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NEW LAWYERS

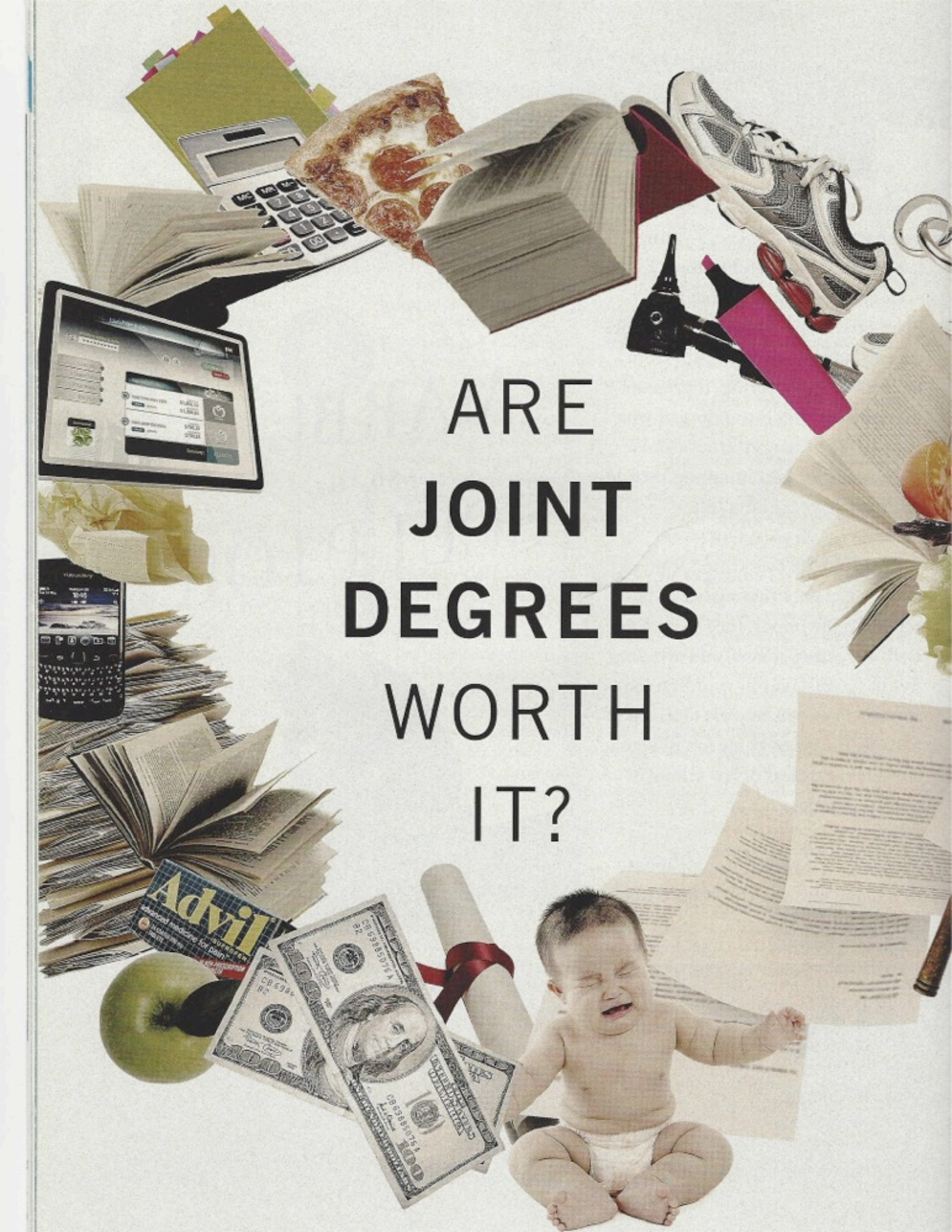
STORIES FROM RECENT GRADUATES

2014 STUDY ABROAD DIRECTORY

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ARE
JOINT
DEGREES
WORTH
IT?

*IF YOU'RE MULLING A JOINT DEGREE PROGRAM,
BE SURE YOU EVALUATE THE PROS AND
CONS—AND MAKE STRATEGIC
PLANNING AND FINANCIAL
MOVES.*

G.M. FILISKO



NIKKI JOHNSON-HUSTON always wanted to get a master of business administration (MBA) degree, but her ultimate dream was a law degree. She didn't think she could do both, so she opted for law school.

One of the first things Johnson-Huston learned in law school was that her assumption was wrong. She could—and did—earn both degrees and threw in a master of the law (LLM) for good measure. “I’m really glad I did it because I really challenged myself,” said Johnson-Huston, who nearly 10 years after graduating recently opened her own tax-law firm in Philadelphia. “For my career, it was really helpful. It gave me a set of credentials most people aren’t walking around with. And

now in my own practice, it adds to my credibility.”

