

**So You
Want to be
a Lawyer**



INTRODUCTION

Today, more than ever before, the legal profession offers a unique opportunity for the dedicated individual to make a significant contribution to society. Opportunities exist in the legal profession for rewarding service to individuals and society. This pamphlet is intended to help those of you who are considering law as your career. It should give you a better idea of what to expect on your educational path and the career opportunities open to you once your law degree is obtained.

WHAT IS LAW?

To assign one universally accepted definition of law would be impossible. Even among experts, the interpretations of law and its implications are virtually infinite. However, the main functions of modern law include: maintaining peace; influencing and enforcing standards of conduct; maintaining the status quo; facilitating orderly change; providing for maximum individual self-assertion; promoting justice; and providing solutions to conflicts and problems.

THE LAWYER'S ROLE

The lawyer in our society holds a twofold responsibility, working as both an officer of the court and a public servant. The lawyer's function is to provide legal assistance in resolving conflicts and ensuring justice.

As an officer of the court, the lawyer is charged with the responsibility of upholding and working within the framework of American law, which is based on the Constitution and written legislation.

As a public servant, the lawyer is a counselor who advises his or her clients to put their entangled legal affairs into workable order.

CHOOSING A CAREER

Before choosing a career, you should evaluate your abilities, work inclinations, and personal goals. Prerequisites to a career in law include the intelligence and diligence to earn a law degree and to pass the bar exam and then be admitted to the Bar, which allows you to practice law. You must be inclined to work perhaps 60 hours a week to complete your law school studies and later, as a lawyer, you may have to work nights or weekends on cases and function under extreme pressure.

As for personal goals, a law career provides an opportunity to earn a substantial income and can lead to a position of authority and influence. However, these personal objectives are often forced to become secondary since the profession of law is geared toward serving the public, not perpetuating personal ambitions. In fact, ethical rules are in place to ensure that lawyers fulfill their responsibilities to the public. Frequently, a lawyer's greatest satisfaction comes through the genuine desire to help people in trouble by giving them assurance that their legal rights will be protected.

AREAS OF LAW

More than half of all lawyers go into private practice, setting up a solo office or joining a law firm of two or more partners. Private practitioners usually handle a variety of cases, although they often earn a reputation for concentrating in a particular area. This reputation leads to client referrals. For example, a lawyer might gain a reputation as a divorce lawyer, handling enough cases in this area to comprise most or all of his or her practice.

Many lawyers are employed by departments and agencies of federal, state, and municipal governments. Many work for private businesses, large corporations, or industrial firms. Some lawyers become judges, politicians, mediators, or teachers. Others apply their legal education in areas such as banking, insurance, and real estate, where legal knowledge may be a part of the job activities.

Because the profession of law is so diverse and complicated, law school provides a general legal background, after which there are many options as to the specific area of law or career to be pursued.

LAWYER'S JOB DESCRIPTION

The lawyer's role most familiar to the public is that of a trial lawyer. Trials are news items because they involve people in dramatic and crisis situations. However, many men and women who practice law seldom appear in the courtroom. Many lawyers never present before a jury or a presiding judge. A trial is costly and time-consuming and it usually benefits both parties to settle out of court.

Since most lawyers are not involved with trial practice, activities of those in the legal profession vary according to the individual lawyer's personality and area of practice. A lawyer may spend one day in conference listening to a client's problem. The next day may be spent in the library or at a computer terminal doing research to find prevailing laws and decisions affecting that problem. A lawyer may spend the morning in the court and the afternoon visiting the scene of a client's accident. But almost every lawyer spends hours researching and writing legal pleadings, reports, or documents.

PRE-LAW EDUCATION

It is of utmost importance that you take the high school courses required for admission to the college you wish to attend. See your school counselor to make sure you are maximizing your high school education potential. Courses which develop your ability to read and write more precisely are important.

No law school requires a formal pre-law course of study for admission. While no specific courses are required, it is agreed that a strong liberal arts background is beneficial. Specific useful subjects include English, political science, economics, philosophy, logic, business management and other courses that enhance your reading, reasoning and writing abilities. Language is the tool of the lawyer, whether it is oral argument in court, letters, legal briefs, or drafting pleadings. Therefore, any course that develops this skill is valuable.

LAW SCHOOLS AND COSTS

Law school costs vary greatly, from the modest tuition of state-supported schools to the much higher tuition of the private law schools. On top of tuition costs, you must add the cost of books, room and board.

Many law schools and other legal organizations provide scholarships for outstanding students and also sponsor student loan programs. Many students also help finance their legal education by part-time employment. Information as to specific programs should be obtained from the law school you wish to attend.

