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# Concordia University Irvine

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## *Constructing a Winning Graduate School Application*

A Complimentary Seminar  
Hosted by

Dr. Norma Jimenez Hernandez  
Faculty Member

&

Anthony Hernandez, Ed.M.  
Senior Analyst,  
University of California All Campus Consortium on Research for  
Diversity

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## Preface

To assist you in preparing for a successful transition from college to graduate school, the *Constructing a Winning Graduate School Application* seminar guide discusses issues you are likely to encounter to that end.

Our goal has been to introduce the various phases of graduate school exploration and preparation and to share vital “college knowledge” strategies. To this end, we have included discussions about investigating graduate school opportunities, preparation timelines, essay guidelines, course preparation, financial aid, and common questions about the application process.

We hope that we have conveyed the sense of adventure and excitement that we both feel whenever we talk to prospective graduate students about their academic goals.

We wish to thank the many individuals who have so generously contributed to our success at the academy. It is in honoring that tradition of sharing and support that we offer this effort.

Dr. Norma Jimenez Hernandez

Anthony Hernandez, Ed.M.

## Thinking It Through

Thorough preparation for applying to graduate school in any field includes examining your career interests, meeting with faculty members to review your academic strengths in terms of possible graduate programs, and familiarizing yourself with the graduate school information available. Graduate school applicants apply for funding at the same time as they prepare their applications.

## A Timeline: Applying to Graduate School in the Arts and Sciences

The timeline and documents in this guide describe the application process. While this timeline allows for exploration and preparation throughout your undergraduate years, these steps may begin in your senior year or following graduation.

### First, Sophomore and Junior Years

- Read, observe, and listen. Take advantage of conversations, lectures, and panels in which advisors, faculty members, alumnae, and others describe their experiences. Talk with faculty and ask for advice concerning graduate school. Specifically ask about graduate school preparation, researching and choosing schools, testing and admissions procedures, and financial aid.
- Try to take more than one course with a member of the faculty in your field of interest. Graduate schools are particularly interested in a student's academic development and the more a faculty member knows about your work, the more complex and detailed his/her evaluation of you is likely to be.
- Do not wait until your senior year to request letters of recommendation. If you have excelled in a course, request a letter of recommendation from that professor.
- Look for opportunities to do research in your field of interest either as part of your course work or as term or summer work.

## Spring/Summer Prior to Senior (or Application) Year

- Attend Graduate School/Fellowships meeting.
- Research programs. Use graduate directories and libraries to research potential graduate school programs. We recommend you read: *Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States*, *Educational Ranking Annual*, and *Peterson's Guide to Professional/Graduate Programs* which are among the most detailed. Visit graduate school and financial aid web sites.
- Discuss graduate programs of interest with faculty advisor(s).
- Determine guidelines for the application essay or personal statement in your proposed field of study. Draft a personal statement and begin to revise and rewrite with the assistance of faculty advisors.
- Find out which standardized tests you will be required to take. Research availability and registration processes. The GRE General Exam is now computerized, although the subject exams are still administered by pencil and paper (see the ETS web site for more information: [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)). The registration deadline is usually more than six weeks in advance. Review test material using a guide book (e.g., *Princeton Review*, *Barron's*, etc.) and/or attend test preparation classes offered on- or off-campus. Financial aid for these programs is available.

## Fall of Application Year

- Register for and take the required standardized tests. GRE and GMAT scores are accepted by graduate schools for up to five years. Many students feel more confident taking the test while they are still in college if they can prepare adequately, even if they do not plan to apply to graduate school at that time. Others, however, wait until their year of application.

## **September of Application Year**

- Attend meetings and workshops on graduate fellowships, researching graduate programs, and applying to graduate school, as well as the information sessions presented by graduate schools that visit campus.
- Request application materials from graduate programs you are considering.
- Ask your professors to write or update letters of recommendation. Give them material describing the programs to which you are applying and a draft of your personal statement. Ask for their advice in strengthening your essay.
- Investigate financial aid resources for graduate school. Be aware that most graduate programs make financial awards based on merit as well as financial need, so it is important to complete this part of the application process even if you believe you might not be eligible to receive financial aid.

## **November**

- Order academic transcripts from the Registrar's Office. (Find out if first semester grades will be recorded in time to meet school deadlines.)
- Request that letters of recommendation be sent to graduate programs.

## **December**

- Complete applications.

## **December/January**

- Plan to mail your applications early!

## **February**

- Consider visiting the graduate/professional schools to which you have been admitted.

## **April**

- Some financial aid programs may require that you file a copy of your federal income tax return.

## The Role of the Essay in a Competitive Selection Process

The application essay is a critical component in the selection process, whether it be for a competitive internship, a graduate fellowship, or admittance to a graduate school program. The essay or personal statement gives a selection committee its best opportunity to get to know you, how you think and make decisions, ways in which past experiences have been significant or formative, and how you envision your future.

The essay should have a structure: an introductory paragraph, a body that develops key themes, and a conclusion. Try to capture the reader's interest with your opening and draw the reader into the essay, however, avoid the temptation to be cute or contrived in writing. There should be a balance between discussion of your experience and future plans. Your essay should reflect your knowledge of the specific program to which you are applying and explain how this course of study will advance your goals and meet your needs. In addition, indicate what you will be able to contribute to the program. The essay is not intended to be a laundry list, but a focused and well-constructed presentation of your strengths and accomplishments.

