From June 18 to June 21, 2013, I attended a prelaw advisors conference in Philadelphia, sponsored and organized by the Northeastern Association of Prelaw Advisors. This is the third such conference that I have attended in the last four years. They are always a source of great information. What follows is a brief description of some of the themes from this year’s conference.

**Employment Outlook.** The bottom line with law students is whether they are likely to find a job when they graduate. The job market generally has not been great the last three or four years, and the legal profession was no exception. The good news is that things appear to be a little better now than they have been. Lawyer jobs are a little more plentiful than they were the last three years. However, one of the difficulties in assessing the impact of this change is determining whether there is some “backed up” demand for jobs that keeps the competition for jobs very high. What I mean by that is that typically graduating law students have been competing for jobs primarily with other graduating law students. However, the job market has been so bad the last three years that there is a very good chance that this year’s graduates were also competing with some graduates from the last two or three jobs who either had not found a legal position or were dissatisfied with the one they were able to find.

The most reliable source of information about legal employment of recent graduates is NALP (the Association of Legal Career Professionals). Their website, [www.nalp.org](http://www.nalp.org), is a site that every student seriously considering law school should know well. On June 20, NALP released its report on the employment of the Class of 2012 (not 2013 – it is still too soon for that). The most significant finding of that report is this:

“According to Selected Findings from the Employment Report and Salary Survey for the Class of 2012 ..., the overall employment rate for new law school graduates fell to 84.7%. Even though the overall number of jobs obtained by this class was higher than the number of jobs obtained by the previous class, the Class of 2012 was also bigger. When coupled with fewer law-school funded positions, this resulted in the overall employment rate for the Class of 2012 falling almost a full percentage point from the 85.6% measured for the prior year. The overall rate has now fallen for five years in a row since 2008.”

Another piece of good news is an improvement in the reporting of employment by law schools. In recent years, there has been considerable controversy about the reliability of employment data posted by law schools. (Some recent law school graduates have even sued their alma maters for publishing false or misleading employment data). As a result, the American Bar Association (which has responsibility for accrediting law schools) has established employment reporting requirements that are designed to bring about greater transparency and greater consistency among law schools in the way this information is reported. Each law school is now required to provide a link to the ABA data on their website. For example, [http://law.wm.edu/careerservices/employmentdata/index.php](http://law.wm.edu/careerservices/employmentdata/index.php) shows how the Marshall-Wythe School of Law at William and Mary provides the required information.

**Law School Admissions.** Many law schools have reduced the size of their incoming classes. The explanation that is usually given for this change goes something like this. Because the job market for
lawyers has been so bad, applications for law school are dropping (applications to ABA-accredited law schools have dropped nearly 30% in the last 10-12 years). This has resulted in fewer applicants with the minimum academic requirements (as measured by LSAT score and undergraduate GPA primarily) that law schools are seeking. As a result, many schools have reduced the size of their incoming classes rather than admit students that, in their judgment, lack the academic potential to develop the skills needed by lawyers.

What this means for rising seniors is that the competition for admission to law school is not as intense as it was just a few years ago. This means that a college senior applying for law school for 2014 has a better chance of getting in the school of their choice than they did a few years ago.

**Financing a Legal Education.** There is a clear good news/bad news story here. The bad news is that law school tuition continues to rise to absurdly high levels. (To add to the bad news, interest rates on federal student loans doubled on July 1, 2013. There is much speculation that Congress will do something to rectify that situation soon, but with this Congress it is never a safe bet that it can muster the political resolve to do “the right thing”). The good news is that there is much more scholarship money available than there used to be, and much more of those scholarships are non-conditional (meaning that if you are awarded a scholarship and remain a student in good standing, you keep the scholarship for three years).

However, there is a bit of bad news here as well (depending on your perspective). Traditionally, scholarship money has gone to students with the greatest economic need (need-based scholarships). In recent years, more and more scholarship money is being awarded on the basis of merit (merit-based scholarships), rather than need. The usual explanation for this is that law schools are using their scholarship money to both reduce the absurd cost of law school and to increase their student profile (presumably to increase their U.S. News ranking). The latter objective is highly questionable, of course. This explanation is not just a street rumor, though. For example, see Brian Tamanaha’s FAILING LAW SCHOOLS, where this explanation is advanced by a law school professor (and former acting law school dean).

**Getting in Law School.** These conferences always have good panels with law school admissions staff, discussing things law school applicants should and shouldn’t do when applying. It is apparent that these folks give applications a surprisingly thorough examination. A student’s history, both academically and personally, is important. So is the way that the student presents herself or himself. It is clear that the more transparent a student is in the application, the better off the student is. The applicant should look at his or her application and address things that clearly cry out for explanation. Why did a student have a 1.9 GPA one semester when the student’s grades were well over 3.0 every other semester? Why did the student transfer from a school with a better academic reputation to one with a lower reputation? Did the student take a bunch of lower level, less challenging electives as a junior or senior? Did the student have a pattern of withdrawing from more demanding courses?

Also, writing skills are very important. Take courses that permit you to develop those skills. Take the writing sample portion of the LSAT very seriously. We were shown (anonymous) examples of
students who had drawn cartoons on their LSAT writing sample or said absurdly stupid things in the sample. Perhaps these students thought they had done poorly on the test and just didn’t care at the point where they were writing the sample, but that is not a wise assumption to make.

The Bottom Line. Going to law school remains a somewhat risky proposition. It is costly. While it is a bit easier to get into law school now than in recent years, there certainly is no assurance that a student with a deep desire to go will be admitted. If the student is lucky enough to be admitted, there is no assurance that financial aid will be available. The result is that a student who goes to law school these days usually borrows a substantial amount of money to go. (We were told that the average debt of a student graduating from a public law school right now is $76,000; for students graduating from a private school it is $126,000). If a student graduates with this much debt, he or she will find it very difficult to change professions if the practice of law does not turn out to be as enjoyable as the student had hoped. Thus, the decision whether to go to law school or not is a very important one.

If you need help thinking through this decision, I am available to help. I have a link on my faculty page (which is linked to the Department of Criminal Justice web page) to an appointment sign-up sheet. I only ask that you attend one of my prelaw information sessions first, if at all possible. I hold one of these sessions every semester. The next one will be in October (in the early evening). When I have a date, time, and place selected, I will ask each of the college advising centers to distribute an email announcement.