

# **PreLaw Handbook**



**Washington University  
College of Arts & Sciences**

## Introduction

This handbook is primarily for seniors and others who are applying to law school this year. It should also be useful for juniors and younger students who are looking ahead toward the time they complete their applications.

This book does not address the fundamental question of whether law school and a career in law is a good choice for the reader. Although the question is vitally important, this issue is very much an individual matter that does not lend itself to discussion in a book of this kind. Legal education and a career in law can be challenging and satisfying, but law school and the practice of law are not for everyone. There are books on reserve at the library that can help you to explore this question, and we would encourage you to talk to lawyers, law students, judges, law school admissions officers, Career Center personnel, and anyone else who you think may give you some insight as to whether a career in law is right for you.

Throughout the book you will see quotations like the one in the shaded box below:

*“Law school is hard, it is frustrating, it is designed to break you down and then build you up so you think like a lawyer. It is not fun, but there are good parts, and if you know how you want to use [a legal education], it is worth it.”* Georgetown 2L

These are from students at a variety of law schools. Each received his/her undergraduate degree from Washington University. The designation “1L,” “2L,” or “3L” denotes first, second, or third-year law student, respectively.

Keep in mind the big picture: like any good employer, law schools are looking for smart, hard-working, and interesting people to add to their communities. It is your job to become as strong as possible in each of these dimensions; by doing so, you make yourself more appealing to many different law schools.

Good luck!

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## Academic Preparation

The two most important factors law schools consider in deciding whom to admit are the undergraduate **grade point average (GPA)** and the **score on the LSAT**. (The LSAT is a four-hour timed exam, usually taken at the end of the junior year or the beginning of the senior year. More on the LSAT later, see page 4.) There is no better preparation for law school than taking tough undergraduate courses and doing well in them.

Creating the undergraduate academic record starts in the first semester of the first year. It is important to get settled academically and make your academic work your highest priority from the beginning.

Select a **major** (or majors) in an area that interests you, and do well. Many law school applicants have majors in political science, English, history, economics, or philosophy, but law schools also welcome students with majors in science, engineering, the arts, or business. A technical or scientific background can be helpful for lawyers who specialize in environmental issues or patent law, for example. It is important to take **courses that require lots of writing** and **courses that train you to think analytically**. *If you repeatedly don't fare well in these types of courses, strongly reconsider whether law school is the right path for you.*

*"The great thing about law school is that you can bring any academic background and apply the law to it. I would, however, suggest at least introductory courses in economics, political science, and ethics." Georgetown 2L*

**Minimize your use of each of the following:** pass-fail grading, course withdrawals, and incompletes. Too many of these marks on your transcript will give the admissions committee (and potential employers) pause.

Do not focus exclusively on law-related courses. It's fine to take some of these as an opportunity to test your level of interest, but save law study for law school. Use your undergraduate years as a time to **acquire a broad education**. Particularly if you ultimately choose not to pursue a legal career, you will be thankful for a well-rounded and practical curriculum.

*"Take classes that make you think. If you're going to be studying law for three years, spend undergrad taking non-law classes which interest you...try to be as well-rounded as possible. PreLaw classes don't help once you get to law school. The classes you'll regret not taking are Shakespeare or philosophy or art history or psychology." University of Chicago 3L*

Learning a **foreign language** and **studying abroad** are wonderful opportunities to pursue during your undergraduate years. The law, like everything else, deals increasingly with global concerns, and the ability to communicate in a language other than English can be valuable. Studying abroad is often a student's most memorable college experience. Do not choose to study abroad, however, if your motivation is solely to enhance your chances of admission to law school – it won't make that much difference to the law schools.

*“I wish I’d continued in a foreign language [as an undergraduate]. There are some great study abroad programs, but I am limited to the English speaking ones.”* Columbia 1L

If you are eligible, consider completing an **honors thesis** in your major field. In addition to graduating with Latin honors (*summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, etc.), you will have the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member to conduct original research and create a significant piece of writing.

