

Choosing a Law School

For some people, the choice of which law school to attend is an easy one. The most outstanding students will probably be able to go anywhere and will select the schools they perceive to be the most prestigious or those which offer a program of particular interest, or the greatest amount of financial support. Others, who need to stay in a particular area perhaps because of family or job obligations, will choose nearby schools and schools with part-time programs.

However, the majority of applicants will have to weigh a variety of personal and academic factors to come up with a list of potential schools. Once you have a list, and more than one acceptance letter, you will have to choose a school. Applicants should consider carefully the offerings of each law school before making a decision. The quality of a law school is certainly a major consideration; however, estimations of quality are very subjective. **Factors such as campus atmosphere, the school's devotion to teaching and learning, and the applicant's enthusiasm for the school are very important.** Remember that the law school is going to be your home for three years. Adjusting to law school and the general attitudes of a professional school is difficult enough without the additional hardship of culture shock. Don't choose a law school in a large city if you can't bear crowds, noise, and a fast pace. And, if you've lived your entire life in an urban environment, can you face the change you will experience in a small town? You also may want to ask yourself if you are already set in an unshakable lifestyle or if you are eager for a new environment.

Ranking Law Schools

Law Schools and Reputation

Many people will tell you to apply to the schools that take students in your GPA and LSAT ranges, and then enroll in the best one that accepts you. Law school quality can be assessed in a number of ways.

There is a hierarchy of law schools based on reputation, job placement success, strength of faculty, and the prestige of the parent institution (if there is one). In fact a study done at one university suggests that undergraduate students perceive schools not only in terms of hierarchy but also in terms of hierarchical clusters. In other words, certain schools are grouped together in terms of equivalent quality and prestige. Also, there are books or magazine articles that assign law schools purported numerical quality rankings.

However, according to the American Bar Association (ABA):

No rating of law schools beyond the simple statement of their accreditation status is attempted or advocated by the official organizations in legal education. Qualities that make one school good for one student may not be as important to another. The American Bar Association and its Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar have issued disclaimers of any law school rating system. Prospective law students should consider a variety of factors in making their choice among schools.¹

Since there is no official ranking authority, you should be cautious in using such rankings. The factors that make up a law school's reputation---strength of curriculum, faculty, career services, ability of students, quality of library facilities, and the like---don't lend themselves to quantification. Even if the rankings were more or less accurate, the school's reputation is only one factor among many for you to consider.

What's in a Name?

¹ The American Bar Association Standards for Approval of Law Schools, General Information of the Council for the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, Number 8, "Rating of Law Schools," p. 146, American Bar Association, Chicago, IL, 2001

While going to a "name" school may mean that you will have an easier time finding your first job, it doesn't necessarily mean that you will get a better legal education than if you go to a lesser-known law school. Some schools that were at their peaks years ago are still riding on the wave of that earlier reputation. Others have greatly improved their programs and have recruited talented faculty but have not yet made a name for themselves. Of course, schools already considered excellent have a stake in maintaining their status.

Once admitted, many applicants elect to attend the best-known schools. However, in making this decision you should consider a variety of factors, such as the contacts you may acquire at a school in the area where you hope to practice, the size of the school, and cost. The substantive differences between schools should be your focus when making this important choice rather than the school's reputed ranking.

The Parent University

About 90 percent of ABA-approved law schools are part of a larger university. The reputation of an undergraduate school may influence the reputation of the law school so you may want to investigate the university before committing to the law school.

In addition, there are many advantages to attending a law school that is part of a university. Such law schools may have more options for joint-degree programs or for taking a nonlaw school course or two. They also may have more academic and social activities, campus theater groups, sports teams, and everything else that comes with university life. Perhaps most important, the university can act as a support system for the law school by providing a wealth of facilities, including student housing and support for career services.

National, Regional, and Local Schools

A national school will generally have an applicant population and a student body that draws almost indistinguishably from the nation as a whole and will have many international students as well. A regional school is likely to have a population that is primarily from the geographic region of its location, though many regional schools have students from all over the country; a number of regional schools draw heavily from a particular geographical area, yet graduates may find jobs all over the country. Generally speaking, a local school is drawing primarily on applicants who either come from or want to practice in the proximate area in which the school is located. Many local law schools have excellent reputations and compete with the national schools in faculty competence, in research-supporting activities, and in resources generally. Check the school's catalog or talk with the admission and placement staff to get a clear breakdown on where their students come from and where they are finding jobs.

