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Duncan Vujic Profeta is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in environmental policy at Middlebury College, with minors in biology and French. Originally from Durham, North Carolina, Profeta is an active member of Middlebury College's Student Government, where he serves as director of the Environmental Sustainability Committee. He is also involved with the Debate Club, Research in Investment and Sustainable Equity Club, and Club Soccer. In the summer of 2025, he served as an intern for the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works under the leadership of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island. He aspires to use public policy to promote solutions to climate change and the need to transition to cleaner forms of energy production. In his free time, Profeta enjoys hiking and camping, playing soccer, and spending time with his dogs.

Contemplating Pathways to Public Service: Is Law School the Answer?

So, you want to be a public servant, hopefully on Capitol Hill, but you do not know exactly how to get there. After all, you are a young and inexperienced person who is not meant to have it all figured out. But it never hurts to start thinking about the path to public service. As you start to think, you may consider law school to be the best path.

Law school sounds great and is certainly impressive. There is an undeniable weight that the letters "J.D." carry and a level of credibility with which few other titles can imbue a person. Without a doubt, many of our society's greatest leaders started out as lawyers. In fact, almost half of the members of Congress went to law school. Yet, what a law degree actually means remains an abstract concept in many young peoples' minds, begging the question: do you need a law degree to be a public servant, particularly on Capitol Hill?

Having these same questions myself, I sought the opinions of lawyers working on Capitol Hill. Interestingly, they all had the same, potentially disappointing, answer: "It depends."

The first piece of advice I received was that you should not attend law school immediately after college. Most lawyers I spoke to recommended taking at least two to three years off, at the very least, to decompress after four intense years of undergraduate work. It



Duncan and the interns of Senator Whitehouse's personal office

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may not seem necessary now, but most agree that, at some late hour during your first year of law school, you will be struck with dread and regret, wishing that you had not tried to power straight through.

Second, taking some time to allow yourself to mature can be beneficial. Research shows the human brain does not fully develop until around the age of 25, so for the average undergraduate, a three-year break before law school is just about perfect.

Third, most importantly, you should pursue law school only when it feels essential to the work you want to do. When that time comes, you will know exactly why you want a law degree and how you intend to use it. Lawyers I interviewed emphasized that this clarity makes



Duncan and Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, who holds a J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law.

law school far more rewarding, giving both you and your studies a stronger sense of purpose, which helps you understand the law as more than centuries of dense text.

I was told that it is inefficient to arrive at these conclusions in law school. As a three-year program, there is little time to discover your purpose midstream, and by the time you do, half your time there is gone. Furthermore, law schools tend to steer students toward traditional

paths, such as corporate law or litigation. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, but this discussion centers on public service—and on law as a means to pursue it. Without a clear sense of direction, you risk being carried by the current. But when you know your purpose and actively seek out the classes and experiences that align with it, law school can be deeply rewarding.

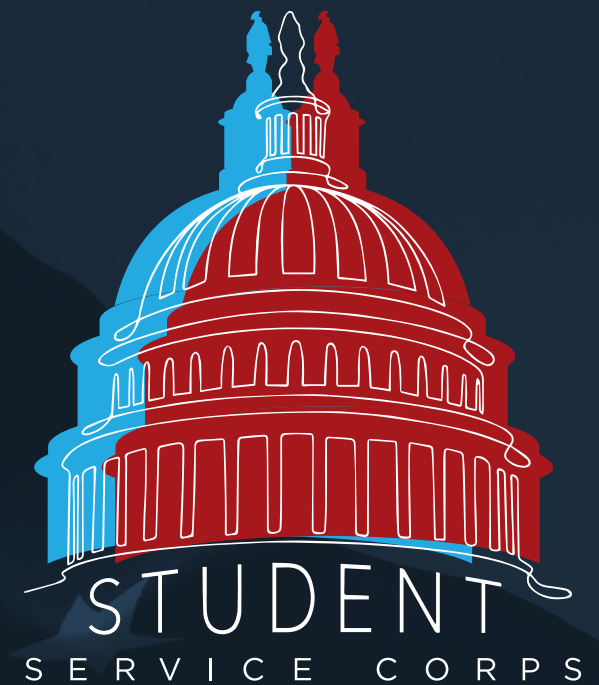
Thus, take the time to do something else, grow up a bit, and figure out what you really want to

do. Before making a decision about attending law school, consider shadowing a lawyer in a congressional office, a nonprofit, or a law firm. Be a paralegal for a while; see law degrees in action; and discover why the legal profession is the career you want to pursue. Law school is not cheap, costing nearly of a quarter million dollars to attend. This often requires student loans and working in law for 10 years to qualify for public service loan forgiveness. It is not easy either: the lawyers I spoke to reminisced about many stressful moments throughout their education. It is not meant to be a casual pursuit.

The type of role you want to pursue also influences this decision. In fact, it was pointed out to me that if government service is your end goal, law school might not be the best pathway. In this field, the vast majority of advancement comes from developing soft skills. You need to know how to solve problems, communicate, negotiate, and make compromises with people who have opposing views or different motivations. And while law school may help you develop these skills to some degree, time in an actual professional setting is also crucial.

Therefore, you should know what type of role you want to pursue and how a legal degree would benefit your work. While possessing a law degree might aid in the hiring process for some offices, it may also make you overqualified for entry level positions such as an intern or staff assistant, which are also great paths to getting Hill experience desired by many congressional offices.

There are many other education paths available to help pursue your desired role. Could you see yourself enrolling in another type of graduate program, for instance? A master's



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degree in public policy? Or, engineering? Maybe political science, environmental science, or business? Would you be better off working in Congress instead and getting educated through experience?

And let us say you ultimately come to the conclusion that a career as a lawyer is for you. It is then important to consider the different niches you could fill. For example, within Congress, there are numerous functions that lawyers serve. You could work on a committee that addresses legal issues within the penal or legal system; such as the Judiciary Committee, the Homeland Security Committee, or the Governmental Affairs Committee. Or, you could work in ethics, making sure your office complies with the law, or be an investigative lawyer who makes sure other offices follow the law. You could also work as a legislative counsel who helps non-lawyers turn their policy ideas into legal language. There are also broader roles available, such as the general counsel, who helps the policy team with any and all legal aspects of their work.

So, should you consider being a lawyer in Congress to start your career in public service? Once again, "it depends." Take some time; try out legal work and other fields of work. Once you take that time and can articulate why you want to attend law school, then go to law school. It will mean that much more, because you have approached it with the thought and consideration the commitment deserves. But if you find that law school is not for you, do not worry—that is just as important to know. Growing up is not just about figuring out what you want to do, it is probably more about figuring out what you do not.

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