A project developed and implemented by the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division to educate high school and junior high school students about lawyers and the legal profession, and to encourage students of color to consider a career in the legal profession.
CHOOSE LAW: A PROFESSION FOR ALL

A Public Service Project of the American Bar Association
Young Lawyers Division

There is no better time than right now to begin making decisions about your future. These decisions include smart choices about staying out of trouble, making good grades in school, and participating in extra curricular activities. No matter what career you pursue, these choices will help ensure your success.

The Choose Law project encourages you to do even more. The video and written materials provide you with specific information about what it means to be a lawyer and the importance of lawyers in our world. As you consider your options for your future place in society, you are encouraged to take a long, hard look at the legal profession, and perhaps make the law your career choice.

The information that follows and the Choose Law video are designed to give you basic information about the legal profession and your potential future as a lawyer. And this is only the beginning! To seek out additional information about the legal profession, go to your library, the Internet, your local bar association, a local attorney or your school guidance counselor.

Pursue a career in the law and help ensure that the legal community continues to serve, represent and reflect the changing face of our nation. The choice is yours.

Jay E. Ray
2006-2007 Chair
American Bar Association
Young Lawyers Division
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What is a Lawyer?

We’ve all heard the jokes. When it comes to lawyers, everyone is a comedian. The jokes we hear on TV, in the movies, and in general conversation are often very funny. In truth, that is what they are supposed to be . . . funny, but as with all issues, there is another side. There is nothing funny about the vital role that lawyers play in our society. In fact, the legal profession is one of the most important professions that exist, a fact that has been true for centuries.

Attorneys play many roles in our society. Lawyers advise our President, serve as and advise state and federal government officials, defend and prosecute criminals, defend and protect our constitutional rights, represent professional athletes and celebrities, help children in adoption and foster care situations, and help us to solve difficult and stressful personal disputes. The work that lawyers do affects our lives in many ways: lawyers ensure product safety, design laws that influence what is taught in our schools, defend equality in the law relating to the treatment of minorities and enforce laws that protect human rights. Without attorneys, the world would be a dangerous and violent place.

The Importance of Diversity in the Profession

Our country is built on diversity. Americans have many faces and ethnic backgrounds, and our differences need to be reflected in all aspects of professional life. The legal profession and the organizations representing attorneys, such as the American Bar Association and state and local bar associations, strongly encourage diversity in the legal profession for many reasons. It is only by supporting diversity within the legal profession that we can ensure that society provides American people with laws that apply equally to all regardless of race, gender and ethnicity. The face of the legal profession needs to match the face of the people it serves in order to serve them equally.

We have come a long way in providing access to a legal education to students of color and in integrating lawyers of color into the legal workplace. There is, however, still a lot to
do. We have a long way to go before the diversity among practicing attorneys and law firm partners is reflective of the diversity of our overall population. The profession is committed to closing the gap that exists, and recognizes that the first step toward attaining this goal is to increase diversity among students who identify the law as a career choice.

What It Takes
When you decide to become a lawyer, you make a decision that is the beginning of a long and committed process. It is a great choice, and one that opens the door to a wealth of possibilities, but it is also a choice that requires a lot from you. The benefits that you receive from your successful pursuit of a rewarding and fulfilling lifelong career as a lawyer will far outweigh what you give, but there are definitely challenges in the process.

You need to commit right now to doing your best in high school. The better your grades and participation in extracurricular activities, the better are your chances of being accepted by a college and ultimately by a law school. Following your high school graduation, you generally need to successfully complete four years of college, three years of law school, and pass a comprehensive test called the Bar Exam. Competition is stiff, and course work on all levels is challenging, but this should not discourage you from pursuing a career in the legal profession. Your success in each step of the educational process prepares you for the next level. And, there are many people to help you along the way.

Family members, teachers, counselors, friends and practicing attorneys are there for you. Just as adults have helped you arrive at the place you are today, they will continue to support you as you move toward attaining your future goals. Remember that you are not the first person to face challenges head-on to arrive at a career goal, and that you are not alone.

Choose Law
The information that follows will give you specifics regarding the importance of lawyers to our society, opportunities available to those who choose law as a career, how you can become an attorney, and the importance of diversity within the legal profession. These materials represent a very small portion of those available to you as you explore the possibilities. Your teachers and counselors, parents, family members, and practicing attorneys are there to help and guide you. You are not alone.

Why not become a lawyer? The decision is yours to make, and if you decide to pursue that career goal, your journey begins today!
Maintain and Guard the Law

Imagine a world with no rules. Although this scenario may be appealing at first, take a moment to envision how uncivilized things would be. Every car on the road could be driven at different speeds with no traffic rules. Newspapers could publish articles even if they were false. Employers could fire their employees because of their race or their gender. Schools could arbitrarily decide which students to admit and how to treat those students.

Without simple rules or laws, there would be no order within society. People would have no obligation to consider their fellow citizens and would not be reprimanded for violating the rights of others.