*“[An honors thesis is] a good opportunity to work on your critical reasoning and writing skills, develop a close relationship with a professor, and learn how to tackle large projects in small pieces. All three of these are good preparation for law school.”* Harvard 1L

But remember: know yourself. **Honors theses are worthy projects to take on, but they are not for everyone.** You should be fully committed to the subject matter and effort of the honors thesis; otherwise, it could hurt you in the application process. If writing a thesis detracts from work you need to do in other classes, or if you end up writing a less-than-stellar thesis, your academic record will be negatively affected. Thus, if you choose to write a thesis, be certain that you have the motivation and time to be fully invested intellectually in the research endeavor. Otherwise, you will be better served by taking an independent study (typically only one semester, instead of an entire year) **or** a rigorous set of courses that interest you.

If you are entering your senior year and **your GPA has been affected by a poor start** at Washington University (perhaps you began as a pre-med student and then changed direction after freshman year), **consider waiting to apply until after you have graduated** (see page 6.) Remember that law school isn’t going anywhere, and your chances for admission could potentially be much greater with an additional strong year of academic work on record.

If you want to convince admissions officers that you are indeed intellectually and emotionally ready for the rigors of law school, waiting to apply until after you graduate gives you additional “evidence” to support that argument – they will have more classes to view. It also gives you a chance to raise your overall GPA (because the senior year grades will be factored in), **and** you will have the opportunity to get to know more professors who might write you letters of recommendation. At the very least, if you want to apply during your senior year, make sure you send in fall grades to LSAC once grades are submitted in December.

## **Internships and Extracurriculars**

Use internship opportunities to test your interest in law and to gain some experience in different workplace settings. Well-chosen internships can help you learn what kind of working environments you like, and whether law practice or other law-related work appeals to you. It’s just as important to determine what you don’t like as it is to determine what you do like. Investigate internship possibilities at the Career Center, [careers.wustl.edu](http://careers.wustl.edu) or 314.935.5930.

*“An internship with a legal aid firm really showed me the reality of practicing law – the good, the bad, etc. It also provided me with some contacts that have been very helpful.”*  
Tulane 2L

As with study abroad, choose an internship for its value to you, not because you think it will enhance your chances of being admitted to law school. How much will a law-related internship mean to the law schools? One admissions dean's answer: "As much as it meant to you." One good guiding principle is that if you have choices, you should **select the internship that gives you the most responsibility**. It will undoubtedly lead to better future job choices, and it will give you more to comment on should you apply to law school. It is also important to realize that for some people, interning at a law firm may not be very interesting (see quotation below.) If you have no other means of exposure to law firm life, however, it could be helpful to experience this before you apply to law school.

*"Working in a law firm over summers gave me some rudimentary understanding of what was in store, but nothing substantive. I think that working in either business or government would probably be more helpful."* Columbia 2L

Extracurricular endeavors can help you develop organizational, leadership, and public speaking skills that are valuable to law students and lawyers. Law school admissions officials are interested in applicants who have made a serious commitment to one or more activities and have taken on significant responsibilities within organizations. **The quality of your commitment** is always of more value than the quantity of your involvement. Being a leader of one organization is typically viewed more highly than being a member of several. This is particularly true if that leadership role overlaps with your intellectual interests and/or community service work. For example, if you direct a campus organization that mentors juvenile offenders and you want to be a legal advocate for children, then your law school application will likely be more focused.

Do not, however, participate in extracurriculars to the exclusion of your academic work. **A long list of community service work or extracurricular experiences cannot replace a strong academic record.** By the same token, pursuing a high GPA to the exclusion of any work, extracurricular, or community service experiences can raise eyebrows. Remember that admissions committees are looking for smart, hard-working, and interesting people. If you have a strong GPA but nothing else in your file, you might be perceived as smart, but you will not be perceived as a strong communitarian or particularly interesting. **Find the right balance.**

*"[Legal] employers are very interested in extracurriculars, especially those exhibiting leadership skills and initiative."* Harvard Law School alumnus

Think ahead to when you might be interviewing for jobs **after** law school. If you have proceeded to law school immediately after graduating from Wash U, then potential employers will want to know that you have had some significant work, internship, or other experiences. The person interviewing you might be 20 years your senior, and to the extent that you have some record to comment and reflect on, you will be perceived as more mature than your peers. This can only improve your employability (see page 6 for more on this.)

