

YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE:  
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO GETTING INTO LAW SCHOOL

Melanie Stallings Williams, J.D.  
Professor & Chair  
Department of Business Law  
College of Business Administration and Economics  
California State University, Northridge

I. Deciding to go to law school

Even if you are sure that you want to go to law school, it will do you no harm to think carefully about this decision again before going any further. Careers in law can provide jobs that are rewarding personally, professionally and financially. However, not even the best job is a bundle of excitement every day. Every practicing lawyer has some activities that include unexciting, routine tasks. Most legal careers involve a great deal of work and responsibility. Lawyers have shown levels of stress higher than in many other professions.

If you are sure that you want to go to law school, realize that there are many different kinds of careers in law. Most lawyers work for law firms - groups of lawyers who have joined together in a partnership to practice law. Many lawyers work for governmental agencies related to law enforcement (e.g. the district's attorney office) regulatory or administrative law (e.g. the Securities and Exchange Commission) or to represent other governmental entities (for example a county or a school district). Corporations often hire lawyers as employees to work "in house". Some lawyers go into related fields of teaching and legal journalism. Some attorneys don't practice law but instead are involved in government (for example, acting as a legislative aide) or in business. The best thing that you can do is to contact attorneys in various types of practices and ask whether they would be willing to speak with you about their jobs. Another way to find more about legal careers is to work for lawyers: law firms employ clerical workers and paralegals. Working in some capacity while you are still in college should give you some idea about the legal careers. It will not, however help you get into law school.

Finally, realize that law school takes a big commitment both in time and money. The application process itself is expensive. Law school, for full time students, lasts three years. After graduation, you are still unqualified to practice until you pass the state bar exam (which some students never do). While it is not meant to discourage you, you need to think carefully before you decide to go to law school. You may, for instance, want to consider law related careers in such fields as business or law enforcement.

II. Getting into law school

Once you have decided to go to law school, what should you do? Law schools base their admission decisions primarily on two factors: the LSAT (Law School Admissions Test)

and the student's GPA (grade point average). Obviously, then, you need to make these scores as high as possible.

#### A. Your undergraduate record

Since a student's undergraduate record is so important in the admissions process, it is important that you make yours as strong as possible. Work hard to keep your grades high. Limit the number of credit/no credit classes you take.

Many students wonder what they should major in to get into law school. The answer is simple: it doesn't matter. Law schools are looking primarily for certain skills: analytical reasoning, reading comprehension and writing ability. Any major which gives you these skills will be what the law school wants. Consider majoring in what you like the best; along with making you happy and introducing you to careers in that field, this should result in your getting the highest grades, since you will probably do your best work in courses you like.

This doesn't mean, however that course selection isn't important. In addition to a high GPA, law school look at the depth and breadth of the undergraduate record. What this means is that you have taken a wide variety of classes (this is what CSUN's general education requirements are designed to ensure) and that the course selections are academically demanding.

You don't need to take any undergraduate law classes. Law schools plan to teach you all of the law you need to know. Undergraduate law courses, taught using the law school method of Socratic reasoning, may help give you an idea of whether you'd like law school and to be better prepared for the experience. However, such classes don't necessarily affect your application for law school.

#### B. The LSAT

The LSAT is administered by the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), with information available at [www.lsat.org](http://www.lsat.org). This exam is given throughout the year at various locations. Since the LSAT is so important in getting into law school, you need to do everything possible to get a high score. Any bookstore sells guides to the questions on the LSAT; more are available online from LSAC. These guides are generally composed of questions from previously administered LSAT exams. The LSAT application itself includes a representative exam. In addition, various companies give "LSAT prep" courses. Generally, these courses give you the old LSAT exams and note the areas in which you need the most improvement. Since the LSAC makes the old exams available to everyone, there is no reason why a motivated student needs to take the prep course. They do, however, provide structure for those students who need it.

Timing the LSAT test is important. Generally, it is best to take it as early as possible for three reasons: first, so that there will be no delay in completing your law school application, second, so that you can take (or retake) it at another setting if necessary, and

finally so that you have a realistic notion of your chances of admission at particular law schools at the time you are selecting the schools to which you will apply. Check the deadlines that apply for those schools where you plan to apply.