Luckily there are laws to keep order in society and lawyers are charged with maintaining these laws. The American legal system is very complex. The Constitution is the highest law in the United States. The Constitution is the source of most of our civil rights. We often take these rights for granted, but when they are violated or ignored, we look to lawyers to uphold them. We are also governed by statutes passed by the Congress and by state and local statutes and regulations. In addition, much of the law in the United States is based on decisions of the state and federal courts.

Attorneys make sure that these laws are not ignored or wrongly interpreted. Lawyers apply and interpret these laws to advise and defend their clients. These laws would be useless without lawyers to put them into effect. In short, lawyers are guardians of the law.

Advise and Advocate

In a society as large and diverse as ours, conflicts happen quite often. Lawyers help to resolve conflicts by advising their clients of their rights and arguing in favor of their best interests.

Lawyers have dual roles of advisors and advocates. As advisors, lawyers inform their clients about the consequences of their actions and advise them about their rights and
obligations. Lawyers also draft agreements that comply with the law and negotiate transactions on behalf of their clients.

As advocates, lawyers fight for their clients’ rights, help to obtain justice for their clients and present their case to a judge or jury.

Serve Their Community

Lawyers are expected to help their communities and the disadvantaged, and many do. Many lawyers provide legal services for free or reduced fees. Some lawyers will work at agencies that only help lower income individuals. Other lawyers will volunteer their free time to provide legal services. Others participate in bar association projects to help the disadvantaged or to improve the law or the legal system.

There are many different ways lawyers can give back to their communities and help people who cannot afford to hire lawyers.

Uphold the Rights of Others

Lawyers play a crucial role in upholding the rights of others. Of particular impact to society is the role attorneys play in upholding people’s civil rights. The Constitution’s first ten amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, promise various unconditional rights to people. The first amendment provides for freedom of speech, religion, press, peaceable assembly and the right to petition the government for redress. In maintaining the rule of law, there are two primary protections: due process and equal protection – regardless of social class, religion or ethnicity.

Due process and equal protection means that an individual may not be deprived of life, liberty or property, nor be denied equal protection under the law without a fair opportunity to have those rights protected and enforced. For example, any person accused of a crime has the right to have an attorney. If an individual accused of a crime does not have a lawyer to represent him/her, the state will assign a lawyer free of charge.

These rights are guaranteed to all citizens, whether they choose to exercise them or not, and may not be taken away. Nonetheless, in maintaining these rights, conflicts may arise where protecting the rights of one individual comes into direct conflict with the protected rights of another, thereby, requiring the expertise of a competent lawyer. By studying and understanding the rules of society, lawyers make sure that things are done according to the appropriate law and effectively aid individuals in upholding these rights.

By becoming a lawyer, you too will have the power to uphold these rights by serving people who are in trouble, advocating for causes to which you feel allegiance and protesting against unjust treatment of those who are not knowledgeable or strong enough to stand alone. You will also have the power to change laws which are unfair or damaging to the welfare of society and help to enact laws which are necessary to rid society of injustice and discrimination.
According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, a “lawyer” is “one whose profession is to conduct lawsuits for clients or to advise as to legal rights and obligations in other matters.” However, when most people think of lawyers, they think of lawyers in courtrooms eloquently arguing their cases to juries as seen on television and in movies. In reality, most lawyers spend much more time in their offices, talking to clients, researching legal issues, drafting legal documents and negotiating settlements and business transactions. Of course, there are some lawyers who spend a lot of time in the courtroom arguing cases to juries. For example, prosecutors and defense attorneys will go to court almost everyday.

Lawyers’ careers are very diverse. Some lawyers work for law firms advising and defending individuals and businesses. What a lawyer actually does when he or she works in a law firm depends on the type of law the lawyer practices. For example, lawyers can help clients make business and personal decisions, draft wills, draft documents to sell or buy a business, help businesses collect overdue bills or advise someone seeking a divorce.

About ten percent of lawyers work for government agencies. For example, attorneys working in the District Attorney’s Office will prosecute crimes, attorneys working for the Public Defender’s Office will defend those accused of a crime and lawyers working for the Securities and Exchange Commission will enforce laws governing securities, stocks and other investments.

Still others work in the business world as executives in companies or work in politics, either running for public office or working for a public official.

Following are a few examples of different types of law and a brief description of what lawyers can do in these areas:

• **Bankruptcy Law** – Lawyers represent companies and individuals who have financial problems, help them file for bankruptcy and help them fix their credit and financial situation.

• **Constitutional Law** - Lawyers fight for people’s Constitutional rights like the right to free speech, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, and equal protection.
• **Contract Law** – Lawyers create written agreements to protect their clients’ rights when they buy or sell property or services. Lawyers also help their clients to understand written documents before they sign them.

• **Education Law** – Lawyers represent schools and students in disciplinary and other legal proceedings. Lawyers can also teach law and law-related courses in colleges and law schools.

