Is Law School for Me?

The legal profession

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2 (1592)

Despite the centuries-old attacks upon those who practice law, students continue to apply to and enter law school in large numbers. The law offers many attractions for those who enter the law: prestige, power, a professional lifestyle, a range of salaries from decent to lavish, and a chance to change the world. But as the Shakespearean quote shows, the legal profession has long suffered from a poor public image as well as a high burnout rate among those who work as lawyers. Add to this the potentially overwhelming expense—both economic and emotional—of law school and it becomes clear that applying to law school is not a decision to be made lightly. Whatever your motivation for entering the profession, be well informed. Study your motivations for pursuing law school, so as to avoid making a major life decision on a whim. Learn as much as you can about the profession before you invest your life and effort in it. An expert on professional burnout, Deborah Arron writes, “The most appropriate reason to enroll in law school is to study and/or practice law.” She then suggests that the following oft-cited justifications for choosing law school are clearly problematic:

- I didn’t know what else to do with my life.
- I didn’t like my science courses.
- I thought accounting would be boring.
- I wanted to change the world.
- I wanted to earn a lot of money.
- I wanted to help others.
- I wanted to right societal wrongs.
- I didn’t have the right background for an M.B.A. or an M.D.

Some who attended law school for these reasons find themselves dissatisfied. This is not to say that one cannot undertake morally satisfying work or accomplish other goals if she or he enrolls in law school. Rather, one must realistically assess the motivations for entering law school, especially in light of the amount of time and money involved.
Arron's list of the traits shared by contented lawyers may help you determine your potential satisfaction with the profession:

- Display a love of learning
- Pay attention to details
- Respect the rules
- Understand how to change the rules
- Possess strong analytical abilities
- Achievement oriented
- Competitive
- Steady and Stable
- Patient and Persistent
- More realistic than idealistic
- More conventional than innovative
- More dispassionate than emotional
- Thick-skinned

Arron supplements this list she created with a Personality Preference Quiz that may help you determine if the legal profession is for you:

- Do you like to get emotionally involved in your work?
- Do you dislike or attempt to avoid conflict?
- In resolving conflict, do you prefer deciding what's fair based on the circumstances of the situation?
- Do you like to create or start projects and let others finish or maintain them?
- Do you dislike paying attention to details?
- Do you prefer short-term projects?
- Do you value efficiency?
- Do you like to do things your own way, based on your own schedule, and in the order of each of your own priorities?
- Do you get more satisfaction being part of a team than being a solo act?
- Do you want to change the world?

A "yes" answer to any of these questions might raise questions about the wisdom of pursuing a law degree and/or practicing law. A thorough self-assessment and talking with others who might have insights about this major decision will always be helpful. A particularly rich resource is the Career Center. Other
means of investigating this choice include: a visit to law schools and sitting in on lectures; volunteer in a legal services program; an internship with a law focus; and review of writings on law school and the legal profession (please see the Suggested Reading List).

A law degree need not restrict career choices. A Juris Doctorate can serve as a ticket of admission to a career in business, communications, politics, academia, not to mention nonpractitioner jobs within the profession, including those within the extensive legal products, services, and consulting industries.