Evaluating Law Schools

The best advice on how to select a law school is to choose the school that is best for you.

The law schools invest substantial time and effort in evaluating prospective students, and applicants should evaluate law schools with equivalent care. The following are some features to keep in mind as you systematically evaluate law schools. (Click here for a discussion on costs and financial criteria (<http://www.lsac.org/LSAC.asp?url=lsac/financial-aid-introduction.asp>)).

Each listing in the ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools (<http://officialguide.lsac.org/docs/cgi-bin/home.asp>) provides school-specific information in the following categories as well.

Enrollment/Student Body

The academic qualifications of the student body are important to consider. It's a good idea to select a law school where you will be challenged by your classmates. Use the admission profile grids in this book to check the LSAT scores and GPAs for the previous year's entering class. Try to select a school where your averages will not be significantly different from those of your fellow law students. This is especially true for those with high scores and high GPAs, who are likely to be successful at any law school. Because of the important role of student participation in law school classes, your

legal education might not be as rewarding as it could be if you are not challenged by your classmates.

You might also inquire about the diversity of the student body. Are a majority of the students the same age, race, sex, and so on? Remember, differences among students will expose you to various points of view; this will be important aspect of your law school education.

Find out how many students are in a typical class. Much of the learning in law school depends on the quality of class discussion. Small classes provide essential interaction; large classes (and the Socratic method) provide diversity, challenge, and a good mix of reactions, opinions, and criticism.

It is also important to find out the total number of students enrolled at the school. Not surprisingly, the larger law schools tend to offer a larger selection of courses. Of course, more doesn't always mean better, and no one student has time to take all the courses offered at a large school. However, if you think you want to sample a wide range of courses, you are apt to have more opportunity to do so at a law school with a large faculty.

Part of the law school learning experience takes place after class with fellow students and with members of the faculty. Check to see if faculty and students are on campus for a substantial part of the day.

Larger schools may also offer more extracurricular programs, greater student services, and a larger library. However, faculties and administrators at smaller schools may be able to give students more attention, and students at smaller schools may experience greater camaraderie. The size of a school is a personal consideration. Some students thrive in large schools; others prefer a smaller student community. Ask yourself which kind of student you are.

Faculty

You will undoubtedly want to assess the faculties of the law schools you are considering. School catalogs will give you some idea of the backgrounds of the full-time faculty--what specialties they have, what they have published, and their public service activities. If the catalog tells you only where degrees were earned, ask for more information. You may also want to check the latest edition of the Association of American Law Schools' *Directory of Law Teachers* available at law school libraries.

It may help you to know that some members of the faculty have interests similar to your own.

Is the faculty relatively diverse with respect to race, ethnic background, gender, degrees in other fields, and breadth of experience? A faculty with diverse backgrounds will have various points of view and experiences. This diversity will enrich your legal education, broaden your own point of view, and help prepare you for the variety of clients you will work with after law school.

How many full-time professors teach how many students--that is, what is the faculty/student ratio?

Although some of the most prestigious law schools are famous for their large sections in the introductory courses, they also provide smaller classes, clinics, simulations, and seminars in advanced subjects. According to the *ABA Standards for Approval of Law Schools*, it is not favorable to have a full-time faculty to full-time student ratio of 30 to one or more.

Are some of the teachers recognized as authorities in their respective fields through their writings and professional activities? Law school catalogs and Web sites vary widely regarding information about faculty. Some merely list each faculty member's name along with schools attended and degrees earned. Others may provide details about publications, professional activities, and noteworthy achievements, particularly when an individual is an authority in his or her field.

Are there visiting professors, distinguished lecturers and visitors, symposiums and the like at the schools you are considering? Law school lectureship programs are a good means of presenting the knowledge and views of academics outside of the particular law school you attend.

The Library and Other Physical Facilities

Chances are you will spend more time in the library than anywhere else, so take stock of the library before you enroll. There are several factors to consider when assessing a law school library: the quality of its holdings, cataloging methods, access to electronic databases, participation in library networks for information retrieval, staff, facilities, and the hours the library is available to students.

