



OCS

# APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL



## *Undergraduate Resource Series*

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## INTRODUCTION

A career in the field of law can encompass many aspects of society such as business, government, human and civil rights, international relations, medicine, law enforcement, politics, entertainment, sports, and the arts, as well as jurisprudence and academia. If you have a passion for legal thought, strong oral and written communication skills, and a propensity for drawing thoughtful conclusions by analyzing fine details and complex information, then a law career may be for you. When contemplating a law degree, ask yourself: Why do you want to become a lawyer? How will earning a J.D. satisfy your career interests? How would membership in the legal profession serve your long-term goals? Plan to do some research in terms of what you can reasonably expect to get out of a law degree both academically and professionally.

### **Ways to learn more about applying to law school and exploring a career in law**

#### **Exploration:**

- Reach out to your House Pre-Law Tutor to speak about the profession.
- Select “law” as one of your OCS Class Year listserv preferences to receive emails about law-related programs and opportunities.
- Attend workshops about the legal profession at OCS.
- Become involved with one of the Harvard Pre-Law student organizations (such as the Harvard College Law Society, Harvard Black Pre-Law Society, Harvard University Legal Committee, or the Small Claims Advisory Service).
- Conduct research on legal careers using the print and online resources available through OCS.
- Consider an internship with an organization where you can learn more about legal issues.
- Talk to lawyers to learn more about the legal profession. Contact people you know or search the Harvard Alumni Association alumni database, accessible through the OCS webpage. Or, connect with alumni and other professionals via LinkedIn.

#### **Applying:**

- Attend an “Applying to Law School 101” session at OCS.
- Attend information sessions by visiting law schools at OCS.
- Set up an account with the Law School Admissions Council – [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)
- Sit in on a class and meet current students at Harvard Law School or other schools you are interested in attending. (Talk to your pre-law tutor and/or contact the professor first.)

## Questions to ask

- What do lawyers do on a daily basis? What is a typical work day like?
- What personal attributes are needed to be successful in a legal career?
- What is satisfying and dissatisfying about the field of law?
- What is the work/life balance like?
- What are typical practice areas and the range of jobs you can consider with a law degree?
- Why did you decide to go to law school? Has your career developed as expected?

## EMPLOYMENT

Salaries and work hours vary widely across the profession. The median starting salary for an entry-level Associate at a private firm is \$95,000\*. While a first-year corporate lawyer at a top law firm may currently earn between \$155,000-\$165,000 in the first year out of law school, he/she may also have to work twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. Government lawyers and those who work in-house for a company or organization usually have more reasonable and predictable work schedules but earn a lower starting salary. Most of those interested in public interest law can expect a starting salary under \$50,000. Lawyers entering a solo practice earn varying amounts depending on their legal expertise and the region where they practice. In addition, many people trained as lawyers work in jobs where their legal training is of value but they are not actually practicing law.

## Realities of a Legal Career

An important step in making your decision is to learn about the significant changes in the market for new lawyers in recent years. Today's graduates can expect a more competitive legal job-search process and the prospect of working in a field not directly related to law; approximately 51% of the Class of 2014 took a position in private practice\*. Therefore, make it a priority to explore the various career options for using your legal training. Think about broad categories such as law, government, education, health care, and technology, and consider how the skills that you will receive from a legal education—such as research and writing, analysis and logical reasoning, knowledge of substantive law and legal procedures, and time management—will be utilized. Be sure to meet with your House Pre-Law Tutor to consider non-legal careers for lawyers.

## PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL

Admissions committees consider a number of factors when evaluating candidates for law school. Among the most important are the strength of an applicant's academic record and the applicant's score on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). These indicators, with letters of recommendation and a personal statement, typically constitute what is required for a completed application. Law schools also weigh the work experience of applicants and welcome applications from students who have taken time off between undergraduate study and law school. The majority of applicants will have taken time off between their undergraduate and legal studies. Applicants are expected to have a solid understanding of law school and why they want to practice law.

