

Career Opportunities for Lawyer-Pharmacists

Pharmacists who wish to obtain a law degree should be primarily interested in the practice of law, not pharmacy.



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The thought of going to law school may seem strange to pharmacy students who are about to complete five or six years of arduous study and qualify for an interesting and high-paying career. But there are probably over 500 lawyer-pharmacists in the United States, indicating that the decision by a pharmacist to pursue a legal education may not be so strange after all. Lawyer-pharmacists are frequently asked why they decided to "leave pharmacy," and what it was that they "didn't like" about the pharmacy profession. In reality, many lawyer-pharmacists have not left pharmacy in the sense that they have found positions in the legal profession that call upon their expertise in pharmacy. Most pharmacists go to law school not because of negative feelings toward pharmacy, but because of positive feel-

ings about law. On the other hand, some pharmacists simply find that a career in law, and a practice totally unrelated to pharmacy, is what they really wanted to do all along.

The best advice any lawyer-pharmacist could give to a pharmacy student who aspires to the dual career is to select the best possible law school and to do well while there. A frequent question of interested students is whether there are jobs available upon graduation from law school. The answer is that job prospects are only moderate for lawyers generally, and that graduates of mediocre law schools, who were not ranked toward the top of their class, have trouble finding jobs. Even top graduates from good law schools may have to accept positions where the starting salary is less than can be earned as a starting staff pharmacist. But the lifelong earning potential is probably greater in law than in pharmacy. Still, it takes many years to recover the expense of books and tuition, lost pharmacy wages, and the other miscellaneous costs that law study requires. As a general rule, an honest interest in the law is a good reason to go to law school, while desire for a guaranteed job at a high salary can result in disappointment.

Assessing One's Interest

Pharmacists and pharmacy students who think they may be interested in law school can do several things to test the seriousness of their interest. Visiting with a local lawyer is a good way to find out what law practice is really like. Perhaps one of the most worthwhile steps would be to take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). This will certainly give an idea of the chances for acceptance into law school, and to a lesser degree it can predict an aptitude for the study of law. Unfortunately, the LSAT assesses one's

ability to solve simple problems quickly, while in actual law practice the problems are conceptually far more complex, and there is usually ample time to make a careful analysis. As is the case with most standardized tests, the LSAT can be studied for, so those who take a preparatory course or who study on their own are at a competitive advantage. It is not a good idea to take the LSAT on impulse and without preparation "just to see what it's like." This can result in a low score that inaccurately reflects the applicant's potential for law study, and greatly decreases the chances of acceptance into law school.

Law practice and law school courses require good written and verbal communications skills, so students interested in pursuing law as a career should carefully assess their abilities and interests in these areas.

Applying to Law Schools

Once you have made the decision to attend law school, the selection of law schools to which you want to apply is a crucial step, since all law schools are not equal. The most important distinction is between law schools that are approved by the American Bar Association (ABA) and those that are not. An ABA-approved law school educates lawyers who are qualified for admission to the bar in any state. A nonABA-approved law school may be accredited by the state in which it is located, and if so, its graduates are eligible for admission to the bar only in that state. Most pharmacists will want to consider applying for admission only to ABA-approved schools, because of the greater flexibility they offer.

It is a good idea to apply to several schools to maximize the chance of acceptance. The majority of these schools should be ones whose level of selectivi-

ty in the admissions process indicates that the applicant has a realistic chance of acceptance. The pre-law advisor at most colleges and universities can help identify these law schools. The reputation of a law school does matter when a lawyer applies for a first job, so one should strive to be accepted at the most prestigious school possible.

The admissions process at law schools centers on grade point average and LSAT scores. Most schools do not conduct interviews of prospective students. Unfortunately, the LSAT is overemphasized, which may be a disadvantage for pharmacy students, who have not been trained to solve policy problems the way social science and business students have. Another possible disadvantage for pharmacy students is that grade inflation has not been present in pharmacy, as it has in some disciplines. Thus, a pharmacy student with ability equal to another student's may have lower undergraduate grades. But there is no standard pre-law curriculum; applicants with diverse undergraduate backgrounds are encouraged to apply to law school. And the fact that most law school admissions committees still see very few applications from pharmacists may be a plus.

