**Assessment Plan for the *Law, Justice, & Society Concentration* – Parts I & II**

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**Mission**

The concentration in Law, Justice, and Society seeks to provide students at Albion College with an opportunity to become familiar with the history and theoretical underpinnings of the legal institutions, processes, and ideas of the United States and the western legal tradition more broadly construed. Through the concentration, we seek to make available to Albion College students a course of study that has been designed to provide them with the intellectual tools necessary for a reasoned appraisal of U.S. and other western legal systems, and the politics and policies that underlie them. Further, the concentration is grounded on the view that the study of law and justice is best pursued when located within its rich humanistic tradition. Such a pursuit can encourage sustained reflection on the fundamental yet contestable values that serve to inform the requirements of citizenship in contemporary democratic society. Law, Justice, and Society thus seeks to provide Albion College students with a comprehensive and coherent curricular structure from within which they might examine and understand a broad range of law-related issues.

**Goals**

The creation of Law, Justice, and Society (LJS) was based on the belief that the systematic study of law advances the goals of a liberal education and accordingly should be included among the curricular options available to our students. At the time of its founding, LJS also became a charter member of the *Consortium of Undergraduate Law and Justice Programs* (Consortium). The Consortium’s membership is composed of undergraduate legal studies programs based at a fairly broad range of public and private colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. What unites this otherwise diverse collection of programs and institutions is a belief in the importance of undergraduate legal education, non-preprofessional in nature, and grounded in the intellectual tradition of the liberal arts.

LJS’s (and the Consortium’s) orientation is informed by two general observations: one concerns the importance of law in contemporary culture and society; the other concerns the capacity of legal study to engage and enhance the intellectual, analytic, and imaginative capacities of our undergraduate students.

First, law is ubiquitous. It pervades much of our lives and provides a forum in which the distinctive temper of a culture may find expression. The pervasiveness of law reflects human tendencies to engage in normative argument as a regular part of social interaction and to interpret social action in the language of right and wrong. For example, in the United States, law plays a major, though variable, role in articulating values and dealing with conflict. Indeed, the variety of legal forms and the different ways law is used and understood in different times and places are as notable and instructive as is the ubiquity of law itself.

Our second general observation is that legal study provides a useful and engaging way to sharpen students’ skills as readers and as interpreters of culture. To understand legal materials, students are required to develop habits of close reading and hone their interpretive, imaginative, and analytic abilities. Understanding those materials requires great attentiveness, the ability to see how arguments are constructed, and the willingness to imagine alternative possibilities. Further, because law is concerned with resolving disputes, the student of law is invited to test his or her ethical arguments and textual understandings in a context where decisions must be made and force often must be deployed. In each of these respects, LJS complements the traditional objectives of a liberal education.

Although law schools have dominated legal education, they have not completely preempted the field. Law-related courses, such as constitutional and international law, legal and constitutional history, sociology of law, deviance and criminology, and the philosophy of law, have long been found among the offerings of social science and humanities departments. These courses cover several aspects of law and make important contributions to legal study by providing in-depth analyses of various legal phenomena. They tend, however, to treat law merely as an example of something outside law itself. Embedding legal study within already existing social science and humanities departments deprives students of a complete and coherent picture of the way law works in culture and society. For example, just as no one would claim that the study of law is adequate for a full comprehension of politics, so too, in our opinion, the study of politics cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of law. While legal study enriches the study of politics, much of what constitutes law (e.g., its hermeneutic and rhetorical dimensions) cannot be brought within the confines of a discipline devoted to matters ‘political’. Similarly, while philosophers may use legal materials to work out or illustrate problems in ethics or epistemology, the power and complexity of law is more than a matter of moral argument or a particular way of knowing and apprehending the world. Traditionally, then, the subject of law has been carved up without any assurance that the coverage of legal subjects is ordered, organized, or complete.

In LJS, we seek to move beyond the treatment of law available in traditional departmental teaching – a ‘*multi*disciplinary’ approach that subsumes law to some other disciplinary perspective. With currently existing courses at Albion, the ambitious student could put together a program of study that satisfied her/his interests in law. However, more likely than not, the student would lack an understanding of the connections suggested between and among these disciplines. She/he might not grasp the possibilities provided by the interplay of these disciplinary approaches to yield new and exciting perspectives on law, culture and society. In developing LJS as an *inter*disciplinary concentration, our goal is to explore law as a complex historical and cultural phenomenon; to understand the *connections* among the various aspects of law, connections left unexamined within existing disciplinary perspectives and traditions. We aim, thereby, to demonstrate how each of the elements of law draws on and refines the others, and to probe the meaning of the resulting combinations.

Further, it is our goal to use LJS as a site (both intellectual and institutional) from which a continuing discussion can be had by faculty and students across the Albion College campus with similar interests in law and the liberal arts, a discussion aimed at the development of an independently identifiable and unified curriculum in legal studies.

The participating faculty will share analytic concerns and build on each other’s work; and, like colleagues in more developed fields, we will challenge each other’s assumptions – all done with the mutual goal of better understanding and explaining legal phenomena. By moving beyond the confines of the traditional disciplines and their generally fragmentary interests in law, we move from aggregation to a more interactive, integrated, and comprehensive approach. Our aim is to draw from, and contribute to, the work of an increasingly interdisciplinary community of legal scholars, which has created scholarly associations that facilitate communication and exchange about legal study by merging existing disciplinary perspectives (e.g., the Law & Society Association, the Association for the Study of Law, Culture, & the Humanities, the American Legal Studies Association, and the Society for the Study of Political and Legal Philosophy).

### (A Note on ‘Pre-Professionalism’)

It is not a goal of LJS to serve as a ‘pre-law’ program. Traditional liberal arts concerns about ‘pre-professionalism’ speak to important issues that we should continue to bear in mind. Specifically, they express the worry that students might become so focused on their professional aspirations that they narrow their educational horizons. To counteract this perception, we need to remind students that the pursuit of a well-rounded education is the best path to post-baccalaureate study. Medical schools have rather well worked out requirements for admission, but there is no parallel in the world of legal education. Indeed, the American Bar Association and the American Association of Law Schools are consistent in their recommendation that no specific ‘pre-law’ course of study will enhance a student’s chances of gaining admission to law school. Rather, both organizations emphasize the acquisition and development of analytic and problem solving skills, critical reading abilities, and a high level of competence at written communication. The Law, Justice, and Society concentration is well suited to meet these requirements. And, while we should not claim that enrollment in the concentration will provide a student with better chances at successful application to law school, we can (and should) claim that full participation in the concentration will expose students to that legal vocabulary that is so integral to an understanding of predominant legal ideas and institutions. Our graduates will be in a good position to succeed in the all-important first year of professional legal training. In other words, while we should resist a purely instrumental pre-professionalism, clearly we should not object when students contemplating a career in law find Law, Justice, and Society to be an attractive option. These students might turn out to be different and better kinds of law students and, ultimately, better lawyers as well. They would be, we hope, insightful, creative, and humane readers of legal materials, sensitive both to law’s power and its limitations.