From the Bachelor's to the Bar

Using College Completion Data to Assess the Law School Pipeline

By Tiffane Cochran, India Heckstall

> *... As law schools seek to grow and diversify the legal profession, college completion data offer good news. Students completing degrees in the top 10 law school feeder majors are increasingly racially diverse.*

Background

The story of declining law school applications is well known among the legal education community. Over 100,000 individuals applied to law school for admission in fall 2004[1], but demand for legal education has since declined—only 54,000 applicants sought admission in fall 2015[2]. The AccessLex Center for Legal Education Excellence[SM] examined college completion data to determine whether undergraduate interest in fields most popular among law school applicants has also waned in recent years. In particular, this research brief summarizes bachelor's degree completion in the top 10 law school feeder majors over the last 10 years, and compares degree production in these fields to those in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Methodology

According to the Law School Admission Council's (LSAC) report of applicants by major[3], the top 10 majors[4] among law school applicants include the following (ordered from highest to lowest percentage of applicants):

1. Political Science
2. Business[5]
3. Criminal Justice
4. Psychology
5. English
6. History
7. Economics
8. Philosophy
9. Sociology
10. Communications

Collectively, these fields accounted for a majority of undergraduate majors among law school applicants in 2014-15, as shown in Figure 1.[6]

Figure 1: 2014-15 Law school applicants by major, with top 10 detailed

All Other Majors **41.4%**
18.5% Political Science
6.3% Business
5.3% Criminal Justice
5.3% Psychology
5.2% English
5.2% History
4.0% Economics
Philosophy **3.4%**
Sociology **2.9%**
Communications **2.5%**
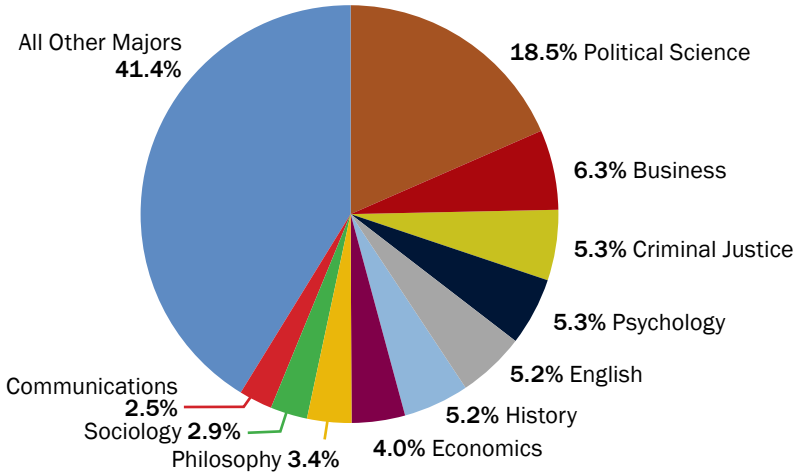
Figure 2: 2014-15 Law school applicants by field of study

STEM **5.7%**
1.0% Health Professions
Other **6.4%**
Business & Management **15.8%**
Arts & Humanities **23.6%**
47.5% Social Sciences & Helping Professions
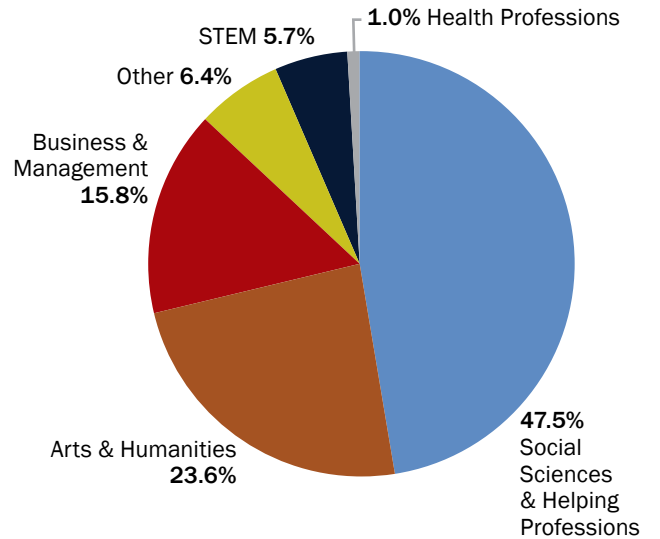
Source: Law School Admission Council. (2016). Applicants by major. *2014–2015 Academic Year* (XLSX) [Data file]. Retrieved from **http://www.lsac.org/ lsacresources/data/applicants-by-major**.