In order to give a glimpse of yourself as an individual, use concrete examples to describe your goals and expectations instead of relying on generalities. Relate experiences that inspired you to continue in your field, achievements that have given you satisfaction and confidence, challenges and unanswered questions that have helped you determine your path.

Answer all questions you have been asked to address. Above all, remember who your readers are and be sure that your statement speaks to their concerns and priorities. If your essay is for graduate school, what are their requirements, what are their goals? If it is for a fellowship or internship, who has given the funds, what are their organizational goals, and what do they hope to accomplish in making the award? Any person or group offering such opportunities will want to select the individual most likely to give them a good return on their investment. They are looking for someone who will finish the program and go on to be successful in her career, someone who will enrich the experience of her peers and professors in the process.

Start writing early. The summer after your junior year is an ideal time to prepare first drafts of essays to be submitted during senior year. Plan to rewrite and revise your drafts several times, making good use of the suggestions of advisors and professors.

Finally, proofread. Misspelled words, typos and careless mistakes will overpower the best of essays. Without doubt, viable candidates have been eliminated from competitions solely because of their inattention to these important details. A successful application requires time for research, planning, and requesting the assistance of faculty and other available resources. The application essay is your opportunity to present yourself as a strong candidate—to show that you know yourself, have goals and a sense of direction, that you understand the action you propose to take, and feel confident in this decision.

## **Exploring Careers in Health**

*Note: This section is adapted from the Health Careers Handbook, written by Elaine Smith and Ellie Perkins and produced by the Medical Professions Advisory Committee (MPAC). This adapted information is not intended to replace the Handbook.*

Health care is one of the largest growing industries in the country with over 600 different health careers and more emerging every day. An assessment of your personal attitudes and values may lead to the decision that health care is best suited to your career objectives. In order to make an educated decision, be aware of the range of health care career choices.

While the requirements can be demanding, with careful planning you can meet the demands, study what you wish, and develop as a total human being. Take time to explore what you want and to learn what you feel is important to help you make the best possible decision for your future.



We recommend the following steps to explore and define your interests in a health career:

- Read literature, talk with people, and obtain practical experience to learn about different types of health careers. Read professional journals and periodicals in fields that interest you, and books that have been written about experiences in these areas.
- Attend lectures and workshops by professionals from various fields.
- After such exploration, it is likely that you will still have questions about what people really "do" on the job. Initiate an information interview or a shadow experience with an established alum in the field. Such experiences provide insight into the nature of various kinds of health occupations and help you to develop specific interests; they also help you test your strengths and weaknesses. They give you experience that strengthens and differentiates your application to a graduate program.
- Explore and discuss your interest with an advisor.

The role of advisors is to inform, advise, and help students make realistic plans for their future careers and involvement in a health field. During the year of interviewing and decision-making, advisors continue to aid students by writing additional letters, and helping to evaluate alternatives that may arise.

Discussions with advisors will allow you to explore your interests, values, future expectations, and dreams. They are valuable ways to learn more about the occupation, about appropriate professional schools, and to receive guidance on preparing your professional training application.

### **Meeting Course Requirements**

*Note: Preparation for medical school is addressed in this section primarily because it is fairly representative of procedures for the other health professions.*

You can positively influence your chances of getting into medical school both by the way you prepare as a premed and by the way you apply to medical school.

While some professional schools in the health fields require a minimum of three years of undergraduate college work, a majority of entering students have completed four years and have received the Bachelor's degree. Students must have a thorough understanding of the concepts of the physical and life sciences. *In general*, the following courses meet *minimum* requirements for most programs:

Biology: one year with laboratory

Inorganic Chemistry: one year with laboratory

Organic Chemistry: one year with laboratory

Physics: one year with laboratory

English: one year; both composition and literature may be required (Wellesley's Writing Program fulfills one semester of this?)

Mathematics: at least one-half year of calculus is recommended and in some cases required; some schools may require one full year.

Requirements for particular schools and programs vary, and some medical schools have additional requirements, such as biochemistry or an extra year of biology. It is *imperative* to investigate various catalogues and source books about the individual schools and programs in which you are interested. **No specific major (science or non-science) is required for medical school.**

Many schools encourage students to take several courses in the social sciences, particularly as they relate to social, political, and economic influences on health delivery systems. Course work in ethics and psychology are recommended. Some schools also suggest statistics, and some place importance on courses in genetics and biochemistry at the undergraduate level.

Become familiar with the standard literature in your field. For example, premedical students should read *Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR)*, a book available from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), Membership & Publication Orders, 2450 N Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037-1126. You may obtain your own copy by using the order form available in the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) registration packet.

Students who have received advanced placement in any of the required sciences are advised to use the equivalent time for advanced work in the same field (e.g., AP credit in inorganic chemistry should be augmented by an advanced chemistry course). Some professional schools specifically require college-level courses in particular disciplines. In some states, advanced placement for high school achievement in sciences does not meet licensure requirements in your health profession. If you have completed all requirements early in your college years, you might consider taking at least one science course a year to keep your knowledge current.

