawyers-by-city.com/index.php>.

Attorneys, like most professionals, tend to work relatively long hours. Most surveys of attorneys indicate that the average number of hours worked in a week is about 50. Thus half of all attorneys work more hours than this. And high proportions of recent law graduates, especially those in large law firms, report working more than 60 hours a week (NALP Foundation 2004, 33). Attorneys in government, in contrast, tend to work more conventional hours in the range of 40-45 a week.

The work settings and business character of the legal profession described above indicate some of the skills attorneys need. Other critical skills are indicated by the frequency with which they must work with clients, research the law, prepare legal briefs and documents, and generally organize and manage their various professional affairs. In light of this description of legal work and careers, what skills are especially important for such work?

Obviously, a law school education is essential because it provides the specialized knowledge that distinguishes this profession. Yet this pamphlet addresses the skills that you might acquire *from your undergraduate education and experiences outside the university during the time you are earning your bachelors degree*. And these skills and experiences are considered critical for successful lawyers.

The American Bar Association (ABA) posts on its website a lengthy statement about the kinds of skills and competencies that are critical for attorneys (American Bar Association 2009). The ABA statement includes seven “core skills and values” that are:

- Analytic/problem solving skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Writing skills
- Oral communication/listening skills
- General research skills
- Task organization and management skills
- Public service values

The ABA statement about these skills specifically emphasizes, too, how valuable it is to acquire as many of these skills as possible *before one goes to law school* (and even though a student will get additional education for them in law school). For example, the ABA states that “Fundamental writing skills...must be acquired and refined before you enter law school.”

The importance of these skills is further attested to by the research of two professors at the University of California--Berkeley that attempts to understand which skills distinguish the most successful attorneys. As part of that research, these professors surveyed a large number of working lawyers, law school professors, and advanced law students and asked them what skills they would want in an attorney they might hire for their own legal affairs. The survey produced a set of desirable skills that is very similar to those in the ABA statement summarized above. Among the most important skills listed by the survey respondents were intellectual skills such as creativity and problem solving, research skills, communication skills as in writing and speaking, planning skills, and character traits similar to the public service ones cited by the ABA (Schultz and Zedeck 2008).

The relevance of a liberal arts and a political science education specifically for these skills is clear. These essential skills for lawyers from the ABA and the Schultz and Zedeck research are identical to the fundamental skills that an undergraduate political science degree can provide you – as summarized earlier in this pamphlet. One might acquire these skills from a number of courses of study in undergraduate school, but political science is an excellent major for this purpose.

And there is even more evidence for why a political science degree is valuable for a future attorney. The ABA statement goes beyond the core skills and values enumerated above to discuss a separate category labeled “general knowledge.” According to the ABA, an attorney should also acquire from his or her undergraduate education a good understanding of American history, the American political system, “human behavior and social interaction,” “diverse cultures within and beyond the United States,” as well as fundamental mathematical skills. A political science degree from Texas A&M University coupled with careful choice in other liberal arts and social sciences coursework for electives can fully equip a student with such knowledge. Indeed, perhaps only a degree from the College of Liberal Arts will ensure that a student has this range of general knowledge.

Is Law the Right Career Field for You?

Many students enter the University uncertain about what their career ambitions might be. Some, however, may be attracted to the images of lawyers and a legal career from the mass media, movies, and television. Other students may be encouraged by their parents to seek a legal career, perhaps because such careers are a tradition in their families. Some students are happy to continue family traditions in this way, while others are uncertain about whether they wish to do so. Yet many such students may know little about what it really means to be an attorney.

The career you pursue, however, is going to be *your* career, not that of your immediate family, other relatives, or friends. Your first job, should you decide to stay in the same line of work, will shape your entire work and professional life, determine the kinds of work associates and friends you will have, shape the environment in

which you work, and determine the kinds of career goals that are realistic for you. Becoming an attorney requires considerable time and investment, too, in law school after getting your undergraduate degree, getting a first job, and working to pass one or more bar examinations. Entry level jobs in law firms are also typically probationary ones, and attorneys in these positions have to work successfully for a number of years before they can earn a partnership in the firm. These investments of time and effort reinforce the importance of choosing a legal career carefully.

At the same time, many Americans change careers in some time in their adult lives. Thus even if you choose to become an attorney, you might change careers for any of several reasons – because you become unhappy in your initial job in the law, the employment prospects for the particular career path you have chosen diminish over time, or a new and more promising opportunity arises. Thus you may not have to remain in the same job or career your entire life. But some kinds of undergraduate and graduate education prepare you better for moving from one career to another. And some first jobs provide better opportunities in the same way. So thinking about these kinds of educational and career possibilities should also be a part of your career choice deliberations.

What Are Your Personality Attributes and Skills Relevant to Your Possible Career Choices? How Well Do They Relate to Careers in Law?