These majors were mapped to their corresponding academic programs in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to retrieve degree counts by major, race/ethnicity and gender for academic years 2005-2006 to 2014-2015.[7]
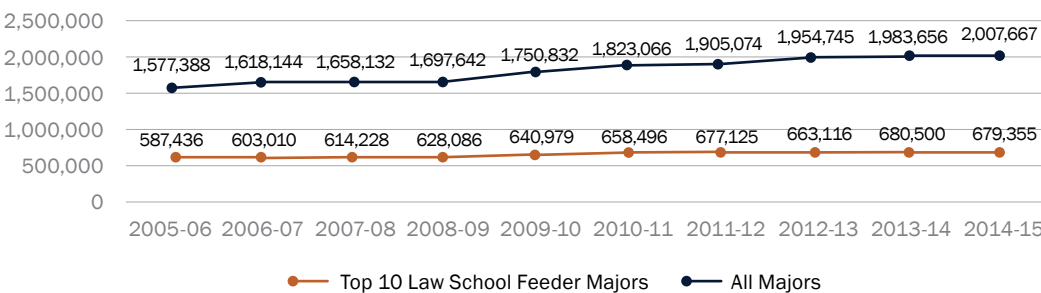
The subsequent analysis explores the following questions:

- What proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded are earned in fields most popular among law school applicants?

- How does the trend in majors most popular among law school applicants compare to the trend in total degrees awarded in these academic fields?

- How does the trend in degrees awarded in law school feeder majors compare to the trend of degrees awarded in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)?

- When observing degree completion by academic program for law school feeder majors and STEM fields, are there any noticeable differences by race/ethnicity and gender?

Findings

The collective proportion of degrees awarded in academic programs most popular among law school applicants has declined since academic year 2005-06.

Figure 3: Number of bachelor's degrees awarded in all majors and the top 10 law school feeder majors

|	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
All Majors	1,577,388	1,618,144	1,658,132	1,697,642	1,750,832	1,823,066	1,905,074	1,954,745	1,983,656	2,007,667
Top 10 Law School Feeder Majors	587,436	603,010	614,228	628,086	640,979	658,496	677,125	663,116	680,500	679,355

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces. ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

Although the total number of bachelor's degrees awarded has increased since 2005-06, the number of degrees awarded in law school feeder majors has not kept pace. Total degrees awarded increased by 27 percent between 2005-06 and 2014-15. In contrast, degrees awarded in fields most popular among law school applicants increased by 16 percent.

As a result, the proportion of degrees awarded in the top 10 law school feeder majors has declined. In total, degrees awarded in the top law school feeder majors make up over a third of total degrees awarded. However, the inclusion of business, which accounts for roughly 10 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded, somewhat inflates this picture. When business degrees are excluded, the share of degrees awarded in law school feeder majors declines to a quarter or fewer of total degrees awarded, depending on the academic year observed.

Figure 4: Percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded in the top 10 law school feeder majors
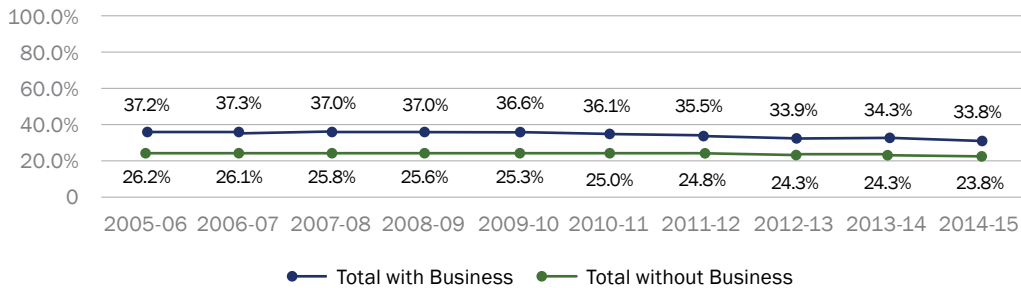
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces. ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

Predominant majors among law school applicants are not as popular among bachelor's degree recipients overall.