If you are considering a career in the health sciences now, it is important to take the pre-requisite courses as early as possible. For example, it is particularly important that you complete (or be completing) the basic science requirements before taking the MCAT or other standardized tests. Also, we suggest that you take English courses early to improve your ability to read, comprehend, and express your ideas clearly. In planning an undergraduate academic program, it is important to begin early to fulfill the minimum science requirements and to keep your options open for selecting a major. Be aware of the degree distribution requirements and confirm that you are fulfilling them as outlined in the college catalogue.

### **Deciding Later: Post-Baccalaureate Programs**

Some students decide to enter a health career late in their undergraduate years and are unable to fulfill premed requirements before graduation. Many universities have designed post-baccalaureate programs to meet the needs of liberal arts graduates whose interest in health careers solidified later in their undergraduate years. These programs vary greatly in structure, criteria used in candidate selection, and successful placements of graduates into medical school.

Post-degree students in the Continuing Education program should consult the MPAC for help in planning a program suited to their individual needs.

## **The Application Process**

The application process varies among different health professions. While this section focuses on medical school, much of the information is appropriate to other fields, specifically dentistry, veterinary science, and osteopathic medicine. Other fields in the health area, such as public health and clinical psychology, have admission requirements and deadlines more similar to graduate schools in the arts and sciences. In fields such as pharmacy, optometry, and podiatry, requirements fall somewhere in between these two. For specific information on other fields, check literature in that field.

## **Selecting Schools: Apply Widely and Wisely**

It is important to apply to a substantial number of schools. Successful applicants usually apply to approximately 15 schools. There is, however, no magic number. As a rule, apply only to those schools which offer a program compatible with your interests and to which you have a reasonable chance of gaining admission. Your advisor can be very helpful in assisting you in determining a list of schools which meet these criteria.

Factors to examine include:

- multi-track curriculum
- introduction to clinical work in the first or second year
- options for independent work, pass/fail grading
- number of electives
- opportunity for independent work
- community involvement
- record of graduates
- the school's basic philosophy

By studying published data and visiting specific schools, you can identify schools which have the type of program and curriculum of interest to you. For example, some medical schools are known for training practicing M.D.'s, others for training research-oriented doctors or specialists. A number of medical schools offer the option of completing training in three years while others grant advanced standing to students with Ph.D.'s and/or offer varied dual degree programs in selected departments (i.e., M.D./Ph.D., M.D./M.P.H.). To ascertain the availability of such programs consult the latest edition of the *AAMC Curriculum Directory*.

Careful application can make a difference. The list of medical schools to which you apply should be the result of careful research on your part. Generally, the following guidelines are helpful:

- Apply to your state medical school and/or schools.
- Apply to the private schools in your state and/or region.
- Apply to a selective group of private schools out of your state and region that vary in competitiveness for admissions.
- Apply to schools whose selection criteria fit your personal qualifications, including those where students from your undergraduate institution have a good record of admission.
- Do not apply to state medical schools which take 90% state residents if you are not a resident of that state, unless you have some special qualifications such as grade point average, family, or personal history.
- Do not apply to so many schools that you cannot keep up with the detailed application process.

### **State Residency**

State residency is probably the most influential factor in the school selection process. Applicants should always apply to public schools in their home state or regions since these schools give preference to state residents. When identifying the medical schools to which you should apply, look carefully at the percentages of in-and out-of-state applicants accepted at each school, both public and private. The *MSAR* spells out these rates in detail. If you are not a resident of a state with a medical school, it is particularly important to talk to your advisor about regional preference. If you do not have state residency, careful application is even more important.

**Note: Legal definition of state residency varies from state to state. Therefore, it is best to check with a specific program concerning its residency requirements.**

Enrollment as a full-time student in another state does not ordinarily affect resident status in your home state as long as you maintain your permanent address in that state. It is possible, however, to be eligible for legal residency in more than one state, depending on the requirements of those states. If you are in this position, carefully research medical school admissions, regional and state residency requirements, and contractual arrangements. Some states have more opportunities to study medicine than others.

Financial considerations are often reason for applying to state schools. Many states have opened their doors to more out-of-state students; in addition, after completing one year of medical school, these students are often considered in-state residents for tuition payments.

It is also important to check the profiles of entering classes and guard against applying only to schools that fit the same pattern of selection, both state and private. In all cases, careful selection can improve your chance of acceptance.

### **Early Decision Programs**

If you have a strong record and a particular interest in one school you may wish to apply through the Early Decision Program. Under this program, an application can be filed with only one school. Applications must be completed earlier than the deadline—usually by August 1—and the school promises a decision by October 1. The disadvantages of this plan lie in the necessity of submitting "late" applications to other schools if you are not accepted into your Early Decision program.

### **Foreign Medical Schools**

Many applicants consider applying to foreign medical schools as an alternative to U.S. schools. While some foreign medical schools offer a good education, other foreign medical schools open to U.S. citizens provide little or no personal attention and utilize teaching practices which are by no means equivalent to U.S. schools. (There are growing numbers of schools which appear to have been established to exploit U.S. students.) Because the situation with foreign medical schools is complex, it is critical to discuss foreign medical schools directly with an advisor before applying.