If you have taken the exam and gotten a disappointing score, should you re-take the exam? For most people, this will not prove to be a benefit. Studies show that most students perform at about the same level as their original score. (Data is available from the LSAC guide.) Before retaking the exam, see how your target schools treat the data – will they take the higher score or average the scores?

### C. The LSDAS record

Most law schools require that students subscribe to the LSDAS service. This service is administered by the same company that administers the LSAT. This program requires that students provide their college transcripts directly to the LSAC rather than individually to separate law schools. The LSAC then provides a standardized summary of your undergraduate record to the law schools you designate. Make sure that the LSDAS summary is accurate, since the law schools to which you will be applying will be relying on it as your scholastic record.

### D. Other factors affecting Admission

While the LSAT score and your GPA are important factors in your admission to the law school, they are not the only factors. Law schools are trying to evaluate both your intellectual ability (your ability to reason, synthesize, and write) and the human dimension (leadership, emotional maturity and commitment). Wherever possible on your application, try to demonstrate that you are a good candidate in all respects.

#### 1. The Personal Statement

Most law school applications include specific questions about your activities during college. In addition, most applications include a “personal statement” by the applicant; an opportunity for the student to write about his application.

This personal statement should be brief (one or two type written pages, unless otherwise specified) and clearly written. If there is any information which would help or explain your background that doesn't otherwise appear in your application, include it in your personal statement. If you have, for instance, learned English as a second language, maintain a high GPA despite working while in school, or overcome some personal setback, explain it. If your record looks erratic and you have an explanation, do so here. For example, if your freshman grades were much lower than all of your grades, point this out. Explain, for example, that when you began college you were immature and lacked direction, but that you became a good student. Be as specific as possible, but don't whine.

#### 2. Letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation carry the greatest weight if they are written by someone who knows your abilities well and can write about them objectively, e.g. a professor or an employer. They need not be written by lawyers or law professors. Those written by family friends carry little weight. The LSDAS will include these letters with the other information to the schools you designate.

### 3. Other factors

Other factors may affect your application, including extra curricular activities both on campus and in community, employment, awards or other recognition of your work, the reputation of your undergraduate school, and more.

### III. Choosing a Law School

Once you have received your LSAT scores, you should be able to determine where to apply for law school. Law schools publish the average GPA and LSAT of its incoming class. This information can be obtained in any number of commercially-published law school guides as well as the LSAC's Official Guide, located at <http://officialguide.lsac.org/>

Determine which law schools offer you a realistic chance of admittance. Most admissions officers recommend that you apply to at least five law schools: three schools where you stand at least a 50% chance of admittance, one which is a "long shot" and one school for "safety".

Consider whether you are able to relocate for law school – this will increase the number of potential schools. You do not ordinarily need to choose a law school that specializes in any particular area of law – any school will give you the background you need for any type of practice. You do not need to go to a school in the state where you plan to practice.

If you are accepted by more than one school, choose the "best" one. The better the school you attend, the more you increase your chances of being hired by the employer of your choice after law school. The way to determine which school has a higher reputation is normally to compare the average GPA and LSAT scores of its incoming class. Another way to evaluate a school is by its bar pass rate; i.e. the percentage of its students who pass the bar. Finally, look to see whether the school is accredited. The American Bar Association (ABA) and the State Bar of California separately accredit schools. The ABA's accreditation indicates its status. The California Bar's accreditation has more immediate impact; students at unaccredited schools have special hurdles before they are permitted to take the California Bar exam. Before you attend a school not accredited by the California Bar, contact the Bar to determine the conditions for eligibility to take the bar exam.

Most students are worried about their financial ability to complete law school. This rational concern should not keep you from applying. Instead, when you have been

accepted by a school, contact their financial aid office for advice. Most schools help coordinate the various loan and grant programs available. The LSAC coordinates a program, "Law Access", which administers loans. Other factors may affect the cost. State schools, for example, have lower tuition because of the state subsidy. Some private schools, however, have large endowments and are able to make scholarships and grants available. Most students work during law school, although generally not during the first year, which is the most demanding. Finally, some students work full time and attend law school at night. Such programs take longer to complete and are not offered at all schools.

Applying to law schools is a stressful process. As much as possible, worry about one thing at a time: first concentrate on your LSAT, then your applications, and finally on making financial arrangements. And take heart: everyone gets through the process – you can too.