If you are uncertain about the questions posed above, or just generally interested in but uncertain about whether law is the right career field for you, the University's Career Center on the second floor of the Koldus Building can help you find the answers to those questions. The Career Center has professional counselors who work exclusively with College of Liberal Arts and political science majors. These counselors can guide you through every stage of a search for a career and a specific job. Their services are extensive and are mostly provided in one-on-one sessions with individual students. These counselors have a series of career assessment tests that you can take and that identify your most notable personal skills and interests *as well as* a set of specific jobs where such skills and interests are most applicable. The Career Center has a variety of online information services that will inform you about career, internship, and job opportunities in all sectors of the business world, including those the assessment tests identify for you. Thus such tests offer you general information about how your skills and attributes might fit many fields and specific information about their relevance for a legal career.

If you decided on the basis of such tests, or for other reasons, that law is not the right field for you, the Career Center has a host of services that would help you discover what careers would be better for you. Their individual counseling services and the many online information sources they provide would be essential for the latter purposes. But the Career Center also hosts annual recruitment and job information events with a variety of possible employers, such as with representatives of Federal government agencies. The Center also has an online connection to Aggie Former Students who can assist you with career and job searches, especially in the business firms or industries in which they work.

For students who know they wish to pursue a legal career and thus go to law school, the Career Center also offers valuable assistance. Their counselors and online resources can help you find part-time, summer, or volunteer work that would enhance your knowledge of the law and your attractiveness as a law school applicant. With respect to the latter efforts, Career Center counselors can also help you prepare a competitive resume for applying for such positions *and* develop interviewing skills that should assist you in getting one of them. Some of the Career Center counselors can also offer you advice, in addition to that from the University's Office of Professional and Graduate School Advising that is described below, about how to prepare for the LSAT test and how to prepare your application materials for law schools.

While the Career Center has many professional services to offer you, you must take an active and responsible role in how you use those services. Ideally, you should develop a relationship with a Career Center counselor in your first year as a student at A&M. Your work with the Center in your first year will be less intensive than in later years. But if you begin to learn about your career preferences and opportunities early, then you will be optimally positioned to enhance your competitiveness for such opportunities through coursework, part-time or summer employment, volunteer activities, and internships. Equally important is how you use the services available in the Career Center as you begin the actual search for a specific internship or job. Many students have disappointing searches because they don't follow the advice of their Career Center counselors or because they fail to make a sufficient effort in their own behalf as they go through their searches.

What Other Undergraduate Education Might You Need for a Career in the Law?

This document discusses law school education below, but it is important first to prepare as well as you can for a legal career with your undergraduate education. Your political science bachelors' degree will provide you with much useful education for a legal career as explained above. But other undergraduate coursework could be important for preparing you for some of the work attorneys typically do and for some of the skills they need. Thus you may wish to supplement your political science coursework with particular courses from other departments.

Some undergraduate courses can provide skills that might be of general use to all law school students and attorneys. Coursework in logic – like PHIL 240 Introduction to Logic, in statistics – such as POLS 309 Polimetrics, and in scientific research like you will learn about in many of your upper-level POLS classes can provide analytic skills of various kinds. Advanced political science courses that require original research papers can help in this same way. Courses like COMM 203 Public Speaking and COMM 205 Communication for Technical Professions can strengthen important communications skills that would benefit all attorneys.

Most attorneys, however, also specialize in one or a few areas of legal work. There are many such specializations, but criminal law, business law, environmental law, and international law are representative examples. A prospective law student who has an interest in such a specialized field could take undergraduate coursework that would provide a useful knowledge foundation for legal work there. A student interested in business law might take courses like MGMT 105 Introduction to Business, MGMT 209 Business, Government, and Society, MGMT 211 Legal and Social Environment of Business, and MGMT 212 Business Law that cover the major forms of business organization, the social and governmental environment that shapes business activity in the United States, and the legal environment of business.

Similarly, a student interested in criminal law could benefit from courses like SOCI 304 Criminology and SOCI 305 Juvenile Delinquency. A student interested in environmental law would be advantaged by coursework in Chemistry and such natural resources classes as RENR 205 Fundamentals of Ecology, RENR 410 Ecosystem Management, RENR 420 Natural Resource Law, RENR 470 Environmental Impact Assessment, and POLS 347 Politics of Energy and the Environment. A student interested in international law could benefit from courses like POLS 333 International Cooperation and POLS 412 International Political Economy, along with such courses as SOCI 325 International Business Behavior. Strong foreign language skills will also be very valuable, and perhaps obligatory, for students who want to work in international law.

It is also useful to recognize that law and the legal system touch upon every field of business and very many aspects of American society. A student with a passion for the performing arts, sports, the movie industry, journalism, real estate, and many more specialized business and professional fields can discover a body of law and opportunities for legal careers relevant to those specific areas of business. Students with a passion for social justice, the plight of the needy, or the preservation of the natural environment, can find legal education and professional opportunities, too. Those who wish to champion one or another ideological or public policy agenda can also do so. Thus a prospective law school student should be ambitious about how a legal career might develop out of his or her social, political, or professional passions.

Law School and Other Relevant Graduate Education

The University's Office of Professional and Graduate School Advising in Henderson Hall has a handout on "The Basics for Students Interested in Law School" that offers general advice about preparing for law school while one is an undergraduate. A second handout, "Law School Application Procedures," is *essential* for navigating the process of preparing such applications. The latter handout explains the application process in detail, and it offers advice on how to prepare for the Law School Admission Test and for the application process more generally. Any student interested in a legal career should visit this office to see the additional resources it has to offer and to secure copies of these two handouts *as early in his or her undergraduate program as possible*.

