

# Advising Students on Law School Admission

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Sometimes, at our first meeting, applicants are already on the express train speeding into the darkness. It's junior year, already three years—or maybe a lifetime—into mom and dad's inquisition about career plans. With roommates heading to bank internships or MCATs and the not-too-distant pressure of student loan payments, our conscientious college students are understandably stressed to develop a game plan.

Law school is the dream—at least at this moment.

You know these wonderful young adults? She's writing the senior thesis on Ugandan gender roles and wants to build on the advocacy skills she's developed as a student government leader. He's the somber philosophy major who veered away from Differential Equations after his legal philosophy course epiphany. Or, maybe he just developed a deep admiration for Saul Goodman while binge-watching *Breaking Bad*.

Whatever led them here, these great students are now sitting across your desk, bubbling over about LSATs and personal statements.

How can an Independent Educational Consultant (IEC) help? To be sure, my students, like you, don't want to hear my half-baked microeconomic analyses of the legal industry or my personal—and archaic—take on work-life balance struggles as a large firm litigation associate.

Legal work offers the possibility of world-changing power, whether advocating for gay marriage or helping the biotech entrepreneur patent an anti-cancer vaccine. Still lawyering, like all careers, has strong points that don't fit everyone and downsides that might be a bit hidden from view.

In my work counseling prospective applicants to medical, dental, law, and other programs each cycle, I feel the continuing responsibility to inject realism into their graduate school dreams.

At times, my role is to slow down or even derail the train.

## **STEP 1: Ask some questions: How close has the applicant been to real life lawyers, legal issues or a variety of practice settings?**

No specific major, coursework or shadowing are prerequisite to law school admission. But, it's always good for an applicant to know what they're getting into, right? And with tuition and

expenses nearing a quarter of a million dollars for three years at some fancy-dancy law schools and the Great Recession demolishing some high-flying law firms, pushing applicants to evaluate their potential investment is a no brainer. Even the law school application process, with \$1,500 prep courses and \$80 application fees to 10 or more schools, represents a sizeable expenditure.

As I start this conversation, I'm listening for enthusiasm and informed insights. I'm also hoping to hear evidence of how the student has developed research and analytical abilities, writing and speaking skills, problem solving, and detail-oriented perfectionism that will help both in law school and the profession. Has she stepped up to leadership positions in the outing club or her sorority? Has he embraced writing courses and tried his hand at reporting for the campus daily? Math, logic, physics, and social science and humanities courses all are great ways to cultivate logic and analytical skills.

Delving into the applicant's specific legal exposures comes next. Options for test-driving the legal profession abound including mock trial teams and nonprofit internships. If your student has shied away from these experiences, why? Maybe a law-related opportunity would help—whether demonstrating the detail-oriented drafting or the hefty research that presumably occurs off-screen during Alicia & Will's tension-filled tête-à-tête? Insurance companies, big law firms, solo practitioners, political campaigns, federal and state courts, D.C. policy makers, and others all have provided paid or unpaid experiences to my students.

As I help students reflect on their reasons for a legal career, I'm really hoping our conversation is their personal statement in the making. And, "Perry Mason" work is not the only option leading to a great essay, for sure. Whether a student was the reporter covering the local crime beat with plenty of juicy police stories to share or the college junior working a summer job fielding consumer complaints at a call center, winning applicants develop their passion for justice in every which way.

## **STEP 2: GPA, LSAT & the Admissions Process**

Will a student's experiences wow a top-tier admissions committee without the requisite proof of academic success provided by a strong GPA and LSAT? Like med school and other professional programs, top law schools are looking for the full package.

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Undoubtedly, academic credentials play the most important part in the admissions equation. I always ask to review students' college and graduate school transcripts and LSAT scores, along with their resumé, before our first meeting. The data I collect from past applicants, along with information posted on websites like *lawschoolnumbers.com*, helps us brainstorm a list.

Usual requirements for admission include transcripts from all colleges and graduate schools attended, LSAT scores, resume, two letters of recommendation, and a personal statement. The Law School Admission Council (LSAC [www.LSAC.org](http://www.LSAC.org)) administers the LSAT and processes credentials for applicants applying to ABA accredited law schools in the US and Canada. Most applicants apply electronically through the LSAC.

