Many students believe that pursuing a law degree is the best course of action to fulfill their desire to engage in the policy-making process. This is a common misconception. Law school prepares you for practicing law; some of these skills are valuable for investigating legal concerns, but, as you know, politics is much more than the law itself. For those students who want to pursue a career in government or non-profit organizations, other graduate degrees may be more beneficial to their future career prospects. Many state that an MPA/MPP “is like an MBA for people who are truly passionate about enacting social change.”[1] Careful consideration must be taken when investigating graduate education, this page is meant to inform students interested in continuing their education about avenues that may be more relevant to their career interests.

Dispelling Myths: The Wrong Reasons to Go to Law School

1. I’m a liberal arts major, and I don’t know what else to do with my degree.

There are many fulfilling employment options for students graduating with a liberal arts major. If you do not know where to begin, reach out to an advisor, they typically have information that can help guide your transition from university to the workforce. The UW Career Center is dedicated to helping you find employment after graduation, begin by searching their website: https://careers.uw.edu/

2. My parents want me to go/ everyone else in my family is a lawyer.

Having the support of family is definitely important, although following a parent’s wishes in this case is not recommended. When it comes to choosing any graduate degree, it is a personal decision, one that ought to be based on your personality, career and life goals – not some else’s wishes.

3. I have always been fascinated by the law. It’s intellectually stimulating.

- Students considering a career in law should be aware of the realities of the legal profession. Despite the way it is portrayed on television most real-life lawyers in fact spend a lot of their time on “painstakingly detailed research”.[2]
- Additionally, the legal profession can be a stressful one. Research over the last ten years indicates that lawyers are the professional group most likely to suffer from stress, depression, and alcohol or substance abuse.
- 75% of lawyers in a US News and World Report poll said they would choose a different career path if they were starting over.

4. I want to change the world.

- With the median starting public interest salary under $40,000 (compared to $90,000 at private firms) these huge debts bar most graduates from pursuing public service legal jobs.
- Since 1975, the share of new lawyers who entered public-interest fields has declined from 5.4% to 2.9%.
- A recent study found that 73.5% of UW Law School students are less inclined to seek a public interest or government position due to their educational debt load.
- Public interest employers are having trouble finding new attorneys. According to a recent American Bar
Association Study, 68% of public interest employers have difficulty recruiting the attorneys they need and 62% have difficulties retaining experienced attorneys.

- About 90% of these employers cite both low salaries and educational debt as the largest factors contributing to these problems. [3]

5. I like to argue/debate.

Enjoying argumentation is another poor reason to attend law school. Although attorneys frequently make arguments, most of their time is spent conducting painstakingly precise research, analyzing that research, and then writing briefs and memoranda in support of a position. Many attorneys will never actually step foot in a court room.

6. I did well on the LSAT, so why not?

The LSAT is a poor measure of whether or not you will actually enjoy the type of work that attorneys do. Its intention is to measure your ability to succeed during your 1st year of law school. It is recommended that you shadow, or intern, for a variety of attorneys in different practice areas to see if law school is really a good fit for you.

7. I want to make a lot of money.

How much money do first-year law graduates make?[4]

- 14% received salaries of either $135,000 or $145,000.
- 42% received salaries of $55,000 or less.
- The median starting salary for all graduates is $65,000.
- For law firm private practice, the median starting salary is $104,000.
- For government jobs, the median starting salary is $59,000.
- For judicial clerkships, the median starting salary is $55,000.
- For public interest jobs, the median starting salary is $48,000.

8. Law school is so versatile. I can use it for something else, like business or politics.

Where do first-year law graduates work?[5]

- 52.9% obtained their first job in private practice.
  - Of this group:
    - 23% of first-year law graduates started work in law firms of 500 or more lawyers.
    - 38% of first-year law graduates started work in law firms of 1-10 lawyers.
- 29.5% were employed in a government job, judicial clerkship, or public interest position.
- 6.9% took jobs with public interest organizations (including public defenders).

How flexible is a law degree?

- According to Stephen Seckler, the Managing Director of the job placement firm BCG Search students should only go to law school if they want to be a lawyer. He notes that “Going to law school gives you a certain set of credentials that aren’t really valuable for anything other than practicing law”.
- Employers who have a limited experience with legal application may not understand how skills learned in law school transfer to a non-law position and applicants with a J.D. often must justify their skill-set.
- Only a small percentage of law school graduates obtain jobs in non-legal fields and this has actually declined in the last five years. In 2007, 5.1 percent of law school graduates took a job in another profession.

The Right Reason to Go to Law School:

1. I want to be a lawyer.
   1. Go find what that means! Intern and shadow various attorneys in different practice areas. The life of public defender is very different compared to an associate at a private firm. Find out what kind of law practice you enjoy, this will be vital when you select a focus area during law school.

Other Things to Consider:

How much debt do law school graduates have?
National Averages

- Studies show that most graduates of law school have a combined debt from undergraduate and graduate studies in excess of $140,000.
- This equates to loan payments of more than $1,100 a month.[6]

University of Washington [7]

- UW Law School students will graduate owing in excess of $120,000 in undergraduate and law school loans.
- For graduates following the standard 10-year repayment schedule, this results in monthly payments of over $1,000 for 10 years following graduation.

The Importance of Law School Selection:

Which law school you attend is most likely the most important decision you'll make after the decision to attend law school. Like most degrees, where you obtain your degree is oftentimes more important than the degree itself. Not all degrees are created equal, a degree from Yale will have a much more positive influence on your future employment prospects compared to, let's say, completing a JD at Thomas Jefferson Law School. While, at this point, you may just be content with simply being admitted to a degree program, you'll have to think seriously about whether or not actually attending Thomas Jefferson Law School is something you OUGHT to do. Consider their employment upon graduation, it hovers around 12% - hardly a ringing endorsement. Compare those numbers to the University of Virginia, where 98% of grads have employment upon graduation, not all schools are created equal. Of course the admission requirements at the University of Virginia are quite a bit more stringent, the average undergraduate GPA comes in around a 3.75 and the average LSAT score is 165.[8] The Internet Legal Research Group provides fairly comprehensive data that can further inform your decision and narrow in on schools that best fit your academic profile.

These facts are not presented to discourage you from pursuing a law degree but simply to help you make an informed decision.

I still have questions....

- If you haven't already, attend one of the pre-law info sessions, information on which can be found here: https://www.washington.edu/uaa/advising/at-the-uw/pre-law-preparation/

If you have already attended an info session, schedule a meeting with a pre-law adviser (see link above for information on how to do so).

- Contact a practicing lawyer! The Husky Career Network has a number of practicing lawyers in the Seattle area who can give students more information on the profession. You can access the Husky Career Website at this address: https://careers.uw.edu/

[3] PILF, University of Washington Law School