Whether it has 250,000 volumes or 2.5 million volumes tells you little about the actual usefulness of the library. It may have an unfathomable number of volumes, but many of them may be outdated, irrelevant, or not readily available to students. All ABA-approved law schools must maintain a library that has the research materials considered essential for the study of law. Beyond that, find out if the school has any special collections, subscribes to computerized legal research services, or participates in interlibrary loan networks. Also, find out how many copies of essential materials are available, particularly for large classes.

Even if the library has all the materials you need, you won't be able to get your hands on them if the cataloging is years behind. Find out about the quality of the library's professional staff. Is there an adequate number of reference librarians for the number of students and faculty being served? Is the staff helpful?

Be sure the library has an adequate number of comfortable seats with at least enough carrels to accommodate a reasonable number of students at any given time. Either in the library or elsewhere in the law building, there should be suitable space for group study and other forms of collaborative work.

Because you will need to spend much of your time in the library, make sure its hours will accommodate just about any schedule you might have. While it is not necessary for a library to be open around the clock, it should be open before classes begin each day and remain open well into the night with a professional library staff on hand to assist students.

Access to technology should not only be available in the library, but throughout the law building, so that students can use computers to retrieve information outside the actual library space.

Curriculum

The range and quality of academic programs is one of the most important factors to consider when choosing a law school.

Almost all law schools follow the traditional first-year core curriculum of civil procedure, criminal law, contracts, legal research and writing, torts and property. Do not assume that all law schools have programs that suit your personal needs and special interests. If you don't have any specific interests in mind--and many beginning students don't---try to make sure the school offers a wide range of electives so that you will have many options. A thorough grounding in basic legal theory will enable you to apply the principles learned to any area of law to which they pertain.

In fact, you shouldn't overemphasize your search for specialties; most law students are not specialties; most law students are not specialists when they graduate, nor do they need to be. Generally speaking, new lawyers begin to find their specialties only in the second to fifth years of their careers. A well-rounded legal education is the best preparation for almost any career path you take. The school's catalogs and the descriptions in this book will tell you a deal about academic programs. You may also wish to ask school representatives questions such as: Does the school offer a variety of courses, or is it especially strong in certain areas; what sizes are the classes' are the seminars and small-group classroom experiences available; and are there ample opportunities for developing writing, researching, and drafting skills?

Beyond the content of law school courses, other academic program considerations may be of interest to you as a prospective law student.

Special Programs and Academic Activities

Joint Degree Programs

Joint-degree programs allow you to pursue law school and graduate degrees simultaneously. Almost every combination is available at some institutions. Among the more popular degrees are the

J.D./M.B.A. and the J.D./M.A. in such area as economics or political science. For details, check the law school's recruitment materials.

Master of Laws (LL.M.) Programs and Special-Degree Programs

Many law schools offer advance degrees that allow students to take graduate-level law courses. The LL.M. degree is quite common and usually is tailored to individual interests. Some schools offer master of laws in taxation and master of comparative law. Students may enroll in LL.M. programs only after having received the J.D. degree.

A few schools also offer very specific, special-degree programs. Some of these specialties include a Doctorate in Civil Law, Doctor of Juridical Science, and Doctor of Jurisprudence and Social Policy. Finding out what types of advanced degrees a law school offers may help you determine the emphases of the school.

Part-time and Evening Programs

Part-time programs may be offered either in the evening or the day. For the past 10 years, approximately 17 percent of law students have enrolled in part-time programs. The conventional wisdom is that you are financially able to attend law school full-time, you ought to do so.

Part-time programs generally take four years to complete instead of three years. If you wish to enroll in such a program, you may be limiting your options somewhat, since less than half of the law schools offer part-time programs.

Clinical Programs and Moot Court Competition

Many law schools offer students authentic experiences as lawyers by involving them with clients and providing opportunities to rehearse trial and appellate advocacy in trial team and moot court competitions. It is important that students become adept at using interviewing, counseling, research, advocacy, and negotiation skills.

The best clinical programs involve students in actual legal situations, simulations of such situations, or a combination of both, either at the school itself or in the community. Clinical programs at some schools offer a team-teaching approach; practical, professional skills are taught along with traditional classroom theory. In this manner, faculty can advise and work closely with students.

Student Journals

Most law schools have a law review--a journal of scholarly articles and commentaries on the law--and other student-edited scholarly journals. Writing for the journals of a school can be important to both your legal education and career in law. Thus, evaluation the journals at a particular school may be worthwhile when trying to choose the right school to attend.