• **Environmental Law** – Lawyers fight to protect the environment or help companies comply with environmental regulations. For example, lawyers play a vital role in protecting the public’s health and safety by designing and enforcing policies and regulations to control pollution, protect wetlands and other energy and natural resources.

• **Employment Law** – Lawyers advise companies about problems with employees or defend them against lawsuits filed by employees. Lawyers can also represent employees who feel they have been discriminated against or treated unfairly by their employers and help employees to unionize.

• **Immigration Law** – Lawyers can work for the Department of Homeland Security and enforce immigration laws or represent individuals that immigrate or want to immigrate into the United States and help them become citizens. For example, lawyers are involved in developing and implementing immigration policies, both internally and with other nations. Lawyers also fight for immigrants’ right to work and live in the United States and to receive an education.

• **Intellectual Property Law** – Lawyers can ensure that no one is stealing their client’s inventions, trademarks, copyrights or domain names used on the internet.

• **Public Interest Law** – Lawyers can help people get public assistance and other benefits to which they are entitled. They can also fight for renters’ rights and low-income housing or represent foster children and other disadvantaged youths in a variety of proceedings.

You might still be wondering what a lawyer actually does on a typical day. A typical day in the life of every lawyer may involve meeting and talking with clients, researching the law that applies to the clients’ problems, creating a solution to their problems and finally, advising the clients of the best option to solve their problems. However, there are many different kinds of lawyers, and the type of law that a lawyer practices will often determine the activities that lawyer does in the course of a single day.
WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A LAW DEGREE?

1. Work as a litigation attorney in a private law firm. Doing what for example?
   a. Representing employers in disputes with employees.
   b. Representing insurance agencies in lawsuits against the businesses or individuals they insure.
   c. Representing businesses or individuals in business disputes.
   d. Representing individuals or business in constitutional rights disputes

2. Work as a transactional attorney in a private law firm. Doing what for example?
   a. Advising clients when buying and selling businesses.
   b. Forming businesses, such as corporations and limited liability companies.
   c. Reviewing real estate and other business contracts.
   d. Advising clients regarding business transactions.

3. Work as a criminal defense attorney in a private law firm.

4. Work as a city, county, state or federal prosecutor.

5. Work as a city, county, state or federal public defender.

6. Open up your own law firm.

7. Work for a non-profit legal agency. Doing what for example?
   a. Helping tenants in disputes against their landlords.
   b. Helping individuals obtain benefits from the Social Security Administration.
   c. Helping families in custody and divorce proceedings.
   d. Helping individuals obtain restraining orders against domestic violence.

8. Work for a government agency. Which one for example?
   a. Justice Department.
   d. Federal Elections Committee.
   e. Federal Bureau of Investigations.
   f. Department of Labor.

9. Run for political office. Which one for example?
   a. President.
   b. Congress.
   c. State Assembly.
   d. City Council Member.

10. Work in the business world. Doing what for example?
    a. As the Chief Executive Officer or other high ranking officer or employee of a company.
    b. In the legal department of a company.

11. Teach at a law school.
Being a lawyer is a rewarding career choice for various reasons. First, lawyers can help to shape the law under which citizens of the United States must live. Lawyers can also serve as a voice for groups within society that may not be able to speak up for themselves. Additionally, lawyers are able to give back to society by serving the public and promoting its interests. Since lawyers must protect the interests of their clients, lawyers can often be their own bosses and set their own work schedules. Lastly, the legal profession is a challenging, exciting and often financially rewarding career.

**Lawyers Help Shape the Law**

As a lawyer, you can help to shape the laws that govern us all and fight against laws which are unjust. You can do this by serving in the legislature (the part of our government that drafts and creates the laws) or becoming an activist who petitions the legislature to change unjust laws or make new laws. As a lawyer, you can also help create common law, which is a body of legal rules generated from the cases. In courts of law, lawyers have the opportunity to argue for the modification, extension, or elimination of the current law.

For example, the judicial decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) still characterizes common law at its best. The justices’ opinion in that case changed the lives of all American children and their families forever. In that case, the judge ruled that it was wrong to separate black children from white children in schools, and that separate treatment was not equal treatment under the law. After the decision in *Brown*, it became illegal to have separate schools for children based on their skin color. School districts across the country had to desegregate and allow all children to attend school together.

Some legal battles can make a tremendous impact on a business or a family, while others, as in the *Brown* case, can impact society as a whole. As a lawyer you can help make a difference in people’s lives and in society in general.
Lawyers Serve as a Voice

Lawyers often serve as the voice of those people or groups of people who cannot speak out for themselves. For example, lawyers ensure that the rights of persons charged with a crime are not violated. Lawyers also represent foster children and help them find good homes and represent the elderly in locating affordable housing or resolving problems with the Social Security Administration.

Lawyers can also serve as the voice for groups of people who are disadvantaged or have been treated unfairly. For example, lawyers have played vital roles in changing laws which have put ethnic minorities and women in the workplace at a disadvantage. Many of the laws which prohibit harassment and discrimination on the basis of race, religion or age were developed as a result of lawsuits filed by lawyers. These are only a few examples of the ways in which lawyers can use their skills and knowledge to speak for others.