\*NALP (2015) - Employment for the Class of 2014—Selected Findings. Retrieved from <http://www.nalp.org/uploads/classof2014selectedfindings.pdf>

## Choosing a Concentration

There is no “right concentration” that is recommended for preparing for law school. Law schools are looking for a diverse group of students from a variety of backgrounds. They are interested in students who have selected courses that are academically challenging and that have cultivated and developed the student’s ability to make inferences, reason logically, and analyze and present complex information in a condensed and clear manner. The courses you take should also allow you to write extensively and practice research skills. For example, if you are interested in a law career that involves public policy or politics, you may want to consider a concentration in government or social studies or, if you are interested in working on issues related to the environment and working for the Environmental Protection Agency, then a concentration in one of the sciences may be the best preparation.

## Your Academic Record

In the admissions process, your academic record is a very important element. Therefore, be sure to concentrate in a subject area that you enjoy and do well in. Admissions officers know from experience which departments have strong academic reputations and which courses have high and low curves. According to the Harvard Law School Admissions Office, academic success is important but other qualities that promote vitality, diversity, and excellence in the student body are also valued. As stated on its website, “We have no computational methods for making admissions decisions, no mechanical shortcuts, no substitutes for careful assessment and good judgment. Our review process seeks to assess a number of characteristics that have few direct or precise measures by looking for evidence of these characteristics throughout an application.” You don't have to fit a certain mold to be accepted to a top law school.

## Extra-curricular Activities

Admissions committees do consider extracurricular activities when reviewing a candidate’s application. This is generally a means of looking at the candidate as a whole and obtaining a complete and well-rounded picture of who they are reviewing. What law schools look for are leadership experience, work experience, research and publications, community activities and public service. Be sure to pick activities that interest you and could provide the committee with a glimpse of what law you might be interested in practicing. However, do not sacrifice grades for extracurricular activities.

## SELECTING A LAW SCHOOL

When applying to law schools, consider issues such as *the faculty, national or regional reputation, placement of graduates, facilities, resources available at the institution, cost of attending, and location.*

### Faculty

When reviewing law schools, the strength, accessibility, and reputation of the faculty are key factors. Be sure to consider the academic and experiential backgrounds of faculty members, the student/faculty ratio, the number of full-time vs. adjunct faculty, and the number of female faculty and faculty of color at the institution.

### National or Regional Schools

Law schools are generally divided into three categories: National, Regional and Local. Schools with a **National** reputation tend to appear in various “top ten” lists. They draw students from across the nation and around the world and offer geographic mobility to students. Schools with a **Regional**

reputation are attended primarily by students from that region who may want to remain in that area after graduation, but who may also seek positions throughout the country.

## **Placement of Graduates**

Be sure to look at the data regarding placement of law school graduates and the percentage of graduates who succeed in passing the bar exam. The websites of the respective law schools should have this information or you can connect with the admissions office of the schools you are interested in to get an idea of where students tend to work upon graduation.

## **Facilities and Resources at the Institution**

It is worthwhile to visit the schools you are interested in and inquire about the facilities, resources, and affiliations of the law school.

## **Cost of attending law school**

Attending law school is very expensive. The average student debt upon completion is approximately \$131,000 for graduates of private law schools and \$100,000 for graduates of public law schools\*. Some law schools are more expensive than others and they have varying financial aid incentives. Although some law schools provide grants and scholarships, loans still constitute the bulk of how students finance their legal education. Most students do take loans to pay for their law education and consider this, amortized over time, a good investment in their future earning potential.

## **Location**

Is the school in an urban area or a suburban/rural setting? Is it part of a university or independent? If you are interested in a dual-degree program, are there other graduate schools nearby? Is the school in a place you could see yourself living for three years and where you might be interested in working following graduation? These are important questions to consider because where you attend law school often influences where you practice afterwards.

## **APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL**

### **Meet with your House Pre-Law Tutor**

At Harvard there are many resources. All of the Houses have a Pre-Law tutor or tutors—current law students and recent graduates—who will assist students interested in applying to law school. The first step in your exploration of a possible career in law is to speak with your Pre-Law tutors who can help you create a strategy for maximizing your chances for success. Later when you are applying to graduate programs, pre-law tutors and writing tutors are great resources for students who are working on applications and personal statements.

### **Attend an OCS Applying to Law School 101 Session**

These overview sessions are offered several times during the fall and spring semesters and are geared towards juniors and seniors who are currently in the process of applying to law school. These sessions help introduce students to the application process and to helpful resources.