There are 196 American Bar Association-accredited law schools in the United States, 9 of them in Florida. Florida's law schools include: Barry University, Orlando; Florida Coastal School of Law, Jacksonville; Florida State University College of Law, Tallahassee; Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad Law Center, Ft. Lauderdale; St. Thomas University School of Law, Miami; Stetson University College of Law, St. Petersburg; University of Florida Levin College of Law, Gainesville; University of Miami School of Law, Coral Gables.

THE BOARD OF BAR EXAMINERS

The Florida Board of Bar Examiners is an administrative agency of the Supreme Court of Florida. The Board consists of 12 members of The Florida Bar and three nonlawyer members of the general public. In making a determination as to your character and fitness to be an attorney, the Board conducts a thorough background investigation regarding your honesty, fairness and respect for the rights of others and for the laws of this country.

The Board also administers the Florida Bar Examination which is given twice a year. All law school graduates must pass this examination to obtain a license to practice law in Florida and be a member of The Florida Bar. Once you pass the bar examination and meet the character and fitness requirements established by the Supreme Court of Florida, you will be admitted to the practice of law in this state.

The Board recommends that you file a registration application within the first 180 days of commencing law school. By registering with the Board as a law student, you will pay a lower fee and you can obtain a preliminary decision from the Board as to your character and fitness.

Induction ceremonies for new lawyers are held twice annually, usually in May and October. Other requirements for admission to The Florida Bar are:

- An undergraduate college degree from an accredited school;
- A degree from an American Bar Association-accredited law school (or if the degree is from a non-accredited law school, the applicant must have ten years of practice in another state before being considered for admission).

For information or an application packet, write: Florida Board of Bar Examiners, 1891 Eider Court, Tallahassee, Florida 32308.

THE FLORIDA BAR

The Florida Bar is the third largest unified Bar, meaning that all lawyers who practice in the state must be members of the Bar. There are more than 80,000 members of The Florida Bar.

As a member of the Bar, each lawyer is expected to devote some time to the improvement of the profession. Lawyers participate in the work of the Bar and uphold the established ethical standards and discipline procedures. The Bar helps protect the public from harm that could result in unqualified persons permitted to practice law.

Bar members are also encouraged to support the public interest by providing free or low-cost services to individuals or charitable organizations in need and by working with and financially supporting organizations which provide legal services to those in need.

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS

According to The Florida Bar's 2006 Economics and Law Office Management Survey, the median salary for a starting attorney is \$55,000 depending on his or her internship/clerkship experience. Salaries for starting attorneys with no prior clerking experience vary between the three regions of Florida. In the North Region, which includes Jacksonville, Tallahassee and Pensacola, the median salary for a beginning attorney is \$52,000. The Central-Southwest Region, which includes the Orlando and Tampa areas, has a median salary of \$55,000 for a beginning attorney. In the Southeast Region, which includes Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami, the median salary for a beginning attorney is \$65,000.

As with all compensation, there is a strong correlation between years of experience and salary. The median salary in the State of Florida is \$75,000 for three to five years of prior experience, \$90,000 for six to eight years of experience, and \$145,000 as a partner in a firm. Larger firms generally offer greater initial salaries and more employee benefits than smaller firms. Salary amounts vary according to years of experience, age, type of practice, and firm size.

OTHER LAW-RELATED CAREERS

Much interest has been generated recently in legal assistant careers (also known as paralegal careers). A legal assistant is someone who works under the direct supervision of an attorney. The functions of a legal assistant vary considerably, but may include interviewing clients, conducting legal research projects, and preparing legal documents.

The median starting salary for a beginning legal assistant is approximately \$30,000. Salaries for legal assistants increase with experience. A legal assistant with four years of experience might expect a salary of about \$35,000 and a legal assistant

with five to 10 years of experience might expect a salary of approximately \$42,000. Salaries for legal assistants vary across the three regions of the state.

For those who have an interest in the law, but aren't necessarily looking for a career as a lawyer or legal assistant, there are several other types of professional positions available in law firms. Job titles for such careers include director of administration, administrative manager, controller, office manager, personnel director, support services supervisor, accountant, bookkeeper, librarian, law school recruiting specialist, legal assistant coordinator, mediator and data processing supervisor.

CONCLUSION

As you pursue your course in the study of law, remember that the road is a long and rough one. Money is always a consideration but should not be your primary goal. A lawyer's job is to provide a much-needed service in the community today. The legal profession is exciting and challenging, as it deals with the vital areas of our lives.

As one judge put it, "although more and more people are coming into the profession, we always have room for more good lawyers." Being a lawyer is far from easy, but for the right people it can be one of the most rewarding professional experiences.

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