## **For Minority Students**

In recent years, medical schools throughout the U.S. have instituted special admissions programs and procedures designed to remedy the critical shortage of minority physicians. Most medical schools continue to recruit qualified minority candidates. Several systems of identification and screening of minority applications have been developed. A minority student may contact the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) which circulates a list of minority students (entitled Medical Minority Applicants Register [MED-MAR]) to all U.S. medical schools at no charge. Students can have their names listed by declaring their minority status at the MCAT examination and on the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) application.

## **Financing Medical School**

Tuition and expenses for medical school have increased dramatically in the past decade. Familiarize yourself early with the costs of medical school education and sources of financial aid. The actual process of applying for and securing financial aid, however, cannot be initiated until after you are accepted into a medical school. At that time, contact the financial aid officers at the medical school. Request complete, up-to-date information about estimated costs, including tuition, fees, supplies, microscope, and living costs, the types of financial assistance available and the application process.

There are two major types of financial aid: scholarships, which do not have to be repaid, and loans, which must be repaid. The amount of loan money available, the interest rate, and the terms of repayment of loan programs differ and should be carefully evaluated. Much of the financial aid loan money is supplied by the federal government directly to the medical school which, in turn, awards aid to medical students (e.g., Health Professions Student Loan Program). Other federal programs encourage banks and other private lending institutions to make loans to medical students (e.g., Health Education Assistance Loan Programs, Guaranteed Student Loan Programs).

There are also programs that finance medical school education in return for repayment in the form of service after the receipt of the M.D. degree; the most prominent of these is the Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarships Program. When considering these programs, investigate them fully to understand the details of the contract before committing yourself.

Many states have programs of financial assistance available to state residents. For information, contact the medical school financial aid officer or the State Department of Education.

Loans and scholarship funds are also available to medical students from a variety of philanthropic, civic, and medical organizations. In most cases application is made directly to the agency. Although these sources of financial aid are not administered by the medical schools, the applicant can obtain information about them from the medical school financial aid offices, or by writing directly to the agencies (e.g., American Medical Association, American Medical Women's Association, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National Medical Fellowships, Inc.).

Financial aid assistance is usually awarded on the basis of demonstrated need. Typically students must provide the same information required by undergraduate financial aid officers. Financial analysis generally requires the following information: amount of financial resources available, income and assets of parents (regardless of age, marital status, and prior independent status of applicants), and a proposed budget for the coming year.

## **The Medical School Application Process: A Timeline**

### **November/December/January** *before application year*

- Those applying to medical, dental, veterinary, optometry, podiatry, or osteopathic medical schools for the following year should meet with their advisor to plot a course for their efforts. Defining roles and expectations in the advising process early on is vital to success of the application process.



## **February**

- Request recommendations from faculty if you have not already done so.
- Prepare for the MCAT. Take the spring MCAT, if possible, rather than waiting until the fall. MCAT and Dental Admission Test (DAT) Registration Packets are available from the Committee Coordinator.

## **March/April**

- Meet with your advisor, turn in your resume and applicant summary.
- Request AMCAS applications

## **May**

- Write to non-AMCAS schools to request application forms, catalogues, and financial aid information. All applications should be filled out and submitted as soon as possible.

## **June**

- Deadline for faculty recommendations. It is the applicant's responsibility to make sure that the faculty member provides the letters in time.
- Since AMCAS expects to receive all transcripts prior to the receipt of the AMCAS form, contact the Registrar before you leave campus to arrange to have your records sent to AMCAS. Obtain a personal copy of your transcript to use in completing the AMCAS application. Request transcripts for each college in the United States and Canada you have attended (including summer school).
- It is important to start your AMCAS application proceedings as soon as possible. AMCAS will accept applications after June 1. Submit yours as soon thereafter as possible.

## **Summer**

- Begin work on your application essay. Your objectives in writing your application are to provide information requested by the school and to convey information you feel is important. Explain interruptions in your education or poor grades. Express yourself concisely, clearly, and positively. On

non-AMCAS applications do not hesitate to attach an appendix or extra page. Correct spelling, grammar, and sentence structure is essential. Your advisor will be happy to provide you with feedback on your essay.

## **Fall**

- It is your responsibility to check with the schools to determine whether your application file is complete. A file consists of your application and transcripts, usually a secondary application, and application fee. It is advisable to keep copies of all materials sent and to check on your application periodically by telephone or letter.

## **November/December/January** *of the application year*

- By late fall and early winter you should begin to receive requests for interviews. If you have not, check with your advisor.
- You may wish to write additional letters, particularly after you have received your first semester grades. If you have had interviews, but have not received an acceptance, write additional update letters informing them of your grades, your progress on special projects, etc.

## **March and Beyond**

- This is the time to make decisions based on the information you have to date. If you have not been interviewed you will want to work with your advisor to develop a strategy for this year's and/or next year's plans. If you have been interviewed, but have not been accepted, you will want to inform schools of your continued interest. If you have been accepted at several schools, during the spring you will want to choose well from among your alternatives. Once you have been accepted at a school you plan to attend, do not keep your files active at schools which no longer interest you. It is unfair to other students who are waiting to hear.

