

LAW SCHOOL IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States law is not offered as an undergraduate field of study. Rather, as law programs are at the graduate level, students must have earned an undergraduate degree (BA or BS) in order to qualify for admission to law school. Some colleges and universities do offer pre-law, undergraduate degrees, however such degrees do not permit one to practice law in the United States. A bachelor's degree in pre-law is not necessary to study law at the graduate level. In fact, the majority of law students have not necessarily studied pre-law at the undergraduate level.

The American law degree is a Juris Doctor, JD, and prepares someone to practice law in the United States. JD programs usually require the equivalent of three years of full-time study. The first year curriculum usually consists of required courses in basic subject areas including torts, property, contracts, criminal law, and constitutional law. The second and third year course programs are largely elective, though most schools require completion of a substantial written work, based on research by the end of the third year.

Joint Degree and Advanced Degree Programs

Many universities offer joint degree programs by which both a JD and another graduate degree are earned in an accelerated amount of time. These programs tend to last 4 or 5 years and may result in JD/MBA, JD/MSW, JD/MPP degrees, among other combinations. For lawyers who already have a JD or its equivalent from their home country, many law schools offer a Master of Laws, LLM, degree. Within the LLM degree, students must choose a particular area of specialization, such as comparative law, international law, labor law, or common law studies. Students with an LLM may continue their studies and earn a Science of Law Degree, SJD, the doctorate law degree, which is required for those who wish to teach law at the graduate level.

Accreditation

The recognized accrediting agency for law schools is the American Bar Association, which applies rigorous standards of quality and performance through a system of periodic site inspections administered through the Association's Section of Legal Education and Admission to the bar. The ABA has approved 180 law schools under these standards. There are at least 33 law schools that do not have ABA approval, though some of these schools may be accredited by other agencies. Law schools also seek membership in the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) which applies slightly more rigorous standards than the ABA. There are currently 160 schools in the AALS.

Licensure

Admission to the practice of law is controlled by bar examiners and bar admissions officers in each state. Licensure requirements differ in each state. Licensure in one state does not always permit a lawyer to practice in another state. Foreign nationals are eligible, in most states, for admission to the bar. However, it is not likely that a lawyer who has not earned a JD in the United States will pass the bar examination. In order to pass the bar exam, one must have not only knowledge of state law, but also a deep understanding of general U.S. law which relies on precedent rather than strictly on legal codes, as it does in many countries.

Law School Admissions

Law school admission in the United States is extremely competitive. Some of the top schools admit only 10% of applicants. Admissions procedures and requirements are set by each law school, however the general requirements for all JD programs are the same. Most law schools require proof of completion of a Bachelor's degree and the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) for admission. Students whose first language is not English will also have to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Most law programs require a minimum TOEFL score between 213 and 250 on the computer-based test (550-600 on the written test).

The majority of JD programs start in September and last three years. For such programs, the application deadline usually falls between January and April. Most applications require records of one's personal and educational backgrounds, a personal statement, and letters of recommendation. While students who have earned B.A.'s from institutions in the U.S. may use the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) in the application process, students who have earned degrees from most foreign universities must contact the dean of the university to request application information and materials. Students who plan to apply to law school should begin the process at least

one year before they want to begin studying in order to have time to research law schools, sit for all exams, and obtain necessary transcripts and letters of recommendation.

Financing Law School

Tuition at US law schools varies greatly from \$4,000 to over \$35,000, not including books and living expenses. In general, state supported, public institutions tend to be cheaper only if one is a resident of the state, and private institutions tend to be more expensive. There are no state or federal scholarship grants for law students. Those students who cannot afford the tuition finance their legal education with a combination of federally-guaranteed loans, loans and scholarships provided by the university, and loans from private corporations. International students are not eligible for federally-guaranteed loans and most private loan programs. Some law schools make their own loan and scholarships funds available to international students on a merit or need basis. Others may have financial aid programs especially for international students. Information about financial aid may be obtained from the school's admission or financial aid office.

Special Considerations for Foreign Students

International students who do not have a law degree and wish to practice law in their home country should ordinarily not undertake a JD program at a US law school. The content of American JD programs may be of limited value in another country, and such a degree will not necessarily satisfy requirements to practice law in that country. Any foreign national who wishes to use a JD degree to practice law or engage in other activities in the US must, of course, be mindful of applicable immigration regulations and citizenship restrictions.

For more information on studying law in the United States, please consult the following material, all of which is available at the advising center:

Peterson's Law Schools

Peterson's Graduate Programs Book 6

LSAT & LSDAS Bulletin, published by ETS

TOEFL Bulletin, published by ETS

Sources:

Advising for Study in the US

"Legal Education in the United States" – The Fulbright Commission

"Study of Law in the United States by Foreign Students"- Association of American Law Schools

"Law as a Career"- American Bar Association

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