Traditionally, student journal editors are chosen on the basis of academic standing--usually from the top 10 percent of the class--but writing ability, regardless of class rank, may also be a criterion. Today, a growing number of schools select journal editors by holding a competition in which students submit a previously assigned writing sample to the current editorial board. If you are on a journal, employers may assume you either one of the brightest in your class, or an outstanding writer--or both.

If possible, check the journals of the schools you are considering. The character of the journals may be a reflection of the character of the institution that supports it.

Order of the Coif

Many law schools have a chapter of the Order of the Coif, a national honor society for outstanding students. Students are elected to Coif on the basis of scholarship and character. Check to see if the schools you are considering include such a chapter.

Academic Support Programs

Programs for students who need or who are expected to need assistance with legal analysis and writing are offered by most schools. Students are invited to participate in these programs on the basis of either their entering credentials or their actual law school performance. This assistance may be offered in the summer prior to beginning law school, during the academic year, or both. The aim of the academic support programs is to ensure that students have an equal opportunity to compete in law school. For further information about academic assistance programs, consult the admission office at the law school.

Student Organizations

You can tell something about a law school's intellectual resources and its students by the number and range of student associations and organizations sponsored on campus. Many schools have chapters of the American Bar Association-Law Student Division; a student bar association; associations for minority groups, such as the Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American law student associations; and associations based on religious affiliations. Some, but not all, schools sponsor an environmental law society, a gay and lesbian law student society, a legal assistance society, a postconviction assistance project, an ACLU group, a federalist society, a volunteer income-tax assistance program, a law student spouses' club, an international law society, a law and technology society, or a client-counseling society. Determine which associations are important to you and check individual law school catalogs to see which law schools offer what you need.

Career Services and Employment

One of the tests of a good law school is the effort the institution makes to help its students and graduates understand their career options and find satisfying employment. Planning a career in law requires students to integrate their legal education and personal goals in the context of the employment marketplace. Some students begin law school with a clear idea of how they expect to use their legal education (although they may change their minds along the way). Others are uncertain, or see a number of tempting possibilities. The career services office, faculty, and alumni/ae of the school are valuable resources in the process of understanding and selecting among the many opportunities available to lawyers.

The first role of the career services office is to educate students about career opportunities in all sectors, including government and public service, law firms of all sizes and specialties, corporations, and so forth. To accomplish such a task, a law school may arrange panel presentations, meetings with practicing lawyers in different fields, and a library of career information materials. Career services professionals also collect and distribute vital information and resources, teach students job-search strategies, such as effective interviewing skills and employment research, and discuss students' individual interests, options, and presentation.

In performing all of these tasks, the career services office becomes a major marketing and outreach program for its law school and a valuable resource for both law students and graduates as they chart their career paths. One of the most viable career services provided by many law schools is the opportunity to interview with employers on campus for summer and full-time jobs. Ideally, the recruiters should represent a broad range of legal options (small and large firms, government agencies, public interest groups, corporate law departments) and sufficient geographic diversity to meet your needs. Be aware that the number of recruiters at the law school does not necessarily reflect the range of options open to students.

In most schools, only a small percentage of the class gets jobs through on-campus interviewing. Therefore, it is important to investigate the additional support provided by the career services staff and the experiences of the school's students and graduates in finding jobs.

Career services offices are concerned about all kinds of students, not just those at the top of the class rankings. Most spend a great deal of time and effort working with students individually and marketing the school to potential employers in order to increase students' options. Here are some questions you may want to ask about a school's career services:

- What programs does the school offer to introduce students to career options? Do they seem interesting, relevant, and timely?

- Are the career-counseling professionals accessible, respected, well-qualified, and supportive?
- Are the school's faculty and graduates involved in educating students about their career options?
- What types of employers, and how many, recruit on-campus each year? What are the average number of interviews and offers per student? What percentage of students obtain jobs through the on-campus interviewing process?
- What positions have graduates taken in recent years? What work do students do during the summers? In what locales do students and graduates work? Are these employment profiles changing?
- What are the average or median salaries for the school's graduates?
- What percentage of students have accepted positions by graduation; within six months of graduation?
- Does the school offer career counseling and information for its graduates?

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