\*Baum, S. (2015). A Framework for Thinking about Law School Affordability. Retrieved from <http://www.accessgroup.org/framework-thinking-about-law-school-affordability>

## **Take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT)**

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is required for admission to all American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools. The test is administered four times per year by the Law School Admission Council (LSAC). Detailed test information—dates, sites, registration forms, fees, and deadlines—and registration is available online at [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org).

Be aware that test sites can fill quickly, especially in or around major cities. It is advisable to register several months in advance of a test date so that you can take the test in a convenient location and at a convenient time in relation to your other activities and plans for applying. The LSAT is not offered at Harvard. The optimal time to take the exam is June of the year you apply, but taking the test in October will still allow you to see your LSAT score before applying in November. Scores from the December administration will also reach law schools in time to complete application deadlines at all schools. If you take the December test, plan to submit your applications around the time of the test administration. You may, however, decide to wait to see your score before submitting your applications.

The LSAT provides law school admissions committees with a common measure of applicants' aptitude for legal study. The test consists of five multiple choice sections, each 35 minutes in length:

- 1) one reading comprehension section
- 2) one analytical reasoning section
- 3) two logical reasoning sections
- 4) one experimental test question section (not scored)
- 5) a 35-minute writing sample at the end of the test (not scored; copies are sent to the schools to which you've applied)

Your score is computed on a scale of 120 to 180, based on the number of questions you answer correctly; there is no deduction or penalty for incorrect answers, so it is advantageous to guess if you do not have time to answer a question.

## **The Credential Assembly Service (CAS)**

To centralize and standardize objective application information – GPAs and LSAT scores – ABA-approved law schools require applicants to subscribe to the Credential Assembly Service (CAS). The service organizes and analyzes applicant information in a way that allows law schools to compare academic records from undergraduate schools that use different grading systems. Register for the CAS, and then have your transcript from each college or university from which you have earned academic credit sent directly to LSAC.

If you are enrolled in a study abroad program sponsored by another U.S. college or university, in addition to your Harvard transcript, you must have the college or university sponsoring the study abroad program send a transcript directly to the CAS. List the institution when you register for the Credential Assembly Services under “other Institution.”

## **The Application**

You can apply to any ABA-approved law school through the CAS electronic application, which streamlines the process by allowing you to enter common information only once; you then complete each school's individual application and submit your applications electronically.

## **Personal Statement**

Personal statements are requested by most law schools and provide the opportunity to go beyond the objective aspects of the application to discuss who you are and what is important to you. This personal statement is an invitation to write a limited-length essay about yourself. It is not necessarily asking that you explain your motivation for law school; rather it is providing you an opportunity to explain to the school what distinctive experiences, personality traits, values, academic skills and passions, etc. you would bring to a class. It can be viewed, in essence, as the interview that very few law schools grant. This personal statement should be more mature than the type of essay you may have written for undergraduate admissions. You should begin to compose a personal statement in the early fall, which you can assume will be suitable for all applications UNLESS any of your schools requests a specific topic or style.

Personal statements are typically two double-spaced pages, though you may find that some schools will give more latitude. If schools don't provide guidelines on length, it's advisable to submit a statement that is approximately two pages in length. A few schools will limit the number of words permitted and you should abide by their guidelines. House Pre-Law tutors and writing tutors can be a great resource for students who are preparing their statements.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Most law schools request that one or two letters of recommendation be submitted on behalf of applicants. If letters are not required, it is a good idea, nonetheless, to submit them. Admissions committees will be seeking information not provided elsewhere in the applications.

Recommendation letters should include concrete examples of intellectual strength, judgment, motivation, and leadership, along with an appraisal of communication skills and a comparison to peers.

In early fall, you should plan your recommendation-gathering strategy, or see what recommendations are already in your House file. If you have not made yourself and your law school application plans known to your House Pre Law Tutor, you should do so.

Two academic letters of recommendation are the usual request in law school applications, but you should be sure to check each application for possible variations. Such letters should be requested early enough so that the writer can comfortably complete the task in time for the artificial submission deadline of early November that we recommend you set for yourself. Letters can also be requested (and kept in your House file) if you think you will apply in the future but are not doing so immediately. You should also plan to keep in touch with potential recommenders.