## **Selected Internet and Library Resources**

The best sources of information is the Association of American Medical Colleges, specifically, **Medical School Admissions Requirements and Association of American Medical Colleges.**

## Law School

### Overview and Preparation

Qualification for the legal profession requires three years of law school to earn the J.D. degree and the successful completion of a state bar examination. In preparation for law school, a student will want to develop three basic competencies:

- skill in analysis and reasoning
- effective writing and speaking skills
- a broad understanding of the diverse factors which make up the community in which the legal system functions

These competencies can be developed in any field in which a student chooses to major — the social sciences, the humanities, or the natural sciences. Law schools do not specify particular major fields or particular courses of study for admission. A strong transcript that reflects a challenging and well-rounded liberal arts education will be more impressive to a law school than any specific major.

In the year prior to applying to law school, a candidate should begin to consider specific law schools with particular regard to type (private, state), size, location, opportunities for clinical work, programs of special interest, arrangements for financial assistance, and a realistic assessment of her chances for admission based on academic performance and test scores.

Many students decide to postpone application to law school for a year or more after graduation. In fact, the average age of law students is 26.

### Common Questions about the Law School Application Process

#### *What do law schools evaluate? What are the most important admissions criteria?*

The LSAT and GPA are the key criteria for admissions. The GPA is calculated on a 4.0 system and includes your first-year grades. Studies have shown the GPA and LSAT scores are the most valid predictors of first year law performance.

Other factors distinguish among candidates of equal numerical qualifications. They include your course of study (pass-fail grades should be at a minimum), quality of your college (this assessment is not based on a specific uniform formula), an improvement in grades over the course of the undergraduate experience, letters of reference, personal statement, college activities, experiences after graduation, and ethnic background. Law schools vary in the weight they give these factors. Some law schools do not require recommendations at all. In the most competitive schools, post-graduate work experience is not likely to offset poor grades and/or a low LSAT score.

### ***What should I major in? What courses should I take?***

Undergraduates considering law school often ask which major will assure admission to law school. What courses do law school admissions officers look for? Law schools do not require any particular course of study or undergraduate major as preparation for the study of law. The choice of a major is far less important than the intensity and rigor with which the student studies.

Many advisors recommend taking a few quantitative courses such as math, physical sciences, economics, or statistics. Courses that focus on research, writing, and analysis of dense texts may prove valuable. Extracurricular activities that involve debating, public speaking, or any sort of writing are helpful as well.

All students should be familiar with the important forces in the historical development of American government, including having a grasp of the chronology of the most important events in American and world history.

### ***When should I take the LSAT?***

Students planning to attend law school after graduation should take the LSAT in June of the junior year. This makes it possible to select law schools earlier in the application process. November is the last preferred month for submitting applications. If you take the December test, you will probably be applying to schools without test results and will miss the chance for rolling admissions.

Those planning to apply some time after graduation need to keep in mind that while some schools will accept scores up to five years, others will have a limit of three years. You need only register for the LSDAS service in the year that you are planning to apply. Further information on the details of the LSAT and LSDAS can be obtained from reading the *LSAT/LSDAS Registration & Information Book* available in the CWS, or online at [www.LSAC.org](http://www.LSAC.org).

***How should I prepare for the LSAT?***

A motivated applicant can adequately prepare for the test by using the Official LSAT Sample Prep Tests. Some candidates find that commercial study guides or videos are helpful. (Be sure to check whether the edition you buy is geared to the version of the test in current use.) Commercial prep courses are very expensive and while there are no data that assess their positive impact, some applicants feel these courses provide the confidence and discipline they need. (Note: Major commercial prep courses offer financial aid.) Decide how much outside assistance you need, based on your previous experiences with standardized tests and using the practice LSAT as a guide.

***If I am unhappy with my test scores, should I retake the test?***

Most people take the test only once. In 2003, for example, 80 percent of the total number of test takers took the LSAT just one time. After reviewing your answer sheet, which you will receive with your test results, you may decide that you really can improve your performance. Consider all factors carefully in making your decision to retake the test. A few added points will usually be attributed to familiarity with the test and will probably not enhance your chances. Law Services will automatically report the results of all LSATs in your file, including cancellations and absences, for the last five years. An average score is calculated and reported when more than one reportable score is on file.

***When should I apply? Should I consider taking time off before law school?***

If you are applying for fall admission, your application should be complete and ready for consideration by November of the year prior to the anticipated September entry date. "Complete" means your transcript and LSAT score are on file as well as your recommendations and a completed, typed application and application fee. An official transcript must be requested directly from the Registrar's Office. Your chances of admission are better early in the decision-making process. Whatever the circumstances, be sure to meet deadlines (most commonly between January 15 and March 15) and allow plenty of time for recommenders to meet those deadlines.

You may want to consider taking some time off before applying to law school. This would make it possible to submit a full senior year's transcript with any honors you may have received. It would also give you a break from school and an opportunity to explore other career options. The average age of law school students is 26.

***To what law school should I apply?***

Research information resources. Look at law school catalogs like *The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools*. Make a list based on location, size, cost, general reputation. Consider those law schools whose student body profiles most closely match yours. Use grids in *The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools* and *NAPLA Law School Locator* to estimate your chances. State schools usually give preference to residents. If you know the geographic area in which you are going to practice and are not competitive at top-ranked "national" schools, apply to local schools. Check *Martindale-Hubbell*, a directory of law firms worldwide, to see where lawyers in your chosen geographic region have attended law school.

