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Quote of the Month

"None of us has gotten where we are solely by pulling ourselves up from our own bootstraps. We got here because somebody bent down and helped us."

- Thurgood Marshall



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EDUCATION

The road to law school begins in your freshman year. Too often, low income and minority students devote more time explaining and rationalizing their past, than preparing for the future. Often forgetting that they were born to win, they focus more on obstacles than accomplishments.

...When your adversaries tell you that you can't go any further, just tell them to look behind you and see how far you've come.

If you are taking the time to read this article, let's assume that you want to know more about the legal profession. Maybe you've decided to attend law school, or perhaps you just want to know how to get started. But regardless of your reason for picking up this book, we hope you will find it useful.

Freshman
Get Ready
Sophomores
Now is The Time

It's never too early to start thinking about going to law school. In fact, the earlier, the better. Preparing for law school is so simple and non-restrictive, that even if you change your mind and decide to pursue another career, your efforts will not have been in vain. Unlike medical school, with its litany of prerequisites: biology, chemistry, physics, etc.; or a graduate program in business, psychology or sociology which require 20 or more undergraduate hours in a particular field, there are no prerequisite courses for admission to law school. Instead, the Prelaw Committee of the American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar has identified core skills and values that are essential for competent lawyering.

Students who are successful in law school, and who become accomplished attorneys or use their legal education successfully in other areas of professional life, come to their legal education from widely differing educational and experiential backgrounds... Thus the ABA does not recommend any particular group of undergraduate majors, or courses that should be taken by those wishing to prepare for legal education... Nevertheless, there are important skills and values, and significant bodies of knowledge, that ...will provide a sound foundation for a sophisticated legal education.

These skills include analytic and problem-solving skills, critical reading abilities, writing skills, oral communication and listening abilities, general research skills, and task organization and management skills. (For a detailed discussion of the above skills, see the ABA Guide to Approved Law Schools, pages 12-14).

In selecting courses that will enable you to develop and refine the above skills, remember that your undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA) will become a significant factor in determining your admissibility to law school. Hence you will have to weight the value of struggling through an advanced course in Probability and Statistics to improve your problem-solving and analytical skills, or breezing through a class in square-dancing. The pre-law advisor at your institution may be able to help you decide on the best course of action.

I received very high grades in high school, however, after beginning college I quickly realized that my public school education had left me academically ill-prepared. In addition, I needed to work a full-time job to help support my family. Although it was extremely difficult at first, I became singularly focused, worked very hard to overcome my academic shortcomings, and ended my under-graduate studies as a Dean's List student.

Recognizing that individuals may get off to a slow start, some law schools abate an applicant's earlier undergraduate performance. However, law schools generally prefer applicants with a solid GPA, i.e. 3.0 and above. Consequently, it's a good idea to balance your work and school schedules rather than run the risk of not performing up to par.

I graduated from college over 10 years ago. I have a graduate degree in economics and have worked in progressively demanding professional positions.

You only get one shot at your GPA. Once your undergraduate work is complete, your final GPA is established. Work experience and graduate study are additional factors that law schools consider in determining an applicant's admissibility. However, regardless of whether you apply to law school immediately after graduation, or decide to wait a few years, your GPA will not change. Your undergraduate GPA is a major factor in determining your admissibility. If you are a freshman or sophomore, you still have time to make your best shot.

You're Almost There

Your educational background tells law schools an enormous amount about you. It tells them what kind of subjects interest you, how rigorous your course selection was, and how hard you did or didn't work to get good grades. It tells them if you learned how to study better as you went along, so that your grades improved, or if you became distracted by other things and let your grades drop. Even the school you chose to attend tells the admissions officer something about you, as well as telling him something about what your grades represent in terms of academic challenge.

In addition to showing the admissions officer who you are as a student, your transcript tells a law school how competitive you are in the applicant pool. Most law schools combine your grade point average (GPA) and law school admissions test score to compute your index number which is then used to compare you with other applicants. Consequently, a high GPA definitely works to your advantage. In fact, in some schools, if your index number is sufficiently high, your application will not be stuck in a pile waiting to be scrutinized by the admissions committee. Instead, as long as everything else in your file indicates that you will be a successful law student, your acceptance letter is sent immediately.

In assessing a prospective law student's educational qualifications, admissions committees generally consider the chosen curriculum, the grades earned, and the reputation of the colleges attended. They also view favorably scholastic honors, awards, and special recognition. Solid grades in courses such as logic, philosophy, and abstract mathematics are generally considered a plus.

Unfortunately, some students enjoyed such a socially active college experience that their transcript is completely void of the academic indicators that the admissions committee is seeking. When this happens, students often take additional classes or choose graduate school as an alternative to immediately pursuing a legal education. While these efforts will increase your chances of admission to a small extent, they will not entirely offset the effects of a poor undergraduate effort.

Most of you reading this are doing so two to six months before you will apply to law school—in your senior year or later. In that case, your school, major, grades, and extracurricular activities are already determined. The simplest way to increase your chance of admission to law school at this stage is to understand the application process, do what the law schools want, and track your applications to make sure nothing is lost.

If you've been told that your undergraduate record was a major factor in your rejection, you could try taking a year's courses at a more rigorous university. This might make a difference, especially if you get A's and B's. Make sure you have the time to invest in the classwork; a lower grade might just reinforce the law school's belief that you're not of the caliber they desire. Good grades at a more challenging school would show admissions officers that you're capable of doing work at a more difficult level.

Contrary to popular belief, law schools do not favor political science, criminal justice, and government majors over others. Choose major and elective courses that you will genuinely enjoy, instead of those you were told were required for pre-law students. You are likely to get better grades in a field you find interesting. And even if you don't, law schools will respect your pursuit of subjects you find challenging. This is especially true if the courses you take are known to be more difficult, such as philosophy, engineering, and science. Also, look for courses that will strengthen the skills you need in law school. Classes that stress research and writing are excellent preparation for law school, as are courses that teach reasoning and analytical skills. Classes that help you understand the complex relationships that motivate legal decision-making can be both fascinating and useful. History, psychology, economics, and political science can all help you to understand the processes that influence our legal system. If you find a particular instructor who challenges you to produce your best work and with whom you have developed a mutual respect, take as many courses as you can with that instructor. Your grades (and eventual recommendation) will reflect the rapport you've developed with this person.

Law schools particularly value courses, regardless of the subject, in which you produce lengthy and well-researched papers. In law school, a short paper usually measures 10 to 20 pages and a long paper can be 50 pages or more, so practice at producing papers of this length will be valuable.

If you are offered the opportunity to enroll in honors classes or to write an honors thesis, seize it. Honors work demonstrates your willingness to subject yourself to greater intellectual challenge and academic discipline. An honors thesis will not only show your dedication to academic pursuits, it also exposes you to the disciplined research and writing most valued in law school.

Law-related courses and internships do little to strengthen your academic record. Law is rarely taught to undergraduates in the same way it is taught in law school, and internships may show your suitability to work in a legal environment, but they do not indicate your ability to succeed as a law student. In fact, you may find it helpful to remember this simple truth: in applying to law school, you are not trying to prove your eventual success as a lawyer; rather, your goal is to prove your potential as a law student, since that is who law schools are admitting. ■

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