

Ahead of the Curve: A STEM Premium for Law Students?

By Karen Sloan

*Welcome back to **Ahead of the Curve**. I'm Karen Sloan, legal education editor at Law.com, and I'll be your host for this weekly look at innovation and notable developments in legal education.*

*This week, I'm looking at a new survey by **Suffolk University Law School** that seeks to find out why people with STEM backgrounds decide to go to law school. Next up, I'm checking in on the busy **Columbia Law School** faculty, which will dispatch three members to testify before lawmakers in Washington in the span of a week. It's a legal education triple-header.*

Please share your thoughts and feedback with me at ksloan@alm.com or on Twitter: [@KarenSloanNLJ](https://twitter.com/KarenSloanNLJ)

STEM Premium?

We hear a lot these days about trying to bring in more law students with science, technology, engineering and math backgrounds. Encouraging more STEM folks to apply to law school is one of the rationales



we've consistently seen from law schools that are now accepting GRE scores alongside the LSAT—the idea being that STEM majors are more likely to have taken the GRE already than the LSAT. And the focus makes sense for a few reasons.

First, not all that many STEM majors apply to law school. I looked up the **latest stats** from the **Law School Admission Council** about the undergraduate majors from the 2017-18 applicant pool—listed in the order of the number of applicants with that major—and the first STEM major to appear is biology, which accounted for 1% of the applicant pool. (Math came in at a mere .5%.) Let me put those

figures into the bigger context. The most prevalent undergraduate major was political science, with 18% of the applicant pool. Psychology, History, Economics and, of course, English were also well represented.

The other thread that comes up a lot is that law firms and other legal employers are hungry for attorneys with STEM backgrounds. It's no secret a few firms will **foot the law school bill** for people with technical backgrounds who commit to coming on board as patent attorneys. And some firms see value in attorneys with previous expertise in areas such as life sciences and tech, who can work closely with clients in that space.

Why am I telling you this, you ask? One thing we don't have much solid data on is the level of demand for attorneys with STEM degrees and the economic value of entering law with prior STEM experience. So I took note when **Suffolk University Law School** emailed me last week about its first-ever **Intellectual Property S.T.E.M. Professionals Survey**. The school surveyed technology specialists, patent agents, patent engineers, science advisers or other S.T.E.M. related professionals working at a law firm or in-house legal department—none of whom are actually lawyers—about whether they are in or are planning to attend law school; how they expect to be compensated once they graduate; and how they make decisions about what law school to attend.

The purpose of the survey, according to the school, is to help law schools, legal employers and would-be STEM attorneys better understand this market and what motivates those with STEM backgrounds to pursue legal careers. Before I jump into the findings, a quick caveat. The school had a 15% response rate, with 89 people filling out the 22-question survey. So it's not a huge sample. Also, the survey doesn't capture the perspectives of STEM folks who aren't already working in a legal setting. Still, I think the findings are interesting. Here are some highlights:

►► Among the respondents, 70% reported that their employers were paying at least some of their law school tuition. More than half—55%—said



their employers are covering the entire tuition bill.

►► Most respondents expect to receive some seniority (and higher pay) once they graduate. The largest chunk of them—42 percent—said they expect to be treated as a third-year associate once they graduate law school. And 19% said they expect to start as a second-year associate. Another 9% are counting on a fourth-year associate status.

►► Location and proximity to work were the two most important factors in choosing a law school among the survey respondents, followed by the strength of the school's intellectual property program. Cost was cited least often.

There were a few other interesting stats in the survey. **Fully 45 percent of the respondents were women, which surprised me given STEM's reputation for being so male-dominated.** I was less surprised to see that 60 percent of the respondents were white.

And they seemed to be doing relatively well financially. Nearly three-quarters reported salaries upwards of \$115,000.

The finding that really caught my eye was that stat about nearly half of respondents expecting to get treated as a third- or fourth-year associate following graduation. That struck me as a bit cocky, though maybe their agreements with their employers set out such parameters before they even start their legal education.

I like hard numbers, though, so I reached out to **Jim Leipold**, my guru of all things legal job-related, to see if he thought those salary expectations are realistic. (OK, he's technically the executive director of the **National Association for Law Placement**, but jobs guru sounds cooler.) Turns out NALP doesn't collect data on salary differentials between new lawyers with STEM backgrounds and those without. However, Leipold did supply me with NALP data showing that median associate salaries of intellectual property

associates do outpace those of associates overall. **The median first-year associate salary for all firms was \$155,000 in 2019, NALP found, compared to \$190,000 among first-year IP associates.** (The gap was smaller looking only at first-year associates in firms of 700 or more lawyers, who clocked an \$180,000 median salary.) So it would seem that there is something to this idea that firms are willing to invest in the expertise they need to keep their IP practices robust. Take note, English majors ...

Columbia Law Goes to Washington

Summer is when law faculty decamp to their beach houses, teach summer courses in picturesque European cities, or finish up that long gestating law review article, right? **It seems some professors at Columbia Law School didn't get the memo.** Rather than kicking back, they're keeping busy on Capitol Hill this week.

To be clear, it's not unusual for law professors to offer up their legal expertise in committee hearings in Washington. But it is pretty rare for faculty from a single law school to do so three times in the span of a single week. That brings us to Columbia.

Elora Mukherjee got the ball rolling July 12 with her testimony before the **U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform** on the Trump Administration's child separation policy. The director of the

school's **Immigrants' Rights Clinic** was among the 10 lawyers who toured the Customs and Border Patrol's now-infamous detention facility in Clint, Texas, where they found kids who had been denied proper medical care and basic toiletries for days and even weeks on end. (Her 33-page written testimony is **here**, but I warn you, it's a tough read.)

Then on Tuesday, **Columbia Professor Tim Wu** is slated to testify before the **House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law.** That hearing, titled, "Online Platforms and Market Power—Innovation and Entrepreneurship," is the second in a series of hearings centered on competition in digital platforms. Wu, who coined the term "**net neutrality**" has written extensively about his concerns over the power of massive tech companies such as Facebook. (Execs from a number of big players, including **Facebook** and **Apple**, are also slated to testify.)

A day later, **Columbia professor Katharina Pistor** is due to speak at a hearing before the **House Committee on Financial Services** on Facebook's proposed cryptocurrency, dubbed Libra. Pistor has given Libra a **big thumbs-down**, arguing that a run on Libra would require massive government bailouts.

It's fair to say this trio of Columbia pros are each ringing a warning bell in

Washington, and it's good that they are being given the chance to share their views with lawmakers.

Extra Credit Reading

There's **no shortage** of legal educators involved in the 2008 deal that allowed **Jeffrey Epstein** to spend just 13 months in jail—a deal that led to former **Florida International law dean Alex Acosta** to resign as Labor Secretary last week.

Sergio Garcia, the undocumented California law grad who successfully fought to get admitted to the bar, is **now a U.S. citizen.**

Here's how the **University of Oklahoma College of Law** and the **University of North Texas Dallas College of Law** are using **virtual reality in the classroom.**

I'll be back next week with more news and updates on the future of legal education. Until then, keep in touch at ksloan@alm.com

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