Society needs strong lawyers to help fight injustices committed against those who may be unable to defend themselves, including children, senior citizens and groups of persons who have been harmed by unjust laws, companies or other individuals, young and old, rich and poor. Serving as the voice of others is a major reason people become attorneys.

Lawyers Serve the Public

A career in the legal profession brings with it a certain level of power and respect. When lawyers talk, people listen. With such distinction, lawyers are in the perfect position to empower others. The practice of law is a career that will enable you to help make equal justice available to all.

As a lawyer, there are several different ways that you can serve the public. One way is to volunteer some of your free time to do pro bono (no charge) work for people who cannot afford to pay for legal representation. Some law firms and state legal organizations require their lawyers to dedicate a certain amount of time to pro bono services. This type of work is not compensated with money, but it provides lawyers with the type of reward that comes from helping others in need. This type of work also helps ensure that all groups can have access to justice.

Another way to serve the public is to seek employment with a legal aid agency. Working at a legal aid agency is different from pro bono work because it is a full-time paid position. Although the clients you will be helping do not pay for your services out of their own pockets, legal aid lawyers are usually paid with money that is provided by the government. At a legal aid agency, you would have the satisfaction of providing legal services to those who otherwise would not be able to afford legal help and likely need it the most.

A legal education can give you the opportunity to support laws and legislation to protect people from homelessness, discrimination, unfair discipline, and unequal or selective treatment under the law. In sum, you could use your knowledge, power and respect to help promote equal protection under the law.

Lawyers as Entrepreneurs: Be your own boss

Often, lawyers choose to work for themselves in order to be their own bosses. A career in law could allow you to set your own schedule and contract with your own clients. You can accomplish this goal by choosing from a couple of different paths. After passing the bar, any lawyer can begin his or her own law practice as a sole practitioner, or join with a few other lawyers to establish a small law firm.

As a sole practitioner, you can work by and for yourself. However, a small law firm may be a good option for a lawyer who prefers a smaller, intimate working environment but doesn’t want to work alone. It is also an opportunity to join with friends to create a firm of lawyers with the same interests while still allowing you to make your own decisions. In either instance, sole practitioners and lawyers who create small firms enjoy the independence and respect of being their own bosses.

As your own boss, you can choose who you will represent and what kind of cases you will handle. You can decide how much money you will charge your clients or whether you will charge them at all. Having your own law firm and being your own boss gives you a lot of flexibility and the satisfaction that comes with owning your own business.
Lawyers Have Rewarding and Challenging Careers

One of the first things that probably comes to mind when you think about lawyers is money. However, there are many careers that offer you the opportunity to make a large income. The real reward in being a lawyer comes from all the opportunities the legal profession provides, including the opportunity to change the law, to help and be the voice for others, to serve the public, to be a leader and to be your own boss. The law also offers you the opportunity to have an intellectually challenging and exciting career. The law is always changing. As a result, lawyers are always learning new aspects or changes to the law. Lawyers often also have the opportunity to learn about other careers or businesses in order to adequately represent their clients. For example, if a lawyer is going to represent a doctor in a malpractice case, he or she must become familiar with the doctor’s medical practice and with the particular surgery or procedure involved in the case.

Nevertheless, income is oftentimes an important factor when choosing a career. The salaries of attorneys are varied and dependent upon the type, size, and location of their employers, experience, and the nature of their practice. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Labor found that the average salary for lawyers in the first nine months after graduating from law school was $55,000 dollars per year. For those lawyers in private practice, the average salary was $80,000 dollars per year. Keep in mind that a lawyer who starts his or her own practice may earn less than those attorneys working as associates or partners in a large law firm. For lawyers in government, the average salary was $44,700 per year. And lastly, for the lawyers that decided to teach and train law students, their average salary was $40,000 dollars per year.

As a lawyer, you have the chance to achieve financial success. Increased wealth leads to increased opportunities, as well as better education, better healthcare, and better family support and stability. However, that should not be the only reason you choose to become a lawyer. There are so many other more important rewards you should consider in deciding whether to choose law as a career.

Top Ten Reasons You Should Choose to Become An Attorney

1. You can make a difference in society and in people’s lives.
2. You will gain the knowledge and ability to fight for causes you believe in.
3. You will stand up for people who cannot stand up for themselves.
4. You can be a vehicle for change.
5. A law degree opens doors to many opportunities, including leadership opportunities in your community, the business world and politics.
6. You will constantly be challenged and learn new things.
7. You will have the opportunity to be your own boss.
8. You will learn about the law.
9. People will listen to you and value your opinion.
10. Practicing law can be financially rewarding.

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The First Step – College

Hopefully by now you’ve learned what an important role the law plays in your everyday life and how the legal profession truly needs someone like you. The next step is preparing yourself to become a lawyer. You may think that since you are in high school, you have plenty of time and that what you do now really won’t have that much impact on your future. If this is the case, you’ll need to change your way of thinking, and fast!