The application timeframe is pretty similar to college admissions; most schools accept applications from September until March for regular decision. Acceptances are handed out on a rolling basis at most schools, so applying early usually lets students hear their decisions early. Some schools, such as Yale, expressly state that application timing doesn't impact admissions decision, but at other schools applying early when most seats are unfilled seems to yield better results. Anyway, if she can be ready with her best application by Labor Day, why not push the send button? I'm good with celebrating the Georgetown early decision acceptance in mid-October and the Harvard acceptance from the waitlist in July!

Early decision, with a binding commitment if the applicant is accepted, is an option at many grad schools—just like college admissions. For example, Emory allows ED applications up until March 1, promising a decision within two weeks and hefty merit money, if accepted. Others, like Penn, provide two rounds of early decision, with specific deadlines in November and January. Just as with college admissions, if institutional financial aid is a factor, early decision isn't wise. And, similar to college admissions, ED's show of interest and binding commitment does seem to improve the applicant's chances a bit.

### **STEP 3: Talk Money**

**Can merit money entice an applicant?** If a slashed price tag is important, applicants should consider schools where their stats are above the schools' 75%. Merit money is ubiquitous and can be very significant—for example, University of Chicago's David M. Rubenstein Scholars Program and NYU's Root-Tilden-Kern program offer three years of full tuition. For many applicants, at least their "safety" school acceptances are accompanied by some special scholarship, often amounting to a 2–5% or larger tuition discount.

As the *New York Times* reported a few years ago about Golden Gate University School of Law and others, sometimes attractive grants are offered to first years, but renewal conditions are all but impossible to fulfill. For sure, students need to be cautioned to investigate the chances of their scholarships continuing for years two and three. Columbia, Yale and others schools offer added financial benefits including loan repayment assistance programs for graduates pursuing public interest law.

### **STEP 4: Talk Strategy**

Students starting at UMiami Law School recently ranged from ages 20 to 46. At Boston College, the oldest law students hit 50. Only a quarter of Yale's incoming first years matriculate straight from undergrad; a third have taken off for three or more years. So, what's the rush for a college junior to go straight to law school? Plenty of good reasons can delay law school applications; helping the student become a stronger applicant by retaking the LSAT, rethinking the personal statement, and exploring options is often one.

**LSAT retake?** I spend time with students brainstorming ways to strengthen their candidacy. ED and adding legal activities are discussed, of course, but retaking the LSAT is often strategy number one. When the ABA stopped requiring law schools to report average LSAT scores of their entering class who had sat for the LSAT multiple times, law schools started looking a lot more kindly upon LSAT re-takes. Law schools receive all scores along with an average in the LSAC report, and law schools say they judge these results "holistically."

Practically, I think that means that many students can gain from LSAT re-takes, especially if a disappointing first score doesn't adequately match practice tests and classroom performance as measured by their GPA. For students with consistently top grades at rigorous colleges, I raise the possibility of waiting a year and re-taking the LSAT after college graduation. Maybe applicants sell themselves short without another try? In my limited experience, I've seen greater improvement after a break, rather than a September LSAT repeated at the next date in December.

**Re-think the Personal Statement?** I want the personal statement blank canvas to persuasively demonstrate the applicant's argument for "Why me?" I can't tell you how many times I write "Show, don't tell" or "Evidence?" in the margin of essays. Draft after draft, I work hard to give thoughtful critique on personal statements; I carefully evaluate both the reasons given for law school admission and the presentation. Once they're sitting with sizeable merit money offers and handwritten praise on their acceptance letters, my students usually agree that their hard work, possibly the product of my incessant nagging, paid off.

**Options:** Part-time and evenings programs allow students to work while preparing for a legal career. Joint programs, combining MBAs, PhDs, or other specialized training are great fits for some students with a clear vision of their future. And if your pre-law junior decides to go in a different direction, that's okay too. "Well, I ain't passed the bar but I still know a bit," is true, as Jay-Z says.

IECs can play an important role in empowering applicants with information and strategies for admission to law school, even if that sometimes makes me feel like I'm throwing myself in front of a speeding train.

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