***To how many schools should I apply?***

On the average, undergraduates usually apply to six to ten schools. Applicants should check acceptance grids and choose a cross section of schools including those where acceptance chances are strong along with a few back-up or "safety" schools. You will also probably want to apply to one or two "long shot" schools.

***Should I waive my right to read my letters of recommendation?***

In general, both the admissions officers at the law school and prelaw advisors respect your waiver of right to access your letters of reference. If you choose not to waive your right of access, you should know that most law schools will not take your letters as seriously as confidential letters.

The kind of reference that law schools find most useful addresses directly the candidate's intellectual and analytical abilities, research and writing skills, and motivation for the study of law.

***What do law schools want to see in a personal statement?***

Some law schools will ask specific questions. Be sure to answer all of them. Other schools give you an opportunity to say whatever you want about yourself that distinguishes you from the rest of the applicant pool. Write the statement as if you were having a personal interview. What would you say if you were asked, "Tell me about yourself." Use your essay to say something that is not evident elsewhere in your application. This is your opportunity to talk about your unique interests whether academic or extracurricular, a person who has been a role model or mentor (be careful to write the essay about yourself, and not entirely about the other person) or an unusual and compelling life experience. If you have overcome serious obstacles, tell the admissions committee. If you have had a poor academic record, but can offer some tangible evidence that you are a "new person," do so. It is advisable, however, not to address such a weakness in your essay. An addendum would be preferable.

Good writing, grammar, and perfect spelling are essential. Let your personality come through. Remember, the essay is your opportunity to let the admissions committee know why you would make a unique contribution to the student body. For further suggestions see *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement* by Donald Asher. See also [The Role of the Essay in a Competitive Selection Process](#).

***Is it possible to defer admission to law school?***

Some schools will require you to reapply if you choose not to enter immediately. Others will defer admission for a year. You must check with each school. If you are certain you do not plan to attend in a given year, do not apply.

***If I take time off what kind of a job should I get?***

Approximately 60% of first-year law students have taken time off before entering law school. They work in a wide variety of jobs in every field. Taking time to explore the world of work and to carefully consider your future plans is important. This choice should not be made because you think it will enhance your chances of admission.

Some prelaw candidates find it useful to experience the atmosphere of a law firm or other legal environment to assist in their decision-making about a legal career. Others prefer to work in another field and conduct information interviews with lawyers in various specialties and settings, attend some law classes, and perhaps "shadow" a lawyer to see what a typical day is like.

For an excellent overview of the admission and application process, see *The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools*, published annually by the Law School Admissions Council.



## A Timeline for Applying to Law School

### **May** *before the application year*

- Be sure to review Law School Preparation and Application Process.
- Pick up the Law School Admissions Council's *LSAT/LSDAS Registration & Information Book*, through which you can register for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS). You can also register by phone or go to www.LSAC.org.
- Register for late spring/summer LSAT.

### **June** *before application year*

- Take the LSAT.

### **August** *before application year*

- If you have not already taken the LSAT, use the registration form in the *LSAT/LSDAS Registration & Information Book* or register online for the October LSAT. (Application deadline is in early September. Late registration with an additional fee has a postmark deadline one week later. You may also register later by telephone or online using a credit card.)
- Order LSAT and LSDAS services.
- Visit www.LSAC.org to view law school Web sites or write to law schools for catalogs and applications.

### **September/October** *of the application year*

- Order transcript from Registrar. Have transcript(s) sent to LSDAS using LSDAS Transcript Request forms in the *LSAT/LSDAS Registration & Information Book*.
- Prepare for the LSAT by reading thoroughly the *LSAT/LSDAS Registration & Information Book*. Take the sample test on a timed basis. Additional practice materials may be ordered from Law Services online or by using the order form in the *Information Book*.
- Don't wait for your scores to start reading catalogs and *The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools* available in the Center for Work and Service Library. You may order your own copy of this publication using the order form in the *Information Book* or by going online at www.LSAC.org.

- Attend on-campus law school informational meetings and law school forums throughout the fall.
- Work on your application and your essay.
- Check each application and determine what references are required. Some law schools require a dean's form (college questionnaire or certification). Determine if you must provide a dean's form for each educational institution attended (undergraduate and graduate) or from your degree-granting undergraduate institution only. If you are an undergraduate, the Dean provides this for all schools requiring one (except Harvard Law, which requires the signature of the Dean of Students on its form).
- Allow your recommenders ample time to complete their evaluations by the deadline. Note whether the law school requires recommendations to be submitted directly or compiled by you and included with your application materials.
- LSDAS will send up to three letters of reference with no additional fee to LSDAS-participating schools to which you apply.

## **November**

- Approximately five weeks after you take the LSAT, Law Services will mail your LSAT report to you, indicating your current test results and the results of any previous tests for which you registered in the last five years. An average score is also calculated and reported when you have more than one reportable score. You can learn your score by e-mail or via Telescore (\$10 fee) in about three weeks.
- Complete and submit applications by Thanksgiving. Those who took the June LSAT should be able to submit even earlier. Many schools have rolling admissions and it is always better to apply early.
- Law Services will send you a Master Law School Report once all of your undergraduate transcripts have been received and the LSDAS summary has been completed. Check the biographical and academic information on the report carefully and report any inaccuracies to Law Services.
- If you were unable to take the October test, register for the December exam in November. Note that the time between the October and the December test administrations probably will not permit you to receive October scores before December registration deadlines.