Johnson-Huston cautions, however, that a joint-degree program isn’t for the faint of heart. Here we reveal the pluses and minuses and offer tips for proceeding wisely when it comes to doubling up on degrees.

FROM FORMAL TO DO-IT-YOURSELF

Joint-degree programs, also called dual-degree programs, allow law students to study for a law degree while doing the same for a second

degree. The advantage is that such programs typically eliminate overlap in coursework and allow credit in both programs for some courses. The result is a shortened time, and often lower cost, commitment for earning both degrees.

Options at law schools vary. Many offer an array of formal joint-degree programs. Some schools offer programs that blend a JD with an MBA degree allowing students to gain legal and business education at the same time. Other programs offer a JD and LLM combination that allows students to specialize in a particular legal discipline like tax or intellectual property. Some schools offer programs that combine a JD with a non-legal post-graduate degree.

These options include both master in science degrees and PhD programs. The disciplines vary greatly. At University of Idaho, students can combine a JD with a master of science degree in environmental science or accountancy or a PhD in water resources. Some programs like Northwestern University allow students to pursue a PhD in any discipline.


In addition to formal joint-degree programs, some schools work with students to craft their own. That’s what Linda Parry did, graduating in 2006 from Syracuse University College of Law and Syracuse University’s S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications with a master of advertising degree. “It’s an interesting combination,” admitted Parry, now senior vice president at MSCO, an advertising firm in Rye Brook, New York. “But it’s also interesting the school had never had anybody combine these two degrees before, but that year, there was another woman who completed the same program.”

SHOULD YOU DO IT?

The fact that you can do a joint-degree program doesn’t mean you should. Be sure you’re able to articulate a strong rationale before plunging in. “I wouldn’t tell someone to do a joint degree just to have it on your résumé,” said Johnson-Huston. “It has to fit into your career plans.”

David M. Diamond, assistant dean at Northwestern University School of Law, couldn’t agree more. “I wouldn’t pursue the joint degree unless I had an understanding of why I wanted to pursue it and what I wanted to do with it,” he explained. “I do think they’re very valuable when you know why you’re doing them. When I look at students who’ve entered our JD-MBA program, they go onto careers at law firms and in business, and in both instances, I feel the second degree benefits them and improves their career trajectory.”

That means you need to think seriously about your career path. “It’s about figuring out what you want to do,” said Ethan Bordman, a lawyer, MBA, and LLM who operates an entertainment law and counseling firm in Fairmont, New York. “Think about what you want



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to do once you finish school because you're still paying for school, and you want to make it worth your time and money. If you want to work in business or securities law, an MBA is helpful. I also know someone pursuing a law degree and a medical degree. He wants to do medical malpractice work. He'll be a doctor who's not licensed to practice because he's not doing a medical residency. But that MD will give him a tremendous advantage in the law."

However, earning a joint degree doesn't guarantee you'll achieve your goals, as Barry L. Brewington, who launched a law firm in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2009, learned. Brewington had an undergrad degree in business and technology and was working in information technology for an insurance company when he chose a joint-degree program. His plan: get more business skills, along with a legal degree, with the goal of going the executive route as a chief legal counsel or chief executive officer in the insurance industry.

The recession threw a wrench into Brewington's gears. When he graduated from Cleveland State University—Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 2008, the opportunities he'd foreseen had evaporated. He stayed in the IT position he'd held while getting his joint degree but was later laid off. Brewington then opened his own law firm. Though he's not where he'd planned to be, he believes he's better off today than if he hadn't pursued a dual degree.

"I was affected by the recession," he said. "But I believe my landing after getting laid off was softer because I understood business, marketing, and even took a starting-your-own-business course in my program. That all helped me get through the recession a little better than many of my law school colleagues. My law firm is supporting about 75 percent of my expenses today, and I still do document review at times to make ends meet. If I didn't have this joint degree, I don't think I'd be at that 75 percent mark."

"I came out of school at the wrong time," added Brewington. "But I knew exactly what I was getting my joint degree for so whether things went my way or not, I didn't feel like I'd wasted

my time. A lot of people go to law school because they don't have a job or a direction. Don't get a joint degree for that same reason."

If you can articulate why a joint degree will benefit you and what opportunity it creates for you, then it may be the right decision. The decision doesn't have to be made before enrolling in law school. As you progress through law school, career paths previously unexplored may become options. Even as a 2L or 3L, it may be worthwhile to delay graduation to get the additional degree. Any additional time is likely less if done concurrently with law school rather than returning to school after graduating.

TIPS FOR PLANNING WISELY

If a joint degree is the right move for you, be sure to plan smartly to save yourself money, time, and grief.