As shown in Table 1, political science majors made up nearly 20 percent of law school applicants in 2014-15. However, political science majors accounted for only two percent of all bachelor's degree recipients in the same year, down from nearly three percent of college graduates in 2005-06. Similarly, English and history majors each accounted for just over five percent of law school applicants, but only 2.5 percent and 1.5 percent of 2014-15 bachelor's degree recipients, respectively. On the other hand, 10 percent of 2014-15 bachelor's degree recipients majored in business administration, finance, and business management. Collectively, these three business majors accounted for 6.3 percent of law school applicants in the same year. However, the proportion of law school applicants with these majors has declined since 2005-06.

Table 1: Comparison of top 10 law school feeder majors as a percentage of law school applicants and bachelor's degrees awarded

Top 10 Law School Feeder Majors	Percent of law school applicants			Percent of bachelor's degrees awarded		
	2005-06	*2014-15*	*10-year change*	*2005-06*	*2014-15*	*10-year change*
Political Science	16.0%	18.5%	2.6%	2.8%	2.0%	-0.8%
Business	7.8%	6.3%	-1.5%	11.1%	10.0%	-1.0%
Criminal Justice	3.5%	5.3%	1.8%	2.3%	3.0%	0.7%
Psychology	5.4%	5.3%	-0.1%	5.9%	6.2%	0.3%
English	5.9%	5.2%	-0.7%	3.7%	2.5%	-1.3%
History	5.1%	5.2%	0.1%	2.3%	1.5%	-0.8%
Economics	4.7%	4.0%	-0.7%	1.7%	1.8%	0.2%
Philosophy	2.8%	3.4%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%	-0.1%
Sociology	2.7%	2.9%	0.2%	2.0%	1.6%	-0.4%
Communications	2.8%	2.5%	-0.2%	4.9%	4.7%	-0.2%

Table 2: Comparison of bachelor's degrees awarded in the top 10 law school feeder majors in academic years 2005-06 and 2014-15

| Top 10 feeder majors	Bachelor's degrees awarded		
	2005-06	*2014-15*	*10-year percent change*
Political Science	43,876	39,794	-9.3%
Business	174,758	201,452	15.3%
Criminal Justice	36,403	60,526	66.3%
Psychology	93,737	125,101	33.5%
English	58,567	49,441	-15.6%
History	36,371	30,957	-14.9%
Economics	26,551	37,013	39.4%
Philosophy	8,503	8,203	-3.5%
Sociology	31,471	32,345	2.8%
Communications	77,199	94,523	22.4%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

Since academic year 2005-06, the proportion of degrees in law school feeder majors awarded to non-white recipients has increased from just over a quarter to a third of all law school feeder degree recipients.
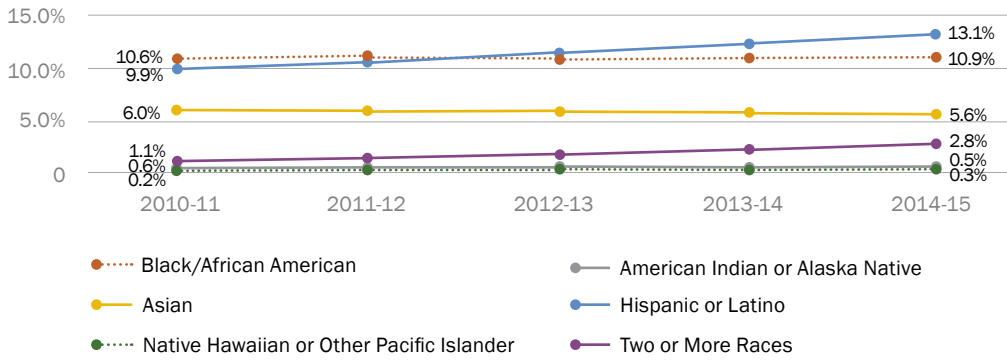
The proportion of non-white degree recipients in law school feeder majors has increased by eight percent since 2005-06 (Figure 5). As Figure 6 shows, most of the increase in non-white degrees can be attributed to a higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American graduates, and two or more race graduates in feeder majors. This trend is reflected in law school admission data, which indicate that although the number of law school applicants has declined, the percentage who identify as racial minorities has increased over the last few years.[8]