## **November/December**

- Many law schools send acknowledgment cards when your file is complete. If you have not received this card within nine or ten weeks from the time the application should have been received, inquire about its status. Follow up on any problems.

## **January**

- Undergraduates should send seventh semester grades to Law Services. If law schools request these grades, Law Services will issue a new report.

## **February - May**

- Acceptances and rejections begin to arrive, although some schools with rolling admissions will notify you of your status earlier. As soon as you are admitted to the law school of your choice, notify all other law schools that you are withdrawing your application.

## **The Role of the Essay in a Competitive Selection Process**

The application essay is a critical component in the selection process, whether it be for a competitive internship, a graduate fellowship, or admittance to a graduate school program. The essay or personal statement gives a selection committee its best opportunity to get to know you, how you think and make decisions, ways in which past experiences have been significant or formative, and how you envision your future.

The essay should have a structure: an introductory paragraph, a body that develops key themes, and a conclusion. Try to capture the reader's interest with your opening and draw the reader into the essay, however, avoid the temptation to be cute or contrived in writing. There should be a balance between discussion of your experience and future plans. Your essay should reflect your knowledge of the specific program to which you are applying and explain how this course of study will advance your goals and meet your needs. In addition, indicate what you will be able to contribute to the program. The essay is not intended to be a laundry list, but a focused and well-constructed presentation of your strengths and accomplishments.

In order to give a glimpse of yourself as an individual, use concrete examples to describe your goals and expectations instead of relying on generalities. Relate experiences that inspired you to continue in your field, achievements that have given you satisfaction and confidence, challenges and unanswered questions that have helped you determine your path.

Answer all questions you have been asked to address. Above all, remember who your readers are and be sure that your statement speaks to their concerns and priorities. If your essay is for graduate school, what are their requirements, what are their goals? If it is for a fellowship or internship, who has given the funds, what are their organizational goals, and what do they hope to accomplish in making the award? Any person or group offering such opportunities will want to select the individual most likely to give them a good return on their investment. They are looking for someone who will finish the program and go on to be successful in her career, someone who will enrich the experience of her peers and professors in the process.

Start writing early. The summer after your junior year is an ideal time to prepare first drafts of essays to be submitted during senior year. Plan to rewrite and revise your drafts several times, making good use of the suggestions of advisors and professors.

Finally, proofread, proofread, proofread. Misspelled words, typos and careless mistakes will overpower the best of essays. Without doubt, viable candidates have been eliminated from competitions solely because of their inattention to these important details. A successful application requires time for research, planning, and requesting the assistance of faculty and other available resources. The application essay is your opportunity to present yourself as a strong candidate—to show that you know yourself, have goals and a sense of direction, that you understand the action you propose to take, and feel confident in this decision.

## Getting References

### Guidelines for Faculty Writing Law School References

*The following guidelines are meant to be a resource for faculty in writing law school letters of reference. We encourage students to provide a copy of this section to faculty members who are writing letters of reference for them.*

The purpose of this section is simply to pass on suggestions made at meetings of law advisors and admissions officers, **not** to tell faculty how to write references. Generally, most schools supply forms which outline the information they seek. Because it is often impossible for the writer to fill out each one individually, almost all schools will accept a general letter appended to the form, which allows you to write one letter to be sent to all of the applicant's schools.

References for law school provide assistance to all candidates. They are particularly important when admissions committees have to choose among applicants whose grades and scores are similar. The schools need to know what in an applicant's background, classroom work, extracurricular activities, or other work experience makes her unique and what distinguishes her from other applicants whose grades and LSAT scores may be in the same range.

Law schools look for: motivation for law, high intelligence, superior analytical and critical thinking, curiosity, persistence, realism, flexibility, independence, self-discipline, stability, high competitiveness, and integrity. The views below, taken from "Recommendation Letters," written by Richard Badger, Assistant Dean, University of Chicago Law School, express the sentiments of many admissions committees:

Legal education and the legal profession...emphasize some skills over others and the following comments may help writers who are not familiar with these distinctions:

Language is the lawyer's working tool and the best law students are those who have the ability to write and speak with precision, fluency and economy. Not only must the student be able to communicate his or her own thoughts clearly, but he or she must have the ability to read and listen carefully with an eye and ear for fine points and subtle distinctions.

Legal education demands well developed analytical skills and the ability to juggle multiple variables. Legal reasoning at one time or another involves deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning and reasoning by analogy. The best students can think independently, have the ability to cut through to the essentials and can distinguish the relevant from the extraneous. Contrary to what many believe about the law, there are few clear and distinct legal rules. A tolerance for this ambiguity and the ability to recognize exceptions and qualifications which may modify general rules are characteristics of successful law students. In short, a reference should consider whether an applicant is likely to be stimulated or frustrated by questions where there are no *correct* answers.

The nature of legal education-- large classes, competitive pressure, and substantial amounts of material to be mastered-- may make some personality traits more important in law school than in other academic programs. Students will often learn as much from their classmates as from the faculty. Thus, interaction among students is an important feature of legal education and those who enjoy engaging in discussion in and outside of class are more likely to flourish in this atmosphere. The student who is intellectually alive and curious is more likely to sustain academic progress where there is little reinforcement between examinations. A student must be diligent and well organized to handle large quantities of material. A well developed sense of humor and a mature attitude are particularly helpful in adjusting to the pressures which many students will experience in law school.