Be mentally prepared. "You really have to think of this as an all-in commitment," said Nat Wasserstein, managing director at Lindenwood Associates, a business crisis-management firm in Upper Nyack, New York; Wasserstein completed the joint JD-MBA program at Brooklyn Law School and Baruch College in New York City. "It's going to take over your life, and you have realize the next several years are just going to fade into history. It's also not pretty when you're studying civil procedure for the first time and then have to open up your statistics course book. It was really intense that first year."

Research program options.

Investigate the programs your school offers along with those at other schools. "Don't be afraid to look outside your school for programs," advised Bordman, who earned his law degree and MBA at the same time—but at different schools and not through a joint program. Bordman made that decision after researching programs in the Detroit area. He was attending the University of Detroit

Mercy School of Law (UD) but declined to enter its joint JD-MBA program after uncovering two important facts.

First, he learned Detroit's Wayne State University would require him to take fewer courses than UD to complete the MBA. "Some MBA programs will give you credit and waive courses based on your background or education," he explained. "I spoke to both schools, and Wayne State waived me out of more classes than did UD."

Second, Bordman found tuition "significantly" less expensive at Wayne State, a public university, than at the private UD.

Another reason to look at other schools? "It may be that one university has a better law school and another has a better business school," explained Bordman.

Ask for expert career advice. "I'm biased in that I think students should be talking to their law school's career office to unpack how this dual degree fits into their career plan," said Diamond. "Think about the implications on job recruiting. For example, if you want this supplemental education but intend to practice law, you need to think about that when you go through the on-campus interviewing program. When exactly are you a second-year student for employment purposes?"

"I also think it's important to discuss whether this is actually enhancing your career options or potentially narrowing your options," added Diamond. "If you're doing it to enhance your career prospects, the safe play with a JD-MBA is that it fits nicely into most legal practices. The JD-LLM in taxation is nice complement for most transactional practices and isn't limited to someone who's solely a tax practitioner."

"But if you want to do civil rights litigation, that LLM in taxation isn't necessarily going to enhance your prospects," he explained. "And if you have your own personal reasons

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that transcend the marketability and employability aspect or you have a larger plan like converting your masters into a PhD, there may be reasons to do a particular joint degree. But the mere fact of combining a JD with some other discipline alone isn't going to provide greater marketability."

Work with administrators to plan your schedule. "Talk to somebody who administers the program to find out how to structure classes and the order in which to take them," suggested Diamond. "Are you going to be taking classes between both institutions the entire time? Or will you be at the law school for a period of time and then at the other facility for a solid semester or two? You also need to plan prerequisites in order and make sure you're at the law school when classes offered only at certain times are available. And if you're trying to structure a program, not take a formalized program, you need to think through the implications of doing that."

Johnson-Huston said she couldn't have completed all three degrees without the business and law school administrators behind her. "I'd be taking six classes and have conflicts with exams, so I'd need help adjusting my schedule," she recalled. "If I hadn't been working with administrators, I wouldn't have known some classes are offered only once a year or that if you take classes out of sequence, you may be adding time to complete your degree. And it wasn't just administrative support. They also provided emotional support."

Talk to schools' financial experts. "Find the exact cost of tuition," advised Diamond. "Also ask them to help you determine the financial implications of your potential decisions. Depending on the type of student loans you already have, you may be accruing interest while you're getting a joint degree. So the longer you take to finish, the more expenses you may be incurring."

Think twice about delaying the second degree. "I have a friend [who has] been a lawyer for eight years," explained Brewington. "He recently asked me whether he should go back to school now to get an MBA. My questions to him were, 'What benefit does

it have for you now? Will it provide the same benefit as if you'd gotten it while in law school?' After being a lawyer for all this time, my friend now has to leave or spend a significant amount of time away from his practice and invest all this money in the hope someone will find a benefit in his MBA."

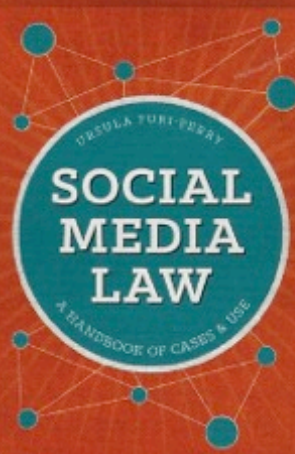
"My best advice is that if you think a second degree is something you'll do at some point in the future, don't delay," said Brewington. "It makes sense to do it now financially—because it'll cost less than getting two separate degrees at different times—and because you're already in that mindset now."

Bordman agrees. "A year flies by, and it may be worth it to stick around law school another year to complete a joint degree now, as opposed to a few years down the road thinking, 'Maybe I should go back.'"

The most important factor in determining whether to pursue a joint degree is yourself. "You have to be very driven," said Parry. "It's time consuming, and it's a lot of work. You have to be able to dive in and get the work done—and you have to want it." ■

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