When you approach potential recommenders for a letter, it is best not to do so on the fly. After ascertaining that they can write a favorable letter on your behalf, you might make an appointment to discuss the ways in which they know you, perhaps bringing a paper (with comments ) written in their class, or a set of class discussion topics in which you participated. They may ask for a resume and your personal statement, and even a transcript. Such documents could help provide writers with a more rounded view of you, but, in fact, it is an analysis of your performance in their field of expertise that schools specifically seek.



We strongly suggest that all Harvard candidates use the **LOR** (Letter of Recommendation Service), a recommendation-collecting and distributing service which is part of CAS. This can be done either directly by the recommender, or by the House.

## Resume

Law schools typically require a resume as part of the application. OCS has a resume guide and templates which can be downloaded from the OCS website. Bring a copy of your resume to OCS and have it reviewed before you submit your application.

## Dean's Certifications

A dean's certification (or letter/clearance) is required by **some** law schools to confirm that applicants have not been involved in academic or disciplinary transgressions. Please contact your Pre-Law tutor if a school you are applying to requires a letter.

## How to Apply for Financial Aid

**Apply early for financial aid.** Check each law school's website to determine financial aid deadlines. Some schools have priority dates for submitting financial aid information; students who apply earlier have a better opportunity to obtain limited grant money.

**Complete your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) as soon as possible after January 1.** Completion of the FAFSA is required for all federal student loan programs. The FAFSA is also used by some law schools to collect information for their own institutional aid. Because the FAFSA requires tax information from the previous year, it cannot be completed before January 1.

Some schools have **separate applications** for financial aid, while others use the law school application or the FAFSA. Schools also vary in how they distribute their own funds.

If you have **special circumstances**, provide this information to the law school financial aid office. This can be critical for law students who have been working full-time in the prior year or who have unusual medical or family expenses.

**Do NOT wait to complete the FAFSA** until after you are admitted to a law school. You can list up to ten law schools where you want reports sent, and update this list with additional schools once your FAFSA has been processed.

If your federal tax return won't be ready until later in the spring, you can estimate prior year income on the FAFSA. Parental income is **not** considered in determining eligibility for federal loans to graduate-level students, who will be directed to skip Section III-Parental Information in the FAFSA.

## Financial Aid Resources

**Federal Student Aid:** [www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov)

**LSAC-recommended financial aid websites:** [www.lsac.org/jd/financing-law-school/financial-aid-websites](http://www.lsac.org/jd/financing-law-school/financial-aid-websites)

**Access Group:** [www.accessgroup.org](http://www.accessgroup.org) (WiseBorrowing & Financial Aid, Calculators, Financial Aid Analyzer Award)

**Public Interest Law Resources:** [www.equaljusticeworks.org](http://www.equaljusticeworks.org) (information about loan repayment programs and public interest law)

## **PUBLICATIONS AND ONLINE RESOURCES**

There are a number of resources available to help you evaluate and research law schools. In addition to the online resources listed below, there are also print resources available at OCS.

**The Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools.** This guide provides comprehensive information on the 205 American Bar Association-approved law schools, including faculty, library resources, enrollment, bar passage, placement, and GPAs. The guide is accessible free of charge through the LSAC website at <https://officialguide.lsac.org/>

### **The Harvard Law School Pre-law Self-Assessment**

Helps potential students assess why they are interested in law school, and to consider a wide variety of career and life planning issues when weighing their desire to practice.

<http://hls.harvard.edu/dept/opia/job-search-toolkit/self-assessment-questions/>

### **The Boston College Online Law School Locator**

An excellent resource which allows students to view schools where they are likely to be competitive for admissions based on LSAT and GPA.

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/gradschool/law/research.html>

### **The NAPLA Pre-law Guide for Students**

The Northeastern Association of Pre-law Advisors has developed a comprehensive guidebook to help individuals considering a career in law and to assist students and graduates applying to law school.

<http://naplaconference.org/resources-for-advisors>

### **The Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP)**

A great online directory of law schools which is straightforward and easy to use.

[www.nalplawsonline.org](http://www.nalplawsonline.org)

**HEATH Resource Center** is a clearinghouse for persons with disabilities.

<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/>

**Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO)** assists economically and educationally disadvantaged applicants in preparing for law school.

[www.cleoscholars.com](http://www.cleoscholars.com)