A good letter of reference will discuss how long and in what capacity you have known the applicant, her strengths and weaknesses, any unusual aspects of the applicant's background that might contribute to or hinder academic work, and knowledge of any extracurricular activities the applicant has pursued during the college years. Discuss the applicant's academic background in greater detail than a listing of courses. If you know that she has taken the most rigorous academic series, or has chosen to complete a very demanding individual project, relate these matters to the admissions committee. Some valid information may come more gracefully from you than from the applicant. The applicant may have gotten a B in a very difficult course, when B was the highest grade given. She may have been the most effective student member of a committee. She may have had a bad semester for valid personal reasons. She may have carried job responsibilities going well beyond what the job title indicates. Such information may be difficult for the applicant to state without sounding immodest or defensive.

Admissions officers really want to know what a person is like. They also know that most candidates are not fully formed. It is better to allow the applicant some room to grow rather than to present her as a flawless paragon. Specific examples are more valuable than generalities.

Finally, while we realize that writing a letter according to these suggestions is a time consuming task, the timely submission of your reference is vital to the application process.

## **Getting References**

### **Letters of Reference: Information for Students**

#### **Guidelines for Requesting Faculty References**

Faculty members are faced with numerous requests to write letters of reference on behalf of students. For this reason, it is wise to allow at least two months for a professor to prepare a letter. If special circumstances such as an unexpected opportunity require shorter notice, ask whether it will be possible for him/her to meet your deadline. When requesting a letter of reference, it is helpful to set up an appointment with the professor to discuss your plans. In order to facilitate what is a time-consuming process, always provide a potential referee with appropriate information to help in writing a letter about you. Suggestions are listed below. It is important to remember that faculty members are not required to write these letters, so be careful to give them the option to decline. They may feel they do not know you well enough, or that your record is not strong enough for admission to a given program.

#### ***Faculty will find it useful to have the following information:***

1. A resume or fact sheet about you. You might wish to add to this a brief narrative highlighting talents, skills, and experiences, such as a particularly rigorous part of your record, the leadership roles which you have held, or an unusual study or travel experience.
2. A transcript and a list of courses you took with the faculty member and grade(s) received.
3. Copies of particularly good papers or exams submitted to the faculty member with their comments and grades.

4. Guidelines for the intellectual/personal qualities the program/fellowship or employment for which you are applying seeks in its applicants. If you are applying to graduate school in the faculty's academic discipline, this is not necessary. If you are applying for a job or internship, provide a description of the position and the organization.
5. A personal statement if required by the program.
6. ***Think carefully about whether or not you want to waive your right to read your letter of reference.*** While admissions officers respect that it is within your legal right not to sign a waiver, some schools may take confidential letters more seriously.
7. A copy of these guidelines.

**Please note:** If you are asking a faculty member to attach his or her letter of reference to a graduate school application form, be sure that you have accurately and completely filled out that form.

### Further Resources for Graduate and Professional Study

**American Association of Colleges of Nursing:** <http://www.aacn.nche.edu>

**American Dental Education Association:** <http://www.aads.jhu.edu>

**American Physical Therapy Association:** <http://www.APTA.org>

**Association of American Medical Colleges:** <http://www.aamc.org>

(Information on medical education, health issues, registering for the MCAT and AMCAS and links to web sites of member medical schools)

**Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges:** <http://aavmc.org>

**The Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry:**

<http://www.opted.org>

**Council on International Education:** <http://www.ciee.org/>

**Grad Schools:** <http://www.gradschools.com>

**Law School Admission Council Services:** <http://www.LSAC.org>

(Information on legal education, registering for the LSAT and LSDAS, and links to web sites of member law schools)

**MBA Explorer:** <http://www.gmac.com>

**Peterson's Education Center:** <http://www.petersons.com/>

**Study Abroad:** <http://www.studyabroad.com>



## Epilogue

Some people let life happen by chance. They wait for opportunities to present themselves and take advantage of them as best they can. Others let someone else make decisions for them. They follow the path that is recommended to them by a parent, a friend, or a teacher.

Some people take charge of their futures and forge their own path. These individuals seek to understand their own unique interests, values, and abilities. They explore a wide range of possibilities and develop opportunities that enable them to use their talents to make a worthwhile contribution to society. Their efforts demonstrate that taking charge of the future and making thoughtful life choices can be an exciting adventure.

As you undertake graduate school exploration, it is not necessary or desirable to make a lifetime career choice. It may be that the career field that you choose now will be the field that you will work within for the rest of your life. Or it may be that with time your values and interests will change and you will shift to a different field of work. Careers can be like the digging of a canal: steady progress along a well-defined and predetermined canal. Or they can be like trees growing and developing into unique shapes as they reach for the sun.

To find a station in life that gives you the opportunity to work towards objectives that you value and challenges you to develop your talents, you need information about yourself: your values, interests, abilities, and goals. You also need information about a variety of fields: the tasks, people, work environments, social impact, and rewards. By integrating information about yourself and about potential vocations, you will be able to set priorities and evaluate options and thus make informed and intelligent choices.