## LSAC, LSAT and CAS

The Law School Admissions Council (**LSAC**) is a corporation that coordinates and facilitates law school admissions processes. Everything you need to know about the law school admissions process is available on the LSAC web site at [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org). LSAC oversees the Law School Admission Test (**LSAT**) and the Credential Assembly Service (**CAS**).

The **LSAT** is required by ABA-approved law schools for admission and is given four times a year. The LSAT score is very important to law school admissions officers. A 1997 study by the American Bar Association reported that most law schools weight the LSAT between 55 and 65 percent, and the undergraduate GPA 45 to 55 percent, of the “index scores” they use to make an initial sort of applicant files. While that study is dated, no one is arguing that the LSAT score and the GPA continue to be the two most important factors in law school admissions decisions – and that the LSAT score is generally the more important of the two.

*“Take an LSAT prep course -- the better your score, the better chance you have of getting a scholarship!”* Washington University 1L

The test consists of five 35-minute timed multiple choice sections: one on reading comprehension, one on analytical thinking, two on logical reasoning, and a fifth “experimental” section. There is also a section that seeks a writing sample. **Careful preparation** for the test is essential. **Plan to take it just once and give it your best effort.** How you prepare (by taking a test prep class or working on your own) is up to you, but do not take the test without a lot of practice. There is no substitute for taking previously used, real LSAT exams (available from LSAC or test prep providers) under realistic, timed conditions. Do not register for and take the actual LSAT for “practice,” since all of your scores within a five year period are reported to the law schools. Some law schools average multiple scores, though a majority of law schools are now taking the highest score. All schools, however, see all scores. Most schools post information about their policy on multiple scores on their websites.

*“[An] LSAT prep course taught me the importance of practicing for exams to become familiar with material and work on strategies -- also helped with time management.”* Fordham 1L

**June after the junior year** is probably the **best time to take the test** for those planning to apply to law school as seniors. You will have your score before the summer is over, so during the summer or very early in the fall you can develop a realistic list of schools. A good **second choice** is to take the LSAT in the **fall of the senior year** (late September/early October), which still allows applications to be filed well before the deadlines. The last realistic opportunity to take the test for those applying as seniors is December. Those planning to work or pursue other interests between college and law school can put the test off a bit or take it during college (LSAC keeps scores for five years).

*“[A commercial LSAT prep course] made me less nervous and more confident about taking it. I don't think it helped too much with my score though.”* Boston University 2L

CAS prepares a report of your academic record for the law schools to which you apply. Most schools require that you register with CAS, and you must pay a registration fee that is separate from LSAT fees. Law schools contact CAS directly for the report; you will indicate to CAS how many reports you would like to pay for and to which law schools you would like reports sent. A CAS subscription lasts for five years; if you take the LSAT during this time, your CAS period will be extended for five years from the LSAT registration date.

Your CAS report includes copies of transcripts of your undergraduate, graduate, and professional school. If you have taken any college-level courses for credit at another institution (e.g. summer school or college classes taken for credit while in high school), you must arrange to have that institution's transcripts sent to CAS. **Follow all instructions on the LSAC website. It is your responsibility to ask each college or university you have attended to furnish transcripts to CAS.** If you have studied abroad, your credits should eventually be placed on your Washington University transcript. We suggest, however, that you ask personnel in the Overseas Programs office to send an authenticated copy of your transcript directly to CAS. CAS will not evaluate that transcript or include those grades in the report it prepares; it should, however, include a copy of that transcript in the report it sends to law schools, which will give those schools a more complete picture of your academic record.

CAS will compute a GPA for you that includes the results of *all* academic work reported on a U.S. or Canadian transcript. Trends in your grades – both positive and negative – will be evident. **Check the CAS report carefully** when you receive your subscription confirmation letter. *These reports are prepared by human beings, so mistakes do occur. Contact LSAC and let them know about any errors, even those in your favor.*

You may wish to check the “**Candidate Referral Service**” box in the registration section of the CAS application. This will result in certain biographical, academic, and LSAT data being forwarded to law schools that request it. Some schools may then invite you to apply, perhaps even waiving the application fee. Similarly, **please check “yes” in the box seeking authorization of release of data to the undergraduate prelaw advisor.** Individual LSAT data are not released to anyone, but having it in an aggregated form helps our prelaw advising program considerably (see page 7 for more on this.)

