



Executive Decision

How to find the right career path after law school.

BY SAM HOUSTON

THE AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL OR COLLEGE STUDENT MAY HAVE HAD LITTLE TO NO CONTACT WITH LAWYERS OR THE LEGAL SYSTEM AND THUS MAY NOT KNOW WHETHER A LEGAL CAREER IS WORTH PURSUING. In some instances, students' exposure to lawyers and the legal system may consist entirely of what is portrayed on TV crime dramas like *Law and Order*. While such programs highlight the criminal justice system and the conventional roles of judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney, they do not address the many other careers—both traditional and untraditional—that law school graduates may undertake. The Texas Young Lawyers Association project *What Do Lawyers Do?* provides that much-needed information.



FINDING THE RIGHT LAW SPECIALIZATION

TYLA is arming students with information about career possibilities in law so that they may make informed decisions about their future. A secondary goal is to educate students about lawyers' impact on society and to inform students that a lawyer's primary duty is to help people. With these goals in mind, TYLA has held moderated panel discussions with high school and college students in Edinburg, Laredo, Corpus Christi, Austin, El Paso, and Waco to share the message that a legal career is open to anyone willing to put in the time and effort to complete law school. Not only do the lawyers participating in the *What Do Lawyers Do?* panels represent different practice areas but they also reflect gender, racial, and economic diversity.

In addition to these panel discussions, TYLA has worked with high school teachers on the pressing issues facing today's students. Not surprisingly, high school students are well-informed and are increasingly concerned about how to finance their education and whether jobs will be available for them after they graduate from college, much less law school.

LOOKING BEYOND A LAW PRACTICE

The range of career options open to a person who completes law school is really a function of how the law touches everyday life. The *What Do Lawyers Do?* project emphasizes that many lawyers do not have "clients" in the conventional sense and that lawyers are found just about everywhere, serving important functions in government, corporations, and nonprofits. The clients in those instances are the business leaders and governing boards, and their lawyers serve as advisers who thereby affect the leaders' decision-making process and help shape organizational policy. This may be news to a high school or college student who has never even met a lawyer or heard the term "in-house counsel."

DISPELLING STEREOTYPES

Given that lawyers are found in many different types of organizations, the project also tackles lawyer stereotypes. Both students and teachers have expressed concern about whether there is any sort of future in law for students who lack skills that are traditionally associated with lawyers, such as being a good public speaker. The project explains that no one-size-fits-all approach applies to the practice of law. Rather than focusing on weaknesses, the project encourages students to concentrate on their strengths when thinking about a career in law. For example, a student who excels in math and science could work to gain

a strong technical education in undergraduate school. Then, at some point, the student could attend law school and use his or her technical background to obtain a position in patent law. The project teaches that there are many paths to entering law school, becoming a lawyer, and selecting a practice area.

DEBUNKING MYTHS

In addressing what life is like after law school, the *What Do Lawyers Do?* project also dispels some of the myths about a legal career. Chief among the myths targeted by the project is the generally held belief that all lawyers make a lot of money. Panelists have pointed to data indicating that the median starting salary for a lawyer—across all ages and practice areas—is around \$60,000 per year (as of 2010). Although some lawyers do earn significant amounts of money, students are cautioned not to expect that they too will get rich by becoming a lawyer. The project also addresses the cost of law school and college in general. By encouraging students to do their homework about realistic salaries, TYLA hopes that the students will be better consumers with respect to higher education and will not blindly incur debt. The project highlights the reality that, in the end, life after law school can be difficult for a lawyer who is not earning enough to cover student loan payments.

TRANSITIONING INTO NONTRADITIONAL CAREER PATHS

Finally, the *What Do Lawyers Do?* project also acknowledges that some people go to law school but decide not to take the bar exam or otherwise "practice" law. While some people know from the beginning of law school that they will never practice law, others decide years later to leave the practice of law. The message to students is that lawyers can transition into nontraditional career paths in business and government. Ultimately, TYLA hopes that students will see that a legal education can continue to open doors and present opportunities throughout one's life, providing invaluable experiences that a student could never have anticipated. **TBJ**



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