Because the Office of Professional and Graduate School Advising has so much useful information materials, this pamphlet will only make a few additional comments on law schools and about choosing which to apply to. Many Texas A&M students hope to go to law school and pursue a legal career in Texas. Going to a law school in

this state then is quite logical. Doing so would especially help prepare one to take the Bar examination one must pass to practice law in this state. And going to an in-state law school likely will make it easier to secure internships, part-time legal work, and a full-time law position with in-state law firms. The several law schools in the state also offer a range of legal specializations and will likely accommodate most students' specific legal career interests.

Out of state law schools, however, may be of particular interest to students who wish to reside in and practice law in other parts of the nation or the world, to students seeking education in unusual legal specialties, and to those who want to attend the most prestigious law school that they can. The University of Texas law school is very highly rated, and the law school at the University of Houston is also well ranked (at numbers 15 and 59 in the 2010 rankings prepared by *U.S. News & World Report*, which is sold at good newsstands and bookstores and which is updated annually). The South Texas College of Law is also very highly rated by *U.S. News* for specialized education in Trial Advocacy. Yet the highest rated law schools in the nation are at Yale, Harvard, Stanford, New York University, and the University of California—Berkeley – to name but the top five in the *U.S. News* ranking. Students with very high grade point averages, high LSAT scores, and the ambition to get the very best education in law school should consider applying to some of the top-ranked programs. Selected faculty in the Political Science department and the professional staff of the Office of Professional and Graduate School Advising can assist all A&M students, regardless of their grades and ambitions, in selecting a suitable range of law schools to apply to.

What Are the Prospects for Future Jobs and Careers in the Law?

Likely the best information on these questions is in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S. Department of Labor. The online edition of that handbook available at the time this pamphlet was written, which is available on the World Wide Web at www.bls.gov/OCO, describes the work of different occupations and offers predictions of job prospects by occupation and by industry to 2018.

Job growth for lawyers to 2018 is predicted in the handbook to be only average among all occupations. Most legal jobs will be in salaried positions, especially in businesses and governments. Less than 30 percent of attorneys currently are self-employed, and competition from large legal firms with many specialized attorneys makes it increasingly difficult to maintain a self-employment practice (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009).

The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* also explains that competition for the best legal jobs has been and will remain high. Thus many new law school graduates have been taking non-traditional jobs for attorneys in business or government, or jobs for which they believe they are overqualified. To be as competitive as possible in this job climate, a degree from a prestigious law school, a strong academic record, a willingness to be geographically mobile, specialized legal skills, and prior work experience are especially valuable. Jobs will be available for law graduates that do not have all or most of these strengths, but they too will be sought by many such graduates.

Where Can You Learn More About Legal Careers?

As noted above, the services and information offered by the TAMU Office of Professional and Graduate School Advising are essential for a student contemplating going to law school and a legal career. And it is never too early in one's undergraduate program to visit that office and get acquainted with the services and information materials it provides.

In addition to the above ways to learn about legal careers and law school we recommend that you investigate the home pages of the following organizations on the World Wide Web:

The American Bar Association. See especially the "Pre-Law Toolkit" at www.abanet.org/careercounsel/prelaw/. Accessed at July 30, 2009.

The NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education, at www.nalpfoundation.org.

A few books also offer useful portrayals of the work life of attorneys. Among those we especially recommend:

Full Disclosure: Do You Really Want to Be a Lawyer? (1992). The section of this book on “The Many Faces of Legal Practice” has chapters by attorneys who work in various separate fields of law – e.g., litigation, business law, as corporate counsels, as government lawyers, and as public interest lawyers as examples. Thus the book would be especially valuable for a student who is considering a legal career but who is also unsure of what kind of law he or she might prefer. The book is available in the Evans Library.

NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education. 2004. *After the JD: First Results of a National Survey of Legal Careers*. Overland Park, KS. Available for order at the web site of the Foundation or for purchase and download as a PDF file on the website of the American Bar Association.

John P. Heinz, Robert L. Nelson, Rebecca L. Sandefur, and Edward O. Laumann. 2005. *Urban Lawyers: The New Social Structure of the Law*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Not in Evans Library but available from the library by inter-library loan.

Bibliography

American Bar Association. 2009. “Preparing for Law School.” At www.abanet.org/legaled/prelaw/prep.html. Accessed August 12, 2009.

Bell, Susan J. 1992. *Full Disclosure: Do You Really Want to Be a Lawyer?* Princeton: Peterson’s Guides, second edition.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2009. “Lawyers.” *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-09*. At www.bls.gov/oco/ocos053.htm. Accessed July 30, 2009.

NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education. 2004. *After the JD: First Results of a National Survey of Legal Careers*. Overland Park, KS.

Schultz, Marjorie M. and Sheldon Zedeck. 2008. Identification, Development, and Validation of Predictors for Successful Lawyering. Unpublished Manuscript.

POLS Legal Career Guide