Breaking Away from the Norm—Nontraditional and Non–Legal Careers

Although definitions may vary, a traditional law career is generally defined as one that requires as prerequisites a Juris Doctor degree and bar certification. Obviously, this definition covers only a very small number of jobs—thousands of jobs fall under the ''nontraditional'' or ''non legal'' career umbrellas. A nontraditional job deals with legal or quasi—legal issues on a regular basis. For example, although a politician is not actually practicing law and does not need bar certification to work, a law degree helps him or her draft clear, effective legislation.

A non-legal job, on the other hand, does not involve the practice of law. In these jobs, the skills learned in law school are an asset to both the employee and employer, but knowledge of the law itself does not help or hinder the employee. For example, a high-school English teacher may benefit from the skills developed in law school but will not be advantaged or disadvantaged directly because of his or her knowledge of the law. Today, many students begin law school planning never to practice law. Others, in the course of their law school studies, decide to combine law with another discipline, such as management or business.

Many career opportunities exist for the attorney who does not want to enter into a traditional law practice. However, before deciding not to practice law, students and the attorneys should consider the pros and cons of the choice, understand their personal motivations, and assess long-term career goals. Law students and attorneys should be cautious not to make this decision out of frustration with the trials and stress of law school. It may be easier for a practicing attorney to later move to a nontraditional career than for a person who begins a nontraditional career directly after law school to go back to the practice of law. Before selecting a nontraditional career, students and attorneys should evaluate the time and monetary investments of a legal education and research to see whether or not the desired nontraditional opportunities are available and will meet their career goals. However, many nontraditional careers exist for students and attorneys who do not wish to be practicing attorneys. For such students and attorneys these career choices may offer more job satisfaction in the long run; thus, those who are not sure what they want to do should not worry that they will not have many career options to choose from.

Marketing Yourself to a Non-Legal Employer

Job hunting will present unique challenges once a student decides to work in a non-legal area. For example, law students interviewing for non-legal jobs should plan to provide evidence to prospective employers that their legal training would be an asset to the organization. One challenge a student may face is convincing a nontraditional employer that he or she is truly interested in the job and will not miss practicing law. Students may successfully market themselves in this way by using conviction, persuasive oral communication skills, and knowledge of the prospective job. Many law students would claim that the primary skills developed at law school are how to deal with lack

of sleep, how to perform under pressure, and how to cope with frustration. In reality, law school students develop a wide variety of highly transferable and marketable skills that are valuable to non-legal employers. For example, law students are able to digest large quantities of material in limited amounts of time, and they learn to think on their feet when called upon in class. Other acquired skills and characteristics include the following:

- Critical thinking and listening
- Persuasive writing
- Assimilating new data quickly
- Handling stressful situations effectively
- Brainstorming
- Being able to innovate
- Applying theory practically
- Engaging in teamwork
- Dealing with difficult people
- Speaking cogently
- Having a good eye for details
- Setting priorities
- Being personable and outgoing
- Working well without supervision
- Learning technical jargon
- Clarifying information
- Editing and proofreading
- Exchanging ideas coherently
- Following through
- Making hard decisions
- Delegating
- Resolving conflicts
- Dealing with the unexpected
- Training others
- Troubleshooting and problem solving