The one-year legal-education option

No, it won’t make you a lawyer, but you’ll be trained to think like one, and that can be an advantage in these complicated times

BY MIKE STETZ

So you want to be a lawyer?
Are you sure about that? Before going all in, it might be a good idea for a gut check and an understanding of your options.

A law degree is going to take three years of your life and a hefty financial commitment. And it might not be the ideal choice for you, particularly if you’re hoping to use it to bolster a career outside of the typical legal environment.

Say you hope to use it to give you an edge in investment banking or health care or criminal justice. Or say law intrigues you, but you’re just not sure if you really want to practice law.

There is an alternative to the J.D. — the master of studies in law, or MLS. (It’s also known as a master of legal studies, or MLS.) It’s a one-year program that aims to give you a solid foundation of law, but it won’t make you practice-ready.

However, given how many professions routinely intersect with law, it could prove a valuable asset. Many schools offer part-time programs so working professionals can take advantage of the degree.

“Law is a modern part of life,” said Alan Palminter, associate dean of graduate programs at Wake Forest University School of Law.

His school started offering a program two years ago, and it’s unique. Other law schools offer the program primarily through the traditional law school setting. MSL students may take an introductory course designed just for them, but the bulk of their learning comes in the classes that J.D. students also attend.

Palminter calls it “parachuting in.”

The Wake Forest model is different in that it gives MSL students a broader picture of the law, he said. He likened it to MSL students flying 5,000 feet above the forest — seeing the overall picture — compared to J.D. students who “are at tree-top level.”

These MSL students get 18 hours of credits in courses designed just for them. J.D. students are not eligible.

The MSL student also takes 10 hours of elective courses from the upper-level J.D.

An MLS degree can be helpful to many professionals, including:

Health care administrators
Librarians
Educators
Scientists
Engineers

Others had established careers and advanced degrees, but felt an understanding of law was critical, he said. One student who had a Ph.D. in environment design had law issues — such as zoning regulations — come up commonly.

One wanted to be a sports agent. You don’t need to be a lawyer to be one, but knowing the law — contracts, anyone? — certainly is valuable.

The degree is also valuable to entrepreneurs. If you’re starting your own business, a host of legal issues can arise. Some young people today are shying from the corporate world and looking to create their own startups. They seek independence.

More schools are unveiling such programs because of how complex our society has become. Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law in Washington, D.C., is offering such a program this fall.

“As the legal profession evolves, the need for non-J.D. professionals with a working knowledge of the law is increasing,” law school Dean Daniel F. Attridge states on the school’s website.

“Our MLS degree will serve the educational needs of this expanding group of professionals, including legal support staff, scientists, and engineers and others working in heavily regulated fields.”

Elizabeth Winston, a co-director of the program, said the program gives students the necessary tools to work with lawyers. That can come in handy if fields where such interaction happens often.

“It introduces students to the legal method, to reading case law, and provides an overview of the legal area students are interested in,” she said.

Whether a student would fare better with a J.D. or this degree is up to the stu-
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA, COLUMBUS SCHOOL OF LAW in Washington, D.C., is offering one-year masters of legal studies degree program for legal support staff, scientists, engineers and other heavily regulated fields.

of work, an MLS degree may be a better fit since it does not require the time and expense of a J.D. program. In the end, the choice is really driven by the potential student’s aims and goals.”

Palmiter believes the degree will grow more popular as people realize the importance of knowing legal issues. And it’s important for society that more people have this knowledge.

“Are we both over-lawyered and under-lawyered,” he said. “We can’t afford to put J.D.s into every nook and cranny.”

But, through this type of program, people are better prepared to understand legal challenges that may arise in their professions.