

Virginia Tech Pre-Law

Information for Advisors

For students entering Summer or Fall 2009

Additional Information on pre-law advising is available on the web at <http://www.psci.vt.edu/prelaw/>.

Advising Overview

Law students and lawyers come from many undergraduate backgrounds and the skills necessary to succeed in law school and as an attorney can be developed in a variety of courses across a range of disciplines. As a result, law schools do not treat any specific course or major as a prerequisite for admission. It is not a disadvantage to have majored in engineering, the physical or biological sciences, or the humanities; and it is not an advantage to double major or to accumulate minors in various fields. Similarly, law schools do not look with special favor on applicants who have graduated from a formal "pre-law" program. Accordingly, Virginia Tech does not offer a formal pre-law major. The University does offer quality education in a large number of fields, as well as counseling about law as a career, preparing for law school, and the law school admission process. Because no single major is best suited for studying law, and because law schools accept applicants with a wide variety of undergraduate majors, students thinking about going to law school should take advantage of this freedom and choose a major that interests them. At the same time, certain kinds of skills are important for studying and practicing law. Students should think about pursuing a course of study that will help them to develop and strengthen their skills in the areas outlined below.

Reading Comprehension

Legal analysis typically depends on careful study of written texts, many of which contain complex forms of reasoning. Being able to understand those texts is thus critical to defending others' positions, drafting documents to deal with a range of problems, or analyzing the applicability of laws or precedents in particular contexts. Thus it may be useful for you to take classes that require close reading of complex sources and encourage you to develop skills of textual interpretation and criticism.

Critical Thinking and Analytic Reasoning

As indicated, legal analysis typically requires careful reasoning about how legal materials apply or might apply to actual or conceivable disputes. As a result, students are advised to take courses that help them to strengthen skills of deductive and inductive reasoning and to be able to analyze, apply, and criticize others' arguments. Law schools require imaginative thinking and active engagement in the learning process, not just passive receipt of information or memorization and regurgitation of details.

Effective Communication

Reading, thinking, analyzing, criticizing, and communicating are mutually reinforcing activities. The legal profession depends on persons' being able to express ideas, not just think them. Developing skills of written and oral communication are integral parts of understanding legal materials and applying them in actual or potential controversies. As a result, students are encouraged to develop skills of written and oral communication before enrolling in law school. Among other things, students will be rewarded for being able to organize and present relevant arguments in a clear and concise manner. In order to develop these skills, students are advised to take classes that require significant writing and re-writing or that involve students in discussions and in making oral presentations.

Which Courses?

There are many equally respectable routes to law school. It is particularly important for students to be interested in their classes, to take them seriously, and to be committed to doing well. In general, you are more likely to do well in courses that you enjoy, and law schools will pay more attention to how well you have done than to whether you have taken particular courses.

At the same time, classes in certain fields are likely to be relevant (but not required) for almost any person considering law school. More specifically, it is advisable for students to take courses that will help them to strengthen the skills identified above and to deepen their appreciation of law and legal institutions. For example, a variety of courses in English, Philosophy, History, the Social Sciences (Economics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology), Communication, and Business may help students to prepare for law school and to place their post-graduate legal studies in perspective.

Some students may want to take undergraduate courses on legal topics, such as Constitutional Law, Business Law, or Environmental Law. Although such courses are typically taught using methods different from those found in law school classes and have significantly different substantive objectives, they may introduce elements of legal reasoning and give students a sense of the broad range of issues that intersect with the study of law. Courses on the U.S. judiciary (such as Criminology or Judicial Process) provide an overview of the players, dynamics, and problems of the legal system in which most lawyers will become involved. Meanwhile, other classes deal more directly with the philosophical and historical underpinnings of law (e.g., Jurisprudence, Morality and Justice). But again, it is only appropriate to take such courses if they interest you. Students majoring in Political Science may elect to take courses to complete an [Option in Legal Studies](#). This is not a formal pre-law course of study, but it enables students to concentrate some portion of their undergraduate course work in the study of public law. In addition, the English Department offers a pre-law track within its Literature, Language, and Culture Program. That program is described at: <http://www.english.vt.edu/lc/index.htm>.