*“The best way to get in shape for the LSAT is to practice reading, reading quickly, and trusting your instincts. It’s all about confidence, and the best way to be confident is to practice taking tests.” Northwestern 1L*

At the end of the fall semester, ask the Office of the University Registrar to send CAS your **fall grades** if you want to have them considered. CAS will add the new material and generate updated reports for the law schools to which you have applied (at no additional cost to you). If you are still on a waitlist at the end of the spring semester, have the Registrar's Office send your transcript again.

If you are unable to pay the fees for the LSAT and/or CAS, complete the **fee waiver application** that is available from LSAC on their website.

## Waiting Until After Graduation to Apply to Law School

Many undergraduates consider taking some time between college and law school to work, earn a master's or PhD, or pursue a fellowship, community service (e.g. Teach for America, AmeriCorps, or the Peace Corps), or travel opportunity. Considering such options is a wise idea. Waiting a year or more after graduating to apply is a popular option; at least half of the first year class at most law schools will be people who have been out of college for one year or more. Some law schools actively prefer applicants who have taken time off between college and law school.

*“Advise students that law school is not just a continuation of college. It is an extremely high stress and intense environment. Make sure that students will be ready to work.”* Cardozo 1L

What follows are some **arguments, pro and con**, on this issue.

Some reasons to wait to apply:

- You will have time to gain some added experience, self-confidence, and maturity.
- You can become more confident about law school and becoming a lawyer.
- Your senior year grades will be included in the GPA calculation.
- You'll likely be a more interesting law school applicant.
- Full-time work experience may make you more attractive to legal employers.
- You can earn money to pay for your law school education.

*“Once you begin law school, your life will be the law. Spend some time working at a corporation, or a store, or travel around the country. Glimpses of real life are few and far between at law school. The happiest law students I know are those who worked and traveled before they began.”* Northwestern 1L

Some reasons to go directly on to law school:

- You are absolutely sure you want to become a lawyer, and you want to get an immediate start on your career.
- You believe you may experience a loss of academic momentum by waiting.
- You do not wish to begin repaying educational loans accrued during your undergraduate education.

*“Students who took time off and used it constructively seem to be more heavily recruited by employers because of their experiences outside of school. On the other hand, by not taking time off I feel I was more prepared and comfortable with the workload and time commitment necessary for studying.”* Emory 1L

We sent a **survey** to 250 Washington University alumni in law school. We asked each person whether the respondent went immediately to law school from college or took time off, and whether

the respondent felt he/she had made the right decision. Here are the results from the 103 responses we received:

- 29% of the respondents went straight from college to law school and had no regrets;
- 15% went straight through but wished in hindsight that they had taken a break;
- 56% waited a year or more after graduating from college to begin law school and had no regrets;
- NO ONE -- not a single respondent -- who took time off between college and law school regretted it.

Our advice: if you find yourself thinking about taking a break from school to work, pursue service opportunities, or travel before starting law school, listen to those signals and heed them. Law school is a rigorous experience, and the first year is crucial. It is important to be ready, enthusiastic, and prepared.

*“The first year of law school is all about time management. You have to stay on top of your work. Skipping a night of homework is not an option, so be prepared to make the library a second home. I would say that I do about 8 – 10 hours of work every day, 7 days a week, including class time.”*  
American U. 1L

## Where to Apply?

Most Washington University seniors apply to between ten and twelve law schools. A few apply to only four or five, and some apply to fifteen or more. In general, you should choose a **minimum** of one or two “reach” schools (where your odds of being admitted are less than 30%), two or three where your chances of admission look at least reasonable, and one or two “safe” schools (where your chances of admission exceed 75%). Be sure you would be willing to attend your safe schools -- do research beforehand.