Figure 5: Percentage distribution of bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder majors by race/ethnicity
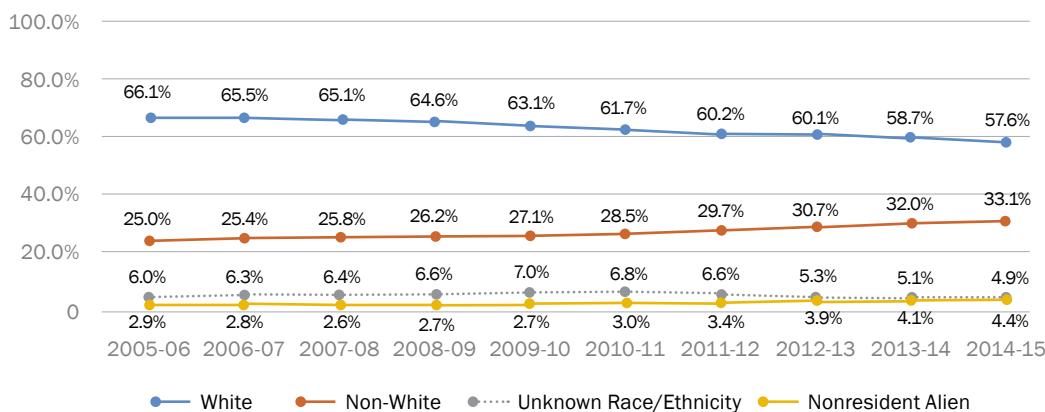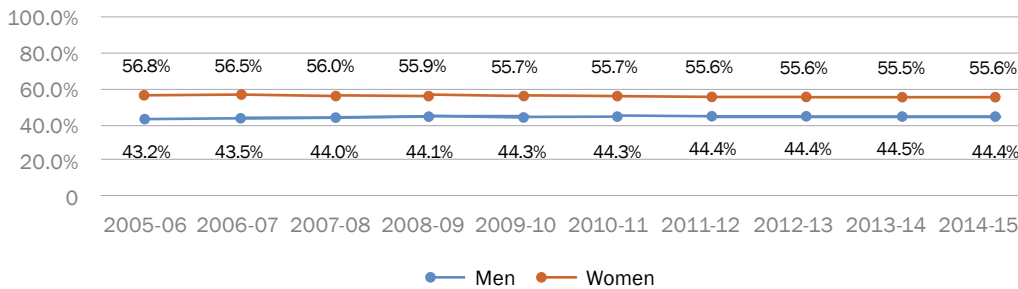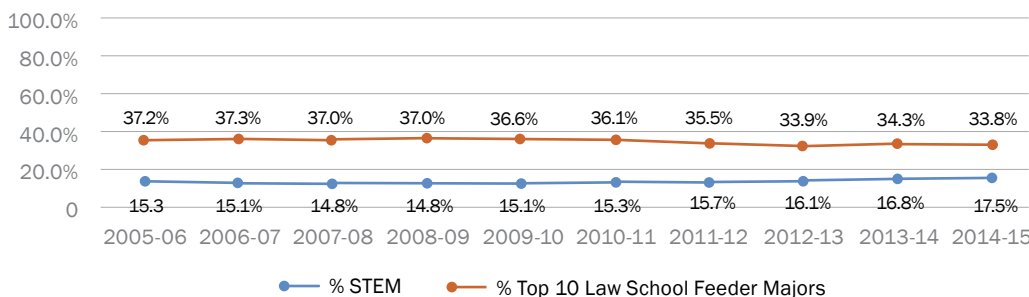

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

Figure 6: Percentage distribution of bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder majors to non-white recipients by race/ethnicity

Legend:
- Black/African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Two or More Races

The gender distribution of degree recipients in feeder academic programs has remained relatively stable over the last 10 years.

Despite a slight increase in the proportion of males earning bachelor's degrees in majors most popular among law school applicants, women represent a majority of college degree recipients in these fields. Women now constitute a majority of law school applicants as well.[9]

Figure 7: Percentage distribution of bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder majors by gender

Legend: Men, Women

Although the proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded in the top law school feeder majors has declined, these programs maintain a higher percentage of bachelor's degrees than STEM majors.