The first step towards becoming a lawyer is getting good grades in school – starting now. Being a successful student at any stage in your educational career depends heavily on developing good study habits. You’ll be reading a lot of books in both college and law school, so it’s important to learn how to manage your study time successfully. By focusing on getting good grades in high school, you will not only develop a strong study pattern, but you will also increase your chances of getting into college, which is a major step on the road to becoming a lawyer.

People follow many different paths to become lawyers. The most traditional path is to attend college for four years, take the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and then attend law school for three years. You can also become a lawyer through a combination of education and experience. For example, in California, Maine, New York, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming you can study the practice of law by working in a law office instead of going to law school. In California, the District of Columbia and New Mexico, you can study the law through a correspondence school instead of in a formal classroom setting.

First things first – let’s talk about college. Many of you may have already started to think about where you would like to go to college, but if you haven’t, don’t panic – there is still plenty of time. A good way to start thinking about college is to visit with your high school guidance counselor, as he or she may have information about schools in your area. Law schools look for students who can write well and think in an analytical and critical way. Because of this, you do not have to major in a specific subject in college or focus on pre-law courses. But, you should generally focus on courses
that include critical analysis, logical reasoning, and written and oral expression. In addition, the more challenging your educational experience in college, the more likely it is that you will be prepared for the challenging world of law school. Of course it is also a good idea to pick classes that you truly enjoy and are therefore more likely to do well in, since law schools will be looking at your grades when deciding whether or not to admit you – and colleges will be looking at your high school grades when doing the same thing.

If you are having a hard time with your classes now, it’s probably a good idea to get a tutor. Maybe your school has a program where older students provide free help after school in the library. Or maybe your community has a homework hotline. Also, you should talk to your parents and teachers to see if they would be willing to work with you either before or after school. Making a commitment to improve your grades now is one of the most important steps you can take to making your dream of one day becoming a lawyer a reality.

Another important part of getting into college is performing well on either the ACT or the SAT college entrance exams. These are tests that you will take during either your junior or senior year in high school that are supposed to measure how likely you are to succeed in college. Since these tests are so important, there are a lot of books and materials out there to help you prepare. Don’t forget to ask your high school guidance counselor if your school library carries these types of books, which usually include practice tests so you can get used to the types of questions that will be asked. If your school library doesn’t have them, your local city or county library probably will. Remember – practice makes perfect.

Learning how to perform well on these types of tests will help you prepare for the LSAT, once you get to that point. For now, focus on getting good scores on the ACT and SAT so you can get into college.

Another way to increase your chances of getting into college is by becoming involved in extra-curricular activities while still in high school. Colleges look for well-rounded students, so it’s important to not only have good grades and good test scores, but also that you be involved in different school clubs, organizations or volunteer activities. One example is becoming a member of your school’s speech and debate team, since lawyers are expected to be able to argue their client’s position in either the courtroom or the boardroom. Another example is becoming involved in a local “Trial by Peers” competition, where high school students act out the role of either lawyer, judge, witness or juror in a mock trial competition. Of course, if you currently belong to a sports team or other type of club at your high school – keep up the good work. Just being involved in something you enjoy is an important step in getting colleges to notice you.
Once you get into college, set up a meeting with your college advisor to discuss the classes you will be taking. As a freshman in college, you will most likely be required to meet with your assigned advisor — which is a good thing. It’s important that you let him or her know early on that you are interested in becoming a lawyer so he or she can point out classes that may be helpful, such as English or Public Speaking. Also, many colleges have pre-law student clubs or organizations that you can join where you will meet other students who are interested in becoming lawyers. These clubs often host speakers from various law schools who will come in and give you advice on how to get into law school. College is an exciting time and you should make the most of every opportunity you can!

The Next Step – Law School

But Can I Afford It? You may have heard the old saying, “it takes money to make money.” Well, that is how you should look at the money you are going to have to spend to get the education required to become a lawyer. By investing in your future, you will be spending money on your education in order to make money in your career. Some of the quotes you will hear for law school tuition may sound like a lot of money. Keep in mind that the costs will vary depending on the type of law school you attend. For example, as of the 2005/2006 school year, residents in the state of California attending public universities to get their law degree were paying approximately $19,000 in annual tuition, while students attending private California schools were paying around $30,000 in annual tuition.

http://www.top-law-schools.com

Luckily, there are ways to get help with these expenses. Today, approximately 80 percent of law school students rely on educational loans as their primary source of financial aid to cover expenses while they are in law school. If you would like to one day receive this type of loan, be sure to pay your bills on time now and during college — credit history is a factor for some types of loans! Other financing options available include scholarships, grants and fellowships, so be sure to ask your college advisor about these types of opportunities while you are in the process of applying to law school.

The Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO) sponsors a program designed to increase the number of economically and educationally disadvantaged students in law school. It was established in 1968, and is co-sponsored by a number of national bar associations, including national minority bar associations. CLEO programs receive their funding primarily from the federal government. For more information about these programs, you can contact CLEO at 1800 N. Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, http://www.cleoscholars.com.

It’s important to explore as many different financing options as possible, since most law schools restrict the ability of first year students to work while taking classes full time. If you’ve crunched the numbers and you absolutely need to work, a part-time law school program may be best for you. More and more law schools are offering these types of programs for their students in response to the increasing costs of getting a legal education, so be sure to check if the law schools in which you are interested provide this option. According to recent information gathered from the U.S. Department of
Labor, approximately 1 out of every 10 graduates from law schools accredited by the American Bar Association attended part-time programs, so you definitely won’t be alone!

**Getting Your Foot in the Door – Law Schools Do Want You!**

You may feel a bit overwhelmed by the idea of going to college, let alone law school. Perhaps you will be the first member of your family to continue your education after high school. While this next step may seem a bit scary, you should take pride in the fact that you are motivated to have a professional career in the law! It’s important for you not to become discouraged and to remember that law schools DO want you as a student.

According to information obtained from the Law School Admissions Council for law schools, during the fall of 2004, 28,000 minority applicants applied – a record high! In fact, the number of minority applicants has more than tripled over the past 20 years, with the number of applicants identifying themselves as being from a specific minority group remaining relatively stable over the past 10 to 12 years at about 25 percent to 28 percent of the total applicant pool, which has steadily increased.

Due to a fresh awareness of the fact that minorities have been historically underrepresented in the legal profession, all Law School Admissions Council member law schools are trying to address this issue by actively promoting diversity in the profession and seeking out qualified minority applicants. Many law schools also consider factors like economic and educational disadvantage when considering a potential applicant for admission. It’s important that you communicate your personal history and current situation to your college advisor when you are working on your law school application so that he or she can help you write an admission essay that best reflects who you are and what you have to offer.

If you’ve always dreamed of becoming a lawyer, it’s important to remember that your dream can become reality. The most important thing you can do now to help you achieve that goal is to find out as much as you can about the process of becoming a lawyer in advance and then take the steps needed to get there. It may seem like a long road through college and law school, but the pay off is having a professional career for the rest of your life!

**Who/What Can Help You On Your Path to Become a Lawyer**

- Counselors
- Teachers
- Older brothers and Sisters
- Family and friends in the legal profession
- Parents
- Internet Sites (see end of this Guide for links to useful sites)
- Books in the Library (see end of this Guide for names of helpful books)

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### Top Five Tips to Excelling in College

5. Choose courses that you think you will enjoy.
4. Stay focused; don’t get distracted by students who do not make grades a priority.
3. Participate in activities and join organizations of interest to you.
2. Develop relationships with your professors.
1. Participate in class and keep up with the reading.
Diversity is Crucial to the Legal Profession

Having racial diversity in the legal profession is extremely important to the profession and to society as a whole. Given that only attorneys can practice law, it is very important that attorneys reflect and understand the diverse members of our society. All groups of society must be able to present their grievances to the government and in a court of law. Although it is not necessary that clients have attorneys of their own racial groups in order to have their legal interests protected, many individuals only feel comfortable with attorneys who share their racial and ethnic backgrounds. In other words, attorneys who look like them, sound like them, and who may have shared their life experiences. Moreover, these attorneys may better understand their clients and therefore be better able to represent them.

In addition, the legal system must be perceived as fair and protective of all members of our society. When someone is exposed to the legal system, it is important that they see other individuals, including judges and attorneys, who are like them. Without attorneys in all racial and ethnic groups, many individuals will feel that they are unrepresented in our legal system and will not see it as a meaningful tool for resolving grievances and protecting their rights. Without a perception of fairness to match an actual fairness in the legal system, individuals will turn away from presenting their grievances in the courtroom and will instead turn to the streets.

The Current State of Diversity in the Profession

Although great strides have been made, individuals of color continue to be under-represented in the legal profession. The causes for this under-representation are many, but include: fewer financial and educational opportunities, fewer opportunities to be favorably exposed to the legal profession, and fewer role models who have attended college or become attorneys. In addition these individuals may not have access to counselors with a full understanding of the requirements of law school and the requirements of the legal profession.
In the fall of 2005, 95,800 individuals applied to an ABA Approved Law School. Of that number, 31,230 (32%) of the applicants identified themselves as belonging to one or more racial minority groups. Of all law school applicants, 56,100 of the applicants were admitted to an ABA Approved Law School, including 15,370 (27%) applicants identifying themselves as belonging to one or more racial minority groups. The racial breakdown of those admitted to ABA Approved Law Schools in the fall of 2005 was:

- 410 - American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 4,720 - Asian/Pacific Islander
- 3,660 - Black/African American
- 40,020 - Caucasian/White
- 720 - Chicano/Mexican American
- 2,400 - Hispanic/Latino
- 860 - Puerto Rican
- 2,600 - Other
- 740 - No Ethnic ID

In the profession as a whole, a disparity continues to exist between the number of attorneys of color and the number of individuals of color in society. In 2000, attorneys of color made up less than 15% of the profession while individuals of color made up approximately 30% of the U.S. population.\(^4\)

Law schools and employers desire minority candidates and lawyers. Because of the historical disparity and because of a desire to have diverse student bodies, law schools actively recruit students of color, whether by including race as a factor for consideration in the application process or by looking to other factors, such as personal history and economic and educational backgrounds.