*“Look at what the schools offer, and don’t just concentrate on the name. Don’t get me wrong, the name and reputation are very important. I know this being in a city with seven law schools. However, each school offers something different than the others.”* Chicago-Kent 3L

There are **many resources** available to help you calculate your realistic chances of being admitted at various law schools:

- *The ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools*, available from LSAC, in bookstores, and free via the LSAC website ([www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org).) The on-line version includes a feature through which you can enter your own LSAT/GPA figures and find the likelihood of your admission to individual law schools.
- The *Boston College Locator*, free and available on-line at <http://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/gradschool/law/research/lawlocator.html>. This website includes links to the law schools’ home pages.
- Our own data of how former Wash U students have fared upon application to most law schools, by LSAT and GPA. **You must meet with a prelaw advisor to access this data**

(presented in chart form for any law school to which we had five or more applicants). *This is why it is crucial that you allow your data to be released to your undergraduate institution – by releasing your information to us, we can construct a good Wash U database to balance against national data for advising future Wash U students.*

Consider **geography** in your decision, because you are likely to develop contacts for potential careers in the area in which you are attending law school. Don't, however, let geography be the single controlling factor unless you have strong personal reasons for staying in a particular region. Consider schools that will meet your needs in several parts of the country. Obviously, the greater the national reputation of the law school, the less geography matters. Think about **cost** in your selection of schools. Public institutions tend to be less expensive than private institutions (especially in states where you are a resident or could become one), but some private schools are generous with merit scholarships. Don't let yourself end up with a set of choices that are all unaffordable. Other considerations include size, reputation, diversity, opportunities to participate in clinics or on law journals, placement opportunities, and areas of specialization.

### Completing the Applications

When you complete the actual law school applications, do them carefully, preferably completing them online. **PROOFREAD EVERYTHING CAREFULLY.** Follow all instructions to the letter. Leave nothing blank -- if a question is inapplicable to you, put "not applicable" in the space provided. Do not sign the application until you are sure you understand all aspects of the application.

Look at the questions that seek a written statement, then tailor your answer to the question -- don't assume that one statement will suffice for every school to which you are applying. Don't send a personal statement to Law School "X" by mistake that explains why Law School "Y" is a great fit for you.

*"I applied to 21 schools. [If I had it to do over] I would isolate fewer schools and really focus on tailoring applications to them. Don't get me wrong; I'm delighted with Michigan, but I think my formulaic approach hurt me at some other top-tier law schools."* Michigan 1L

Disclose any past "troubles," including **academic problems, discipline problems, arrests, convictions** -- anything the application seeks. These sorts of incidents will not automatically bar your admission to law school. The law schools are looking carefully to see whether you have taken responsibility for your actions and how you have responded to negative consequences. If you don't disclose them on the applications, they may catch up with you somewhere else in the application process, triggering a misconduct inquiry. When you are ready to graduate from law school, the bar of the state in which you wish to practice will conduct a very detailed review of your past, and something may pop up then, causing you to have to explain not only the event, but also the failure to disclose it during the application process. Please talk with a prelaw advisor if you have any concerns at all about these questions on the applications.

It is a good idea to include a **resume** (one page preferred but not required) that outlines your academic accomplishments, activities, work experience and other competencies in one place. Do

not, however, fail to answer questions on the application itself by noting “see enclosed resume” - answer the questions AND include the resume.

**Apply early!** Most law schools have rolling admissions, so it is to your advantage to have your application read as early as possible. Some law schools offer early decision and early notification. Try to have all your **applications completed as early in the fall as possible. If you’re taking the fall LSAT, aim for early November** (Thanksgiving at the latest). You want your file to be considered while most of the seats in the class are still available. This also maximizes your chances for merit-based scholarships.

## The Personal Statement

In many ways, the personal statement is the only part of the application that is completely within your control. This is your opportunity to make the admissions committee remember you and to distinguish yourself from other applicants. Imagine that it substitutes for a ten minute interview—what would you want to tell your interviewer about you?