Once they have been accepted and have entered law school, most pharmacists discover that the approach to learning is different from that to which they are accustomed. The professors use the Socratic method almost exclusively, with students providing the substantive information, and the professor serving the role of facilitator. All students read the assignment ahead of time and are prepared for class. This is done not because class participation is graded (it isn't), but because students are intimidated by the thought of being caught unprepared in front of their classmates. The grade for a course is determined entirely by the student's performance on a final exam. Usually by the time the first semester finals arrive, the pharmacist will have learned how to approach a legal problem. The key is that there is no single correct answer. All possibilities must be explored, and the best option must be chosen and justified.

Law school involves more than attending class, studying, and taking exams. During the three years of law school, lasting friendships develop and informal discussions take place among groups of friends. The camaraderie that results contributes to an understanding of legal principles and to a sense of pride in the legal profession. Part-time students and

others who work heavy schedules outside of law school tend to miss out on this important aspect of the law school experience. Although pharmacists may be tempted to work long hours while in law school because the hourly wage they can earn is higher than that of most other working law students, the negative effect of too much time spent at work may in the long run be detrimental. During summers it is definitely better to work as a law clerk than as a pharmacist, because this is how one gains experience and makes contacts that can lead to a good permanent job.

Choosing Electives

The proper choice of elective courses in law school can make a lawyer-pharmacist's resumé more attractive when the time comes to apply for the first job. Courses in tort law, antitrust, products liability, and administrative law can be very helpful to those who are interested in combining their pharmacy and legal expertise.

All law schools teach every student to be a generalist by requiring a core curriculum of basic courses. It is impossible to avoid these core courses, and since most lawyer-pharmacists spend at least some time in general practice, it would be a mistake not to learn as much as possible about these areas of the law. There are pharmacists who, as law students, become very interested in an area of law totally unrelated to pharmacy, and who develop legal careers that do not utilize their pharmaceutical expertise. On the other hand, most lawyer-pharmacists do make use of their pharmaceutical knowledge in some manner, because this is what gives them a competitive edge in their professional careers.

Employment Prospects

When seeking a job after law school, a pharmacy degree does help. Obviously, the Internal Revenue Service does not place great value on a pharmacy background when hiring tax lawyers. And there are numerous other kinds of law practice where pharmacy knowledge is of no significant value. But there are a number of employment settings in which a lawyer-pharmacist will be more highly valued than a lawyer with equal credentials who is not a pharmacist. It is important to emphasize, however, that lawyers are hired for their legal expertise, not their pharmaceutical expertise. Being a pharmacist in no way makes up for mediocre performance in law school. A good lawyer who is not a pharmacist will be offered a job every time over a poor lawyer who is a good pharmacist.

There are several settings in which a lawyer-pharmacist may find employment. The most likely place for a recent law graduate to find a job is with a private law firm. New lawyers begin as associates on straight salary and eventually become partners with a share in the profits. A law firm that does a large amount of personal injury litigation is likely to be interested in a pharmacist who has done well in law school. Some large firms in big cities have departments that specialize in medical malpractice or drug product liability, and lawyer-pharmacists have found employment at these firms. But more often the lawyer-pharmacist practices general law with an emphasis on those legal areas that involve some level of scientific expertise.

The career to which many young lawyer-pharmacists aspire is that of staff lawyer for a pharmaceutical manufacturer. In reality, it is rare for pharmaceutical companies to hire recent graduates, and they tend not to specifically seek lawyers who are also pharmacists. A large amount of legal work for pharmaceutical companies is done by outside lawyers in private practice, who may later on be invited into the company.

One area of law that seems to be in demand by pharmaceutical companies is food and drug law. Unfortunately, very few law schools teach coursework in this subject, so it is difficult for a recent graduate to characterize him or herself as an authority in this area.

Government agencies, both state and federal, have hired lawyer-pharmacists in the past, and there is no reason to believe that this pattern will not continue. Currently, however, opportunities with the federal government are limited. State and national pharmacy associations hire lawyer-pharmacists to work in their governmental affairs departments. This type of function is also served by lawyer-pharmacists working for hospital corporations or pharmacy chains. A limited number of positions are available for lawyer-pharmacists on the faculties of schools of pharmacy and law.

Realistically, the newly graduated lawyer-pharmacist is probably best off beginning his or her career in general private practice, from which many other options may develop. The pharmacist who sees a law career as a lucrative escape from pharmacy would best be advised to look elsewhere. But for the motivated pharmacist who has a true interest in learning and practicing law, there are a variety of opportunities for a rewarding career utilizing both degrees. ●