1948

Suggestions to College Students Preparing to Study Law

University of Michigan Law School

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.law.umich.edu/miscellaneous

Part of the Legal Education Commons

Citation

http://repository.law.umich.edu/miscellaneous/66

This Pamphlet is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School History and Publications at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Miscellaneous Law School Publications by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.
Suggestions to College Students Preparing to Study Law

College students preparing themselves to enter the Law School frequently ask questions concerning the college courses that should be elected by them in preparation for professional study. This leaflet is intended to afford answers to such questions so far as it is possible to do so in general terms.

1. Breadth of Training vs. Specialization

In general, it may be said that the lawyer's range of knowledge should be as broad as it is humanly possible to make it—the broader the better. Yet it is impossible in a college course to cover all fields of knowledge thoroughly. There is no single college program that can be called the best or the only one for pre-law purposes. There are many courses and many combinations of courses that will serve well. In order to attain the necessary breadth of knowledge, the student should elect at least the basic courses in several fields of learning. He must however, avoid such scattering of elections as to result in undue dilution. Furthermore, it is desirable to pursue advanced courses in one or perhaps two fields in order to attain the mastery that can be derived only from specialization. In short, a proper middle course must be discovered between too great dispersion, on the one hand, and too intense concentration, on the other.

2. Necessity of a Well-Disciplined Mind

Still speaking generally, it may be said that one of the most essential qualities of the successful lawyer is a well-disciplined mind. College elections should be made with that thought in view. The mind must be trained to be quick, keen, positive, and elastic. It must be capable of readily embracing complex situations. It must readily identify subtle distinctions, appraise arguments, and weigh opposing considerations. It must be disciplined
to sustained effort over long periods of time. To aid in developing such mental equipment the college program should include courses calculated to extend the mental powers to the utmost. "Snap" courses have no place in a pre-law program.

3. Special Interests of the Student

In view of the breadth of knowledge expected of the lawyer, if the intending law student has a genuine personal interest in some special field of learning not generally regarded as "pre-law background," he need not refrain from pursuing his interest to a reasonable degree simply because some other field of study may superficially seem more directly connected with the law. Thus, if he happens to be seriously interested in astronomy, biology, fine arts, or some other seemingly remote field, an extra course or two to satisfy the interest is quite justifiable, even though pursuing it may eliminate an advanced course in political science or economics, or some other subject more closely related to the law. Indeed, one can never tell just what will prove of practical value to a member of the bar. Legal transactions involve almost every field of human activity. A knowledge of astronomy or biology or even fine arts, may on occasion prove exceedingly helpful. Engineering problems are commonly met in law offices and many engineering graduates have studied and practiced law with success and distinction. In other words, the lawyer's task is likely to require a knowledge of almost any branch of learning, and, if the intending law student has a genuine interest in some specialty, even though it may seem to be remote from law, he may justifiably spend a little time pursuing it.

4. Suggestions Concerning Specific Subjects

Going more into detail, but without attempting to comment on all subjects in the college curriculum, the following remarks concerning specific courses of study may prove of assistance.

Economics.—The value of a thorough understanding of the principles and practices of economics is apparent. In addition to the elementary courses in the subject, certain advanced courses are clearly indicated because of their practical importance to the lawyer. This includes courses in accounting, statistics, taxation, public finance, labor relations, and public control of industry.
Accounting is especially valuable, affording, as it does, an understanding of the meaning and interpretation of balance sheets, income statements, etc. It is part of the "language of the lawyer."

English.—The importance of a high degree of skill in handling the English language, both written and oral, is self-evident. It is the medium through which we exchange ideas, and the lawyer spends his lifetime in exchanging ideas. Not less than twelve credit hours of English (including literature), should be included in a pre-law program, and unless the student has, through debating or otherwise, acquired fluency with the spoken word, he will find a course in speech of value to him.

Foreign Language (both ancient and modern).—Latin is valuable, both by reason of the fact that it serves as an aid to understanding the English language and also because of its disciplinary effect in improving the student's mental processes. However, most students who intend to become lawyers have studied Latin in high school, and unless there is a very special interest to be favored, the high school courses should suffice. A fluent reading knowledge of Latin is no longer necessary for the study or practice of law. Modern languages offer the additional advantage of utilitarian value. Not less than eight hours of language should be included in a well rounded program.

History.—The importance of history in a pre-legal program cannot be overemphasized. Particularly is this true of English and American constitutional, political, and economic history. Many phases of the law can be understood only when illuminated by their historical backgrounds. At least twelve credit hours are recommended in this field.

Mathematics and Science.—Mathematics is unexcelled as a mental disciplinarian and is worthy of consideration for that reason. If, however, the student finds mathematics displeasing, or if he is unable to cope with it because of its abstract quality, certain of the exact sciences—astronomy, chemistry, physics, etc.—serve equally well to develop habits of exact and precise thinking. Moreover, they provide useful general knowledge and background for many phases of the law. Most college programs require the student to include about eight hours of mathematics or science, and it is time well spent.
Political Science.—This subject also is one with which the lawyer must be well-acquainted. Every member of the bar should have an understanding of our national, state, and local governments, and he will be aided by a knowledge of such subjects as political theory, public administration, international law and policies, and other advanced subjects in the field.

5. Mistakes to be Avoided

There are several mistakes frequently made by pre-law students which should be avoided so far as possible:

Vocational courses should be avoided. This includes such courses as business law, surveying, map-making, bookkeeping (as distinguished from accounting), etc.

Lecture courses should be kept to a minimum. Some lectures are unavoidable and perhaps desirable, but the closer contacts and the intellectual stimulus of the smaller “quiz classes” are, in general, more valuable, and should be sought as much as possible.

“Snap” courses should be avoided.

New or partially developed courses should be looked upon with question. The older and better established courses will, in general, give greater returns.

Too great scattering of elections will dilute the program and should be avoided. A broad education is desirable, but undue dispersion will result in no education at all.

A purely utilitarian or bread-and-butter attitude toward the pre-law program should be shunned. Utilitarian values cannot and should not be ignored, but major emphasis should be placed upon the acquisition of cultural and moral values. They add immeasurably to the stature of a lawyer.

Finally, in trying to determine whether to take a three- or four-year pre-law course remember that the fourth college year gives a most valuable opportunity to specialize as well as to round out the course program. Even though taking the extra college year defers the time of entry into active life, the value derived from it is well worth the sacrifice of time and effort. Only compelling considerations of age, family, or financial urgency, should induce the student to sacrifice the final college year.

E. Blythe Stason, Dean

April 5, 1948