The personal statement is important both in its **substance** and its **presentation**. It warrants numerous drafts. Show it to people you trust and ask for their comments. Take it to the Writing Center and ask for a critique. Listen carefully to all of the comments you receive, but accept only the advice that makes sense to you. Here are some **thought-starters** on writing the personal statement from Don Asher, a nationally recognized expert on graduate school admissions who has spoken at several Junior Jumpstarts:

- Has a course, independent research project, or other academic experience ignited your intellectual passion?
- Have you overcome serious adversity in your life?
- What is unusual or unique about you?
- Have you ever received encouraging words from a professor, employer, or other person that are relevant? What were they? How did they influence your choices?

Answer each question by making a list, and then take time to develop the thoughts fully. Here is a list of “do’s and don’ts” that have been developed after listening to lots of law school admissions deans and directors talk about how they read personal statements:

### DO:

- Answer the specific question, if one is asked. Look at each school’s website to see if there are any pointers on what that school likes to see in a personal statement, then tailor your statement accordingly
- Let the reader know who you are – this is usually the only opportunity you have to “get beyond the numbers”
- Be truthful, specific, and accurate
- Write about something you know and are comfortable with
- Write about adversity overcome, but emphasize the overcoming, not the adversity
- Focus rather narrowly . . . zero in on a subject and cover it well
- Write about attributes, achievements, and intellectual passions

- Place the focus of your essay into the context of attending law school and your hopes for your career
- Keep the writing style conventional
- Make sure any supplemental statements are written just as well as the personal statement
- Keep to the prescribed length; if none is given, keep to two pages
- Double space and leave adequate margins
- Put your name and LSAC number on each page
- Proofread carefully. Make spelling, punctuation, and grammar perfect

#### **DON'T:**

- Try to write what you think the law school “wants to hear”
- Summarize your experiences chronologically – let your resume do that
- Apologize . . . if you need to explain something, it is usually better to do so in a separate statement
- Criticize the LSAT
- Strain to appear unique
- Use contrived formats . . . e.g. your obituary, a summation to the jury on why you should be admitted, Q & A format
- Use long quotations – if you use them at all, keep them short, and be sure they are relevant
- Philosophize about the role of law in society, or other lofty topics
- Focus on another person, even if that person has been the most influential person in your life
- Talk about why you are not going to medical school
- Brag about your accomplishments. Instead, put your experiences into a context – what have you learned? How have you grown?
- Send videos, senior theses, etc. unless they are requested . . . “The thickness of the file is *inversely* related to the quality,” according to one admissions officer

### **Dean’s Certification Forms**

A few law schools require that a Dean’s Certification Form be completed by a dean of the undergraduate school(s) that the applicant has attended. These forms primarily function to certify academic standing and to ask about any disciplinary or academic actions taken against the applicant. A space on the form is occasionally provided for the dean to comment on scholastic honors, extracurricular activities, employment and other experiences or qualifications of the applicant.

If your application includes a Dean’s Certification Form, **sign it and bring it, along with pre-addressed envelope(s), to your undergraduate dean’s office.** Students in the College of Arts & Sciences may bring their forms to 104 Cupples II, attention Erin Risk, for processing by a prelaw advisor. The forms, once completed, will be mailed directly to law schools. The Office of Student Conduct, which conducts a check of your record once we’ve received a form, requests that you submit your form at least two weeks before any deadline (more if you know there is an incident we will need to report). See <http://studentconduct.wustl.edu/student-conduct/dean-certification-and-various-background-checks/>.

## Letters of Recommendation

Like the personal statement, strong letters of recommendation can make a positive difference in situations where your GPA and LSAT score put you in the middle of the group applying to a given law school. Seek a **minimum of two letters from faculty members who know you well**. If you believe you can get a strong letter from a third or fourth faculty member, someone else on campus, an employer, or an internship supervisor, request it as well.