Compared to the top 10 feeder majors, STEM majors make up a much smaller percentage of law school applicants, as shown in Figure 2. Additionally, Figure 8 shows that the proportion of degrees awarded in the top 10 law school feeder majors is typically double the proportion of degrees awarded in STEM. However, STEM degrees are becoming a larger share of total bachelor's degrees awarded.

Figure 8: Percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder majors and STEM fields

Legend: % STEM, % Top 10 Law School Feeder Majors

The racial and ethnic diversity of bachelor's degree recipients is comparable for law school feeder programs and STEM majors.

As is true for law school feeder degree recipients, the percentage of STEM graduates who identify as racial/ethnic minorities has increased over the last 10 years. The proportion of non-white degree recipients is nearing one-third for both degree program types.

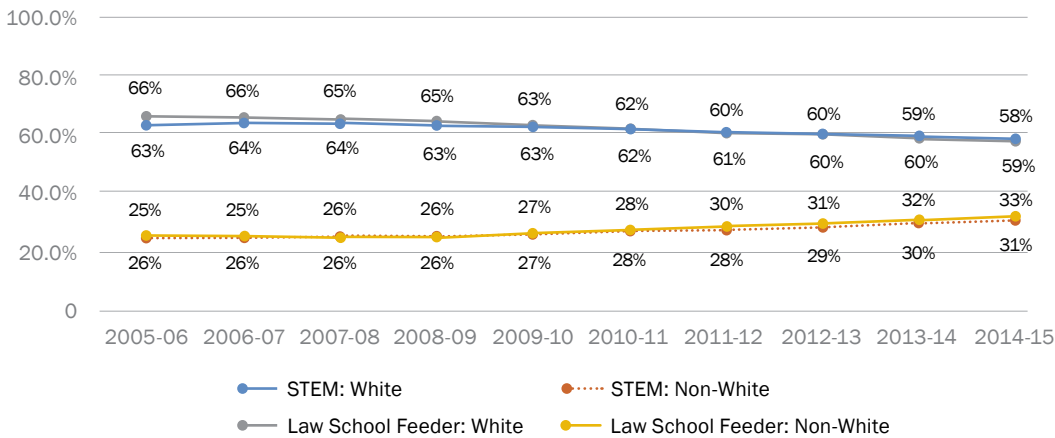**Figure 9:** Bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder majors and STEM fields by race/ethnicity

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces. ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

In contrast to ethnic diversity, the gender composition of law school feeder and STEM degree recipients has held steady over the last 10 years.

Table 3: Comparison of bachelor's degrees awarded in law school feeder and STEM majors, by gender

	Top 10 law school feeder majors		STEM majors	
Gender	2005-06	2014-15	2005-06	2014-15
Men	43.2%	44.4%	64.3%	64.5%
Women	56.8%	55.6%	35.7%	35.5%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (2005-14). Completions Surveys [Data files]. Retrieved from **https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx**.

Despite the overall increase in the number of STEM degrees awarded, men continue to constitute a majority of STEM degree recipients. Comparatively, degree recipients who majored in the top 10 law school feeder programs are majority female, but the percentage of male degree recipients has increased slightly over the last 10 years.

Summary and Implications

The decline in law school applicants is mirrored in college completion trends. As shown in this report, the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded in fields most popular among law school applicants has diminished in recent years. As shown in Table 2, the number of degree recipients in these fields has also decreased in some cases—particularly in majors with the greatest share of law school applicants, such as political science, English, and history. Although the top 10 law school feeder majors make up nearly one-third of all degrees awarded when combined, the data indicate that this proportion declines by roughly 10 percent when business degrees are excluded.

The data also reveals, however, promising opportunities for law schools and others who promote legal education. In 2014-15, the total number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the top ten law school feeder majors was nearly double the total number of degrees awarded in STEM majors. This gap is shrinking as more undergraduates pursue STEM degrees, yet STEM majors only account for six percent of law school applicants. In response, law schools should consider strategies for broadening the appeal of their programs to STEM graduates and highlight synergies

between the legal and STEM industries. For example, AccessLex Institute grantee University of Colorado Law School administers the Tech Lawyer Accelerator Program to provide training for law students who aspire to work in the technology industry.[10] Other schools, such as DePaul University College of Law[11] and Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University[12], offer certificate and joint-degree programs in STEM-related fields.

