

English Degree + Law School = Winning Combination

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In order to prepare for the exam and for law school, the American Bar Association recommends students take courses that strengthen their writing skills and research skills, as well as pursue majors that develop skills in problem solving, analytical reading, editing and oral communication. It's no surprise, then, that many pre-law students choose English as their major.

However, UK pre-law advisor Sarah Ballard says recent data presents another compelling motivation for majoring in English: for the fall 2014 entering class at the University of Kentucky College of Law, English majors had the highest LSAT scores of all students with an A&S major.

“The average score for English majors was a 162. This means the average score for English majors was very good – in fact, it was above the 75th percentile LSAT [score] for UK Law in 2014,” she explained.

The importance of the LSAT in law school admissions is hard to overstate. According to the LSAT Center, the average score for the law school admission test is around 150, with overall scores ranging from 120 to 180. Since many law schools privilege performance on the LSAT more than undergraduate GPA, an applicant's score often means more than any other aspect of his or her materials. Moreover, even when evaluating GPA, law programs weigh the applicant's undergraduate institution higher or lower based on the LSAT scores of its graduates.

Simply put, success on the LSAT is essential to getting accepted into law school.

As several recently-graduated pre-law English majors point out, their experiences in the Department of English at UK not only helped them succeed on the LSAT, but also prepared them for the rigor of law school.

Ella Dunbar, who received her JD from UK in 2015, was highly involved in the Department as an undergraduate, even working with professor Ellen Rosenman to coordinate the 2012 Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies Conference. “I love the English Department,” she said. “I felt like I was cheating a bit because I did what I loved and got a degree.”

Although she didn’t have a preexisting plan to pursue law, Dunbar became involved in mock trial and found herself more interested in pursuing a legal degree. Now in her “dream job” as in-house counsel for Lexington-based Big Ass Fans, Dunbar says she still plans to return to UK and pursue a doctorate in English.

Dunbar says the close reading skills she developed as an English major helped both with questions on the LSAT and in identifying fact patterns in law school. Miata Eggerly, who is now pursuing a law degree at Duke University after graduating from UK, found similar overlap between her English skills and those necessary for succeeding on the LSAT.

“You’re building writing and analyzing skills when you work with a piece of literature. Those skills are transferred when you’re dealing with the logic and reasoning part of the law school admission test and you’re asked to find the strength in the argument,” she explained. “Remembering and sharing pertinent information, analytics, figuring out what’s being asked in a logic game – I honed those skills as an English major.”

For Eggerly, majoring in English also reinforced the variety of legal careers she could pursue. “Law had always been an interest, but I saw the options you could have as a lawyer – corporate, social justice, law professor – and I liked the different avenues I could pursue,” she said.

Matt Wheatley is currently in his third year at UK Law, and says he decided to go to law school precisely because he enjoyed studying English. He initially pursued English as a major because he enjoyed reading and felt that reading critically came naturally to him, but found that his undergraduate education prepared him for the work he faced in law school.

“I have now experienced that law school is about reading, thinking critically about that reading, and being able to express these thoughts orally and through writing,” he explained. “I believe my education as an English major prepared me to excel in these activities.”

Wheatley also points out a similarity in work patterns between his English studies and work in law school: in both cases, students are expected to read material closely, take notes and discuss their findings. Jonathan Pickett, a UK graduate and first-year law student at Emory University, feels similarly about his preparation as an English major.

“The routine of reading, preparing for class, discussion during class and a healthy load of writing papers definitely helped prepare me for law school,” said Pickett. “The skills that English teaches about picking out important information from a large text, reasoning for consistency across multiple sources and forming coherent opinions with an argument for your stance make [it] good preparation for law school.”

Like the other recent graduates, Pickett highlights unique experiences in UK’s English Department that facilitated law school success. He specifically points out a literary theory course with professor Matt Giancarlo, which highlighted the history and different methods of textual interpretation. “That comparison between literary interpretation and legal interpretation stuck with me,” he said.

Eggerly’s English interests involved African-American, early 20th-century and British literatures, and like Ella Dunbar, she wants to leave the door open for possible graduate study. Dunbar recalls being particularly motivated by courses in women’s literature. “It was a graduate writing requirement course, and it kind of reminded me how much I love getting to write – reinforced how much I enjoy doing it,” she said.

As Wheatley points out, “the LSAT score is king in law school admissions.” However, as the experiences of these A&S success stories and research on the law school admission test show, studying English may give pre-law students the best preparation for both the LSAT and the rigorous routine of law school.

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