

LEGAL STUDIES, BA

The Legal Studies major provides a liberal arts education across traditional disciplines, focusing on law, legal processes, legal institutions, and their operation in society. In addition to courses in Legal Studies, students can take a wide range of courses offered by other units, including Sociology (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/soc/>), Psychology (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/psych/>), Religious Studies (https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/relig_st/), Political Science (https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/poli_sci/), Educational Policy (https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/ed_pol/), African American Studies (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/afroamer/>), Philosophy (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/philos/>), Gender and Women's Studies (https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/gen_ws/), American Indian Studies (https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/amer_ind/), Chicana/x & Latina/x Studies (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/chicla/>), English (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/engl/>), and History (<https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/history/>).

The curriculum is designed around five themes, each of which is associated with a group of courses, and each of which incorporates comparative and historical approaches.

THEME GROUP 1: LEGAL INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are at the core of social life. They govern our interactions, distribute power and resources, and influence how we make sense of the world. Courses in this theme group focus on those institutions involved in the creation and application of law. They explore such questions as how legal institutions evolve; how legal institutions help determine the shape of law—in doctrine and in action—and how and whether, in turn, legal institutions can be shaped to create different social outcomes. Institutions are central to the studies of society and politics throughout the disciplines, and courses in the group include perspectives from history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and political theory.

THEME GROUP 2: PROCESSES OF LEGAL ORDER AND DISORDER

This theme examines the dynamics of order at the individual and societal levels. In the course of this examination, students are made aware of the political and social biases that can underlie definitions of “order.” This theme should also allow students to address how social and political biases relate to divisions of class, race, and gender, and how the mechanisms of conflict resolution and order maintenance can be used to reinforce or challenge existing power structures.

THEME GROUP 3: LAW AND SOCIAL FORCES

This theme group explores the intersection between law, social structures, and social movements. Courses in this group address social inequality, generally in the U.S. context, grounded in ethnoracial, gender, and sexuality-based difference. At critical points, the struggle for equality has taken pointedly legal form, whether in the shape of campaigns for legislative change or recognition, or through the litigation of particular cases. Legal categories have informed social identities. Equally, changing social identities have pushed back on legal categories. Courses integrate

broad social dynamics with the rise of organized social movements that use law as an arena in which to reassess social life and values.

THEME GROUP 4: LAW, LITERATURE, AND CULTURE

This theme group introduces students to legal thought, institutions, and practices beyond mainstream or contemporary legal systems, specifically modern Euro-American legal cultures. Courses in this theme group present either culturally based challenges to mainstream modern legal systems or legal systems that are culturally or historically distinct from them. The comparative study of distinct legal traditions and movements forces us to reexamine the cultural presuppositions embedded in modern legal systems, revealing both good reasons for defending mainstream Euro-American laws and arguments and models for changing or questioning prevailing systems. Courses examine historical developments in or affecting law, non-Western legal thought or traditions, and the effect of cultural institutions such as religion, literature, or media on law.

THEME GROUP 5: LAW AND THEORY

Many theoretical and philosophical questions are articulated as propositions about law: its nature, sources, contents, and relations to other aspects of social life. While only some philosophers or social, political, or legal theorists work specifically in the area of “legal theory,” almost all work in any of these areas contributes to our understanding of the sources and nature of law, legal institutions, and legal practices, and for many theorists, explicit discussions of law are central elements of their work. Courses in this theme group focus on the ways in which “law” is treated as a working concept or as a subject of study in theoretical works, and conversely on how understandings drawn from theoretical writings inform our own understanding of law in all its dimensions.