More generally, law school admissions officers and pre-law advisors should encourage and demonstrate alternative pathways to the legal profession from undergraduate disciplines. Fewer undergraduates are completing degrees in political science, English, history, philosophy, and other arts and humanities programs[13], yet these fields comprised roughly 45 percent of law school applicant's reported majors in 2014-15. On the other hand, bachelor's degrees in psychology, communications, criminal justice, and economics are on the rise. Collectively, these fields accounted for 17 percent of law school applicant's majors in 2014-15. These and other academic programs could represent untapped market potential for growing the law school applicant pool and increasing the number and percentage of students who enroll and succeed in Juris Doctorate programs.

Finally, as law schools seek to grow and diversify the legal profession, college completion data offer good news. Students completing degrees in the top 10 law school feeder majors are increasingly racially diverse. Consequently, law schools have a larger pool of minority and female college graduates from which to recruit the next generation of lawyers. By continuing to establish and support diversity pipeline programs and strategic recruitment initiatives, law schools can help ensure that future legal professionals better reflect the society they serve.

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[1] Law School Admission Council. (2016). Applicants by ethnic and gender group (archive). Retrieved from **http://www.lsac.org/lsacresources/data/ethnic-gender-applicants/archive**.

[2] Law School Admission Council. (2016). Applicants by ethnic and gender group. Retrieved from **http://www.lsac.org/lsacresources/data/ethnic-gender-applicants**.

[3] Law School Admission Council. (2016). Applicants by major. Retrieved from **http://www.lsac.org/lsacresources/data/applicants-by-major**.

[4] Includes individually named majors and excludes broader categories such as "Arts & Humanities-Other" and "Any area not listed-Other."

[5] For the purpose of this brief, business administration, finance, and business management majors were combined to form a single "business" major. According to historic LSAC data, these majors have interchanged positions at or just under the top 10 majors among law school applicants.

[6] LSAC's report provides a count of majors, not applicants. As a result, applicants reporting two majors are counted twice.

[7] Degree counts were obtained from the IPEDS Completions data files and only include bachelor's degrees earned at Title IV, 4-year or above institutions. Both first and second majors were included. Provisional release data was used for the 2014-2015 academic year and final release data were used for all other academic years.

[8] AccessLex Institute Center for Legal Education Excellence (2016). Legal Education Data Deck. Retrieved from **http://www.AccessLex.org/2016-legal-education-data-deck**.

[9] Law School Admission Council. (2016). Applicants by ethnic and gender group. Retrieved from **http://www.lsac.org/lsacresources/data/ethnic-gender-applicants**.

[10] Colorado Law, University of Colorado Boulder. (2014). *New tech lawyer program garners inaugural AccessLex Institute grant* [Press release]. Retrieved from **http://www.colorado.edu/law/2014/07/17/new-tech-lawyer-accelerator-program-garners-inaugural-access-group-grant**.

[11] DePaul University College of Law. (2016). Certificate in information technology law. Retrieved from **http://law.depaul.edu/academics/jd-programs/certificates/Pages/information-technology-law.aspx**.

[12] Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law. (2016). Science & technology law. Retrieved from **https://www.law.asu.edu/degree-programs/programs/law-technology**.

[13] A report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences shows that the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in the core humanities disciplines declined to 8.7 percent from 2012 to 2014 resulting in the humanities being the smallest number of degrees conferred since 2003. Bachelor's Degrees in the Humanities (2016). Retrieved from **http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=34**.

About AccessLex Institute

Founded in 1983, AccessLex Institute is a nonprofit membership organization comprised of nearly 200 nonprofit and state-affiliated American Bar Association-approved law schools. From providing financial education resources and services for students and schools, to supporting research and grant programs, data collection and analysis, to driving policy advocacy, we work to promote broad access, increased affordability and the value of legal education specifically, and graduate and professional education more broadly. AccessLex Institute is headquartered in West Chester, PA; its Center for Legal Education Excellence℠ is located in Washington, D.C.

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440 First Street NW, Suite 550
Washington, D.C. 20001

www.AccessLex.org