

Law school after pharmacy school?



By Joseph L. Fink III, BSPHarm, JD

Legal issues are ubiquitous in pharmacy and all other fields. As a result, pharmacy, like other professions, can benefit from having people trained in the specialty and in law. This was acknowledged by the Millis Commission when it looked at the future of pharmacy in the 1970s and recommended that pharmacy education foster "the mastery of the additional knowledge

and the acquisition of additional skills needed for those differentiated roles which require additional knowledge and skill *other than pharmacy.*" Viewed from this perspective, when a pharmacist pursues the study of law, the person can be said to be specializing within the profession rather than leaving pharmacy behind.

Admission to law school depends heavily upon a candidate's score on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) and his or her cumulative GPA as an undergraduate. Information about the LSAT, a list of test sites, and the *LSAT/LSDas Registration and Information Book* are available at www.lsac.org. The Law School Admissions Council publishes the *Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools*. This publication features a table that indicates how many students with a certain GPA/LSAT profile applied to each school in the previous year and how many were admitted. Applicants should consider this information and focus on applying to law schools where they have a reasonable possibility of admission. The overarching goal of law school admission committees is to assemble an academically talented and diverse group, so while cumulative grades and test scores are very important, committee members also weigh applicants' essays, letters of reference, and education and professional experience. Obviously, admitting a pharmacist would make a law class diverse.

Admission to law school requires a degree from an accredited institution of higher education, and a degree in pharmacy certainly qualifies. There is no prelaw major as such; prelaw is an intention, not a field of academic study. English, history, or political science are common undergraduate majors for law students, but these are not the only areas of study that prepare one for studying law. More than 190 law schools are accredited by the American Bar Association. A list of these schools is available at www.abanet.org/legaled/approvedlawschools/approved.html.

Just as curricula vary from pharmacy school to pharmacy school, the curricula of law schools vary. But like pharmacy, the basic course of study is determined by accreditation standards. The law degree program is 3 years long if a student attends on a full-time basis. Some schools offer 4-year part-time programs. Typically, the first year consists of all required courses in basic areas such as property law, torts, contracts, civil procedure, and criminal procedure. Introduction to legal research and writing is also an important

component of the first year.

After that initial year, students choose most of their courses from a list of electives. For this reason, it is usually advantageous to attend a school that offers a large number of courses. For example, pharmacists attending law school might be interested in enrolling in courses such as health law or food and drug law, but all law schools do not have these courses. In response to a commonly asked question, no, there is no school that specializes in pharmacy law. Students must take it upon themselves to apply legal principles and doctrines to pharmacy.

One emphasis in law school is teaching students to "think like a lawyer"—that is, analytically and critically. To help students develop these capacities, law professors have the students recite the facts of a case and analyze the court's decision, with other students then entering into the fray to discuss both the case and their colleague's presentation of it. This was well portrayed in the 1973 movie *The Paper Chase*.

Long-term legal writing assignments must be completed each year in school, either a major paper for a course or some other report. Increasingly, law schools are teaching clinical courses in which students work with attorneys on actual legal matters being considered by courts or administrative agencies. The analytic and communication skills law students acquire serve them well in many areas of endeavor. A frequently cited statistic is that 98% of dental school graduates practice dentistry, 95% of medical school graduates practice medicine, but only about 70% of law school graduates actively practice law in a way that most people would consider practicing law.

Law school graduates must take an exam to determine whether they know enough about the law to be admitted to practice. This multiday exam is known as the bar exam because it is given by a state board of bar examiners, which is a unit of a state's supreme court. The bar exam consists of both multiple choice and essay questions.

If you think law school might be for you, one thing you can do now is take a pharmacy law, business law, or health law elective. If that is a positive experience, the next step might be to take the LSAT to see how you do. This could well lead to your pursuing a law degree and making a very positive impact on the profession.

Also, the American Society for Pharmacy Law (www.aspl.org) is a national organization of pharmacist-lawyers and others who have an interest in issues that concern both professions, and it has a student membership category.

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