The Law, Societies, and Justice Department has long been a center of innovative interdisciplinary education focused on understanding the complex role legal institutions play in structuring social life. LSJ originated in the early 1970s as the Society and Justice Program. It was created and directed for nearly two decades by Professor Ezra Stotland. Professor Stotland imagined a broad interdisciplinary program that integrated analysis of social behavior, legal administration, and critical thinking about justice, with an emphasis on criminal justice. He brought together a wide array of committed faculty across campus and from the community to teach and inspire students about the substantive issues at the heart of the program.

The loss of Professor Stotland to retirement in the 1990's brought a period of uncertainty to Society and Justice. Other faculty retired or assumed new responsibilities, and the program decreased in size and popularity. Nevertheless, the program continued through this period to deliver quality education to a reduced number of majors.

After a decade of struggling for survival, the program was provided new resources that facilitated reconstruction and revitalization beginning in the year 2000. Key to this effort was Professor Michael McCann, who solicited temporary funding from a university Tools for Transformation grant and new permanent financial support from a University Initiatives Fund award. Professor McCann also brought together a group of faculty with keen interest in a re-invigorated program, one focused on viewing law in comparative perspective and emphasizing the important role of rights. Several new faculty were hired to implement this new vision, all of whom remain core elements in LSJ. Today, the program has officially become a UW Department and is widely recognized for its challenging course offerings, strong faculty, and intellectually-engaged students.