The best and most persuasive recommendation letters are written by faculty members who can comment in some detail on your **intellectual capacity**, your **writing skills**, your **motivation**, and your **overall academic experience** here. You can enhance the chances of getting such a detailed letter by letting faculty members get to know you. Participate in class. Use office hours to discuss material you don't understand fully. Take a second class with a professor from whom you learned a great deal. **A strong and detailed letter from a junior faculty member who knows you and your abilities well is better than a terse letter from a senior faculty member or employer who does not know you well and cannot comment in detail on your skills and attributes.**

Ask for a letter of recommendation **in person**, if possible. Ask if s/he can write you a letter of recommendation that will be helpful to your application. If there is any hesitation, thank the person and ask someone else. If necessary, ask your recommender if you can set up some time to talk about your experiences and goals. **Ask for these letters early to give your writers plenty of time**. Give the letter writers the **tools** they need to write a thorough, personal letter, including a copy of your resume, an unofficial transcript, a copy of significant written work completed in the letter writer's class, and anything else that might help him/her supply details in the letter. Provide the writer with a written request and a pre-addressed and stamped envelope.

The College Office maintains a free recommendation letter service for law school applicants (seniors and alumni). You can find the form on the WU prelaw website, <http://artsci.wustl.edu/resources/prelaw-advising> (a sample is in Appendix B.) Fill out the top (waiver) portion of the form and give it to each letter writer at the time you request the letter. The writer can simply forward one original letter, on letterhead, to our office with the recommendation form. When you have decided where to apply, send an e-mail to the prelaw coordinator, at [prelaw@artsci.wustl.edu](mailto:prelaw@artsci.wustl.edu), notifying him/her which letters should be sent to which schools. S/he will take care of duplicating and forwarding the letters to your law schools. Letters are kept on file here for five years, and may only be used for law school applications.

**More often, students elect to have their letters sent directly to LSAC, using LSAC's Letter of Recommendation service.** If you choose this option, as do the majority of applicants, through your LSAC online account you will need to generate a pre-filled letter of recommendation (LOR) form **or** indicate the email option for each letter of recommendation. **Some law schools prefer or require that you use the LSAC letter of recommendation service**, so check the websites of individual schools for more detailed information.

To use the LSAC LOR service:

1. You will use the LOR screen on LSAC's website to identify the use or content of each letter of recommendation you intend to request. You will then print a form/opt for the

email option for each recommender. The description you give of the letter will appear on the preprinted form you give to your recommender or in the email that LSAC sends to the recommender. The recommender will either return the form with the letter s/he writes, sending both directly to LSAC, or upload the letter as directed by the email from LSAC. Letters sent to LSAC without an accompanying form will be returned to the sender. (Please note that your description of the letter, in addition to being seen by each recommender, will also be seen by the law schools who receive that letter. You should make sure that your description is businesslike; this is not the time to be creative.)

2. You will also use the LOR screen to specify the school(s) to which each letter should be sent. If you do not assign a letter to a school or schools, the letter will not be sent to any school.
3. Most letters you request will be general, and you will direct that they be sent to all or most of the schools you choose to apply to. You may have certain letters that are intended for only one school (for example, a letter from someone with a particular connection to that school) or for a certain group of schools (for example, a letter from an environmental studies professor discussing your passion for environmental issues and intended by you for use only at schools that boast of their environmental law program). It is your responsibility to direct those letters appropriately.

Read through the instructions on LSAC carefully. They've anticipated most of your questions and have provided clear instructions.

Finally, remember to send your letter writers a **thank-you note** after the letter has been submitted. People who take the time to write letters for you are interested in your plans; you should let them know where you are accepted and which law school you will attend. This is courteous and will help you stay in touch with them should you need another letter or reference when applying for employment while in law school.

## Choosing a Law School

You should consider a number of factors beyond the law school "rankings" in deciding where to enroll. For your top choices, a personal visit is helpful.

*"Do not just listen to people who tell you to go to the highest ranked law school you get into. I chose a lower ranked school (though still in the top 20) because it felt right. The people and the location are really what make a difference, because you will want to form lasting ties with your classmates, who will be your colleagues in practice."*

UCLA 2L

When narrowing your choices and deciding where to visit, consider the checklist below:

- Re-read the school's **publications** and website carefully.
- Consider where the **faculty** were trained and their areas of expertise.
- Consider **faculty depth** and **advanced degree programs** available. (If you are seriously interested in intellectual property law, for example, a school with four faculty members who teach in this area and an advanced (LLM) degree program in IP law should receive your

careful consideration. Some law schools will have just one faculty member who specializes in this area.)

