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Scientific Formula for Law School

07.17.2008 | Culture and Society, Science, Law, Students  Megan Thomas, Kaitlin Moredock and Aziz Ahmad earned undergraduate degrees in biology and had opportunities to attend medical school. Instead, they're continuing the steady flow of students taking their degrees in the sciences to law school.

Law School Admission Council statistics show around 10 percent of law school applicants between 1996 and 2006 earned a degree in the computer or health sciences, or engineering. The number of science, technology and engineering students applying to law schools during that period increased 6.3 percent.

A similar percentage of science, technology and engineering students entered the University of Dayton School of Law from 1999 to 2007. Plus, the number of entering students interested in UD's Program in Law and Technology jumped by a third during that span.

"(Science majors) don't commonly head to law school. But they really are now," said Janet Hein, assistant dean and director of admissions and financial aid at the UD School of Law. "The bright lines separating career paths are getting fuzzy and are completely gone in some cases. People now feel they need a mix of different skills."

After Thomas earned her undergraduate degree from UD, she worked with aquatic animals at Walt Disney World and as a breast cancer research assistant at the University of Cincinnati. A conversation with UD intellectual property law professors and the discovery that she enjoyed how lawyers deal with analytic reasoning turned her toward law school. Thomas hopes to practice intellectual property law or real property law after graduating in 2009.

Moredock, who received a grant to perform undergraduate Alzheimer's research while at UD, felt a career in law offered more flexibility than a career in medicine.

"The legal profession will allow me to deal with larger societal issues in bioethics rather than focusing on individual medical cases," said Moredock, who will attend law school at the University of Notre Dame. "Also, I have the option of going into patent law or intellectual property law. I also could have a career in government or public policy. All of these options would allow me to use my science background while taking part in conversations about the role that technological advances should play in society."

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of lawyers is expected to increase nearly 37 percent in management, scientific and technical consulting services; scientific research and development services; and research and development in the physical, engineering and life sciences from 2006 to 2016. Most of those jobs will be in consulting services.

Taking advantage of the trend, Hein and Kelly Henri, director of UD's Program in Law and Technology, have started casting wider nets. They now are looking for prospective students in university labs as well as English, history and political science classrooms.

Law schools also are expanding their offerings to attract those students. A year ago, UD added Master of Law (LL.M.) and Master in the Study of Law (M.S.L.) programs for intellectual property to its 20-year-old Program in Law and Technology. Officials believe UD is the 19th U.S. law school, and one of two in Ohio, to offer an LL.M. degree in intellectual property.

Ahmad, a UD School of Law alum and practicing patent attorney, came back for UD's LL.M. program and is its first graduate. An injury that paralyzed Ahmad's sister eventually led him to law school.

"Doctors apply the science that researchers develop, but by pursuing a law degree I felt I could make even more of an impact," Ahmad said. "I recognized there is a communication gap between researchers and implementers. I realized that patent law was a way I could work directly with the researchers to protect their research, and then work with lawmakers to help them understand the science so they can make the best decisions."

An LL.M. is an advanced law degree for anyone who already has received a law degree anywhere in the world. An M.S.L. degree is designed for anyone who possesses an undergraduate degree in an area other than law but wishes to acquire advanced
knowledge of the law within a particular area.

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