“All those gen eds [general educations classes] I took as an undergraduate that I thought I wouldn’t need? It turns out I needed them in law school!” quipped Kassandra Tat ’12 during the October 24 Meet the Law event held at the Commonwealth Honors College events hall. Tat was one of six alumni that volunteered their Tuesday evening to talk with current UMass Amherst students interested in legal careers. Attorneys Keith Walsh ’02, Matthew Berquist ’13, Kathryn Wakefield ’02, Massachusetts State Representative Natalie Higgins ’09, and FBI Agent James Hisgen G’11 joined Tat to share their experiences and perspectives on careers in law. She added, “to be successful in law school and in practice, you need to draw on your range of life experiences.”

Meet the Law, which is co-sponsored by the UMass Amherst Pre-Law Advising Office and Commonwealth Honors College is a bi-annual networking event where students connect with alumni in a fun speed-networking format. It provides undergraduate students with exposure to a wide range of practice areas and career paths in legal fields. Meet the Law is also an opportunity for participating alumni to network with their peers.

The students in attendance ranged from first-year to seniors, in majors from chemical engineering to history to political science. The mix of class years and majors meant that alumni had to answer a variety of student questions, such as how to prepare for the LSAT exam, how to choose which law schools to apply to, and the pros and cons of taking time off between college and law school. Keith Walsh ’02, who chose to attend law school at Boston College immediately after graduating from UMass Amherst, offered this perspective: “One advantage of attending law school immediately after graduation is that you still have a student mind and are primed for studying. A disadvantage would be that you don’t have any real world experience that others can bring to the table in a job search.”

Another question to alumni was what inspired them to choose their career path. For Natalie Higgins ’09, it was her working-class community in Leominster that started her path to becoming a Massachusetts State Representative. Higgins, who completed her BA in political science and Spanish in three years, also earned a certificate in international relations. As a student, she received training from the Everywoman’s Center (now called the Center for Women and Community) on
counseling those suffering from abuse and sexual violence. For several years, she worked in a volunteer and professional capacity counseling women and teens, and was moved to attend law school at Northeastern University to advocate for that population. Higgins long-term goal was to use her education to benefit the Leominster community. Upon the February 2016 resignation of the district state representative covering Leominster, Higgins decided to run for the newly vacant seat. “Law school training helps me to synthesize lots of complex information,” said Higgins, “which helps me contribute to effective policy on the Community Development and Small Business Committee, the Higher Education Committee, the Mental Health and Substance Use and Recovery Committee, and Technology and Intergovernmental Affairs Committee.”

During the spring 2018 semester, Commonwealth Honors College and the Pre-Law Advising Office will bring another group of alumni to the Meet the Law event, keeping the conversations fresh and ongoing.