Recognizing the importance of diversity in corporate life, many companies require the law firms that they use to report the number of attorneys of color working on the client’s files and the number of partners in the law firm that are attorneys of color. Not only are many companies requiring their law firms to report these numbers, some are also grading their outside counsel and refusing to send any new work to those with failing grades. These corporate initiatives are helping to provide more opportunities in private practice to attorneys of color.

Finally, the importance of diversity to the profession and the welcoming of attorneys of color to the profession are evidenced by the numerous programs implemented by national, state and local bar associations, as well as individual attorneys and judges, to encourage individuals of color to choose law as a profession and to assist them in becoming attorneys. This is also reflected in the recent increase in the number of individuals of color who have served as officers of local, state and national bar associations, including two recent African-American Presidents of the American Bar Association: Robert Grey - 2004-05 and Dennis Archer - 2003-04.

The Profession Needs You

The only way to increase diversity in the profession is for more individuals of color to become attorneys. Although the process can be difficult and you may face more obstacles along the way than most, you can become an attorney and help ensure that the legal profession and our country’s legal system are reflective of our diverse society. The rewards of being an attorney can be great and there are individuals and groups ready to help you on your journey to becoming an attorney. There is a place for you in the legal profession, and those that have come before you look forward to welcoming you to this honorable and crucial profession. So, CHOOSE LAW!

On the following page are some quotes and stories from real attorneys telling their stories about why they became attorneys or how they overcame some of the same challenges you are facing now or think you may face in the future.\(^5\)


\(^5\) The quotes are not exact and have been paraphrased.
J. Phenise Poole (Litigation Attorney)

“I started my career as a criminal prosecutor in Cincinnati. The majority of citizens there were African-American, just like me. I love the fact that, as a lawyer, I was able to be an advocate for them. I was also able to be in control in that courtroom. I determined whether a case would get dismissed or fully prosecuted. I was able to be an advocate for the victim in the courtroom.”

Hon. Bernice B. Donald (U.S. District Judge, Western District of Tennessee)

“From as long as I can remember, I have loved the law. I had a wonderful experience when I was a preteen. I lived in Olive Branch, Mississippi, and at that time I had never even seen a lawyer. But three young white lawyers — two from California, and one from New York — came to Olive Branch to help desegregate the institutions there, and to help get people registered to vote. They were energetic, smart, wonderful, and they cared enough to leave their homes, their places of safety, to go to Mississippi to help other people achieve their rights. The law can help people change their lives.”

“When I first became a judge in 1982, I was the first African-American female judge in the history of the state of Tennessee. The person who staffed my court gave me an all African American staff, four African American bailiffs, each armed with 44 caliber weapons. I had two African American clerks and an African American prosecutor. One of the first people to come into my courtroom was a young white male. He looked around, and his eyes grew wide. I’m sure he thought there was no way he could get a fair trial because no one here looked like him. In a non-diverse courtroom, this person who was different felt alienated. It’s important that people know that they have a place in the whole court process.”

Kelly-Ann Clarke (Commercial Litigation Attorney)

“Your friends, family, community, and — most importantly — fear, should not stop you from going to law school. I remember when I was going through law school, I had gone through an excellent university and my mother told me, ‘Kelly-Ann you aren’t going to make it as a lawyer unless you change a few things.’ She believed in me, but when your own mother tells you you’re not going to make it, you start to doubt yourself and think that you can’t do it. You can do it; the biggest thing to combat is fear.”

Morris J. Chavez (Attorney, Representative, New Mexico Gaming Control Board)

“To me, it is a privilege to be a Latin American attorney. When I was growing up, neither I nor any member of my family knew any attorneys. When I tell people my story, it’s somewhat surprising that I was able to do it.”

Rita Diaz (Litigation Attorney)

“I was born in Guatemala. I came to the United States when I was only a few months old. Spanish was my first language, but I learned English quickly. It’s very important to me to keep my culture alive so I visit Guatemala and my family often.”

“Graduation from law school was one of the most exciting times for me and my family. Seeing me graduate was an inspiration to my brother, who is now in law school. My parents felt that all the sacrifices they went through to help me through school were well worth it. It has been very rewarding to have this type of education.”

O’Kelly E. McWilliams, III (Employment Attorney)

“I played college basketball, and when I told my friends I wanted to become a lawyer, there was some laughter. But for the most part, people believed I had a shot to do it. When I told my grandmother I got accepted to law school and that I was going to go, there was about a three-minute spell where she started crying. I later found out that she was crying because my grandfather always wanted to have a lawyer in the family. I didn’t know it, but I was the one who would hopefully fulfill that dream. It was a special time.”

Comdr. Benes Aldana (Attorney for U.S. Coast Guard, JAG)

“I was 10 years old when I came to the United States, and barely able to speak any English. My dad was in the military. No one from my family ever went to law school, and I didn’t know any lawyers. In the seventh grade, my class had to do research on what we wanted to become when we grew up. I thought that being a lawyer would be great. At that time, however, I had a misconception about what lawyers do. I thought it was all about making money, but that is not what it is about.”
Georgene Louis (Indian Affairs Attorney)

“I became a mother when I was a very young woman. It would have been so easy to work in a position that doesn’t require the years and money that law school requires. If you are really serious about wanting to become an attorney, you should look for anything to help you along in achieving your goal. You can always find people who are willing to help you. However, that is just the beginning. You have to take action to be successful. I did, and so can you.”

“As a Native American, I became a lawyer because I desired to help my people. I was the type of person who would always complain about tribal politics and about the way tribal governments are treated. My parents encouraged me to be part of a profession that would allow me to gain the knowledge necessary to make a difference. That was one of the main reasons I became a lawyer. I strive to bring about change by helping to make my people, and tribes in general, stronger so they can grow, yet at the same time, sustain their ancient traditions and cultures. I don’t expect to be able to do it by myself, but I just want to have a hand in seeing tribal people succeed.”

Stephen N. Zack (Law Firm Partner and 2004-2006 Chair of ABA House of Delegates)

“No one in my family had been a lawyer and, frankly, no one in my family had graduated from college. There was just a desire that was almost metaphysical, that started when I was 8 years old. I was walking on the beach with my grandmother in Cuba (where I lived until I was 14 years old). She asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up and I said become a lawyer. I never wanted to do anything else and I’m not sure I could do anything else that would make me happy.”

Kent D. Lollis (Attorney, Executive Director of Minority Affairs, Law School Admissions Council)

“My grandfather got to start college during the Depression, but didn’t get to finish. His ultimate goal was to go on to law school. When I was little, he sat me on the bench in his office study and said, ‘See these law books here? I would really like you to go to law school.’ He was motivated to be a lawyer because he thought it was a good profession and because there were no minority lawyers in his community. I am living out his dream.”

Jesse H. Ruiz (Corporate Attorney)

“I am a first generation lawyer in my family. My parents emigrated from Mexico in the late 50’s. My dad came here as part of something called the Bracero program, a Mexican migrant farm worker program. He picked crops all over the United States, met my mother, brought her here and settled on the south side of Chicago. The day I graduated, my father, who was only able to attend school up to the third grade, heard his last name being called. It was a dream that was not possible for him growing up in Mexico. Being a lawyer in my family has been incredibly helpful assistance to my parents, nieces and nephews, who have seen that an education can change one’s life in this country and be the pathway to the American dream.”

Sunil R. Harjani (Attorney, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission)

“I am the first to go to law school in my family. My parents are business people without college degrees. It means a lot to them for me to be in a profession that means something to society.”

Karen Mathis (Attorney, American Bar Association President 2006-2007)

“I decided I wanted to be a lawyer when I was 12. I turned 12 in 1962, when we had lost great leaders in our nation and were about to lose more great leaders in the years to come: John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Medgar Evers, and the list goes on. I saw the efforts of the freedom riders and others in the South who cared about the right to vote in this nation. Those things made me want to be one of the first women to go to law school in the early 70’s, and to increase the female side of the profession.”
Choosing a career for your future is one of the most important choices you will ever make. Now that you have taken a long and hard look at what it takes to become a lawyer, you may have decided that law is the way for you. However, if you are still uncertain, you should be sure of one thing: you too can make a difference in this world.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the buck stops with you. You have to be the first one to realize that you can do it. Then, you need to begin taking the necessary steps to reach those goals. The choice is yours.

So keep in mind that there are many faces of law. You can find successful lawyers doing many types of legal work in every community, even in your community. So ask yourself, will your face be the next one we see? The journey starts today!

“You have to be the first one to realize that you can do it”
1. For more information on law schools and a career in the law:
   - American Bar Association, 321 North Clark St., Chicago, IL 60619, http://www.abanet.org
   Many states also have local minority legal associations as well, so be sure to check in your area.

2. For more information on the LSAT, the Law School Data Assembly Service, applying to law school and financial aid available to law students:
   - Law School Admission Council, P.O. Box 40, Newtown, PA, 18940, http://www.lsac.org
   - College Board (SAT registration), 45 Columbus Avenue, New York, NY 10023. http://www.collegeboard.com
   - ACT Registration, P.O. Box 414, Iowa City, IA 52243-0414 http://www.actstudent.org

3. Check your local library for these and other helpful books on the legal profession:

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