- Look for a bright and diverse **student body**. Legal education is highly dependent upon discussion and argument with fellow students, and you will learn best in a setting where the other students bring intellectual strengths and diverse experiences to the classroom.
- Consider what **journals** are available for students to work on. A school with three student-edited journals may offer you a better chance of participating than one with a single law review. The same can be said of **moot court** programs.
- Consider **clinical opportunities** – if you want to be a criminal lawyer, for example, will you have the opportunity to get out of the library and work on real cases with real clients under the supervision of attorneys BEFORE you become licensed to practice?
- Consider **cost**, as well – how much debt are you willing to incur to become a lawyer? Figure out what you would need to borrow to finance your education at each school. What will the monthly payments be like? How will they affect your lifestyle when you finish law school? What kind of job do you want when you finish law school? Find out if there are part-time work opportunities for second and third year students.

### **Law School Programs: Joint Degrees/Certificate Programs/Post-JD Programs**

**Joint Degree Programs:** Upon graduating from law school, students are awarded the Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree. If you are considering a career in an area that spans academic disciplines, you can consider obtaining a J.D. degree combined with other degrees. Some joint degree programs offer the advantage of completing both degrees in less time than it would take to complete the degrees independently. In most cases, you must apply separately to both programs. For detailed information it is necessary to research individual schools. Some examples of joint degrees include:

#### J.D. with Masters Degree

Master of Business Administration	Master of Public Administration
Master of Health Administration	Master of Public Health
Master of Science in Criminal Justice	Master in Public Policy
Master in Social Work	Master of Marine Affairs

Other disciplines include Economics, East Asian Studies, Bioethics, and Sports Studies

J.D. with M.D.: Combination with a degree from an associated medical school

J.D. with Ph.D.: Combination with a degree from an associated graduate school

In deciding whether or not to pursue a joint degree program, think carefully about whether you truly need two degrees in the career you plan to pursue. While joint degree programs may be shorter than pursuing two degrees separately, they still involve extra time – and extra expense.

**Certificate Programs:** Some law schools offer Certificate Programs within their law school curriculum. Certificate Programs offer specialization in fields of study during the course of

study for a J.D. degree. These credentials may be attractive to future employers. Some examples of Certificate Programs include:

Health Law  
Family Law

Natural Resources Law  
Tax Law

**Post-JD Programs:** Post-J.D. law degrees are for practicing lawyers and/or foreign lawyers seeking to practice in the U.S. and they include:

Master of Laws (LL.M)

Juris Master (J.M.)

Master of Comparative Law (M.C.L.)

Master of Jurisprudence (M.J.)

Post-J.D. degrees for research and academic-based doctorate level work include:

Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.S.D.)

Doctor of Judicial Science (S.J.D.)

Doctor of Comparative Law (D.C.L.)

## Law School Visits

When you visit a law school, remember that **you are looking for a place to continue your education AND a strong professional placement service** -- law school is a professional program, and you should expect your law school to assist you in finding a suitable position in the legal field upon your graduation.

To assess what the educational experience at a given law school will be like, try to do the following:

- Sit in on some **classes**. Stop in the lounge and **talk to students and faculty**. The quality of your fellow students is very important. Try to discern whether you will be challenged and stretched intellectually and also whether you will feel comfortable there.
- Look at the **library and computing facilities** -- these will become very familiar to you. Law students spend countless hours in the library. Are the facilities large enough for the student body? Are they comfortable and well lit? Are they open at the times you will want to use them?
- Talk to the administrators you will rely on -- e.g., the **dean of students** and the **financial aid administrator**. Do they seem knowledgeable and supportive?
- Ask about **clinics, journals, and moot court** -- find out how students are chosen and whether everyone who wants to participate is able to do so.
- Think about where you will live. Ask about **housing**, and be sure you will be able to live safely and within reasonable commuting distance if you are not in campus housing.

*“The best advice I got was to actually visit the schools I was seriously considering attending. Nothing in a book can describe the essential ‘feel’ of a law school.”* Vanderbilt 1L

To get a sense of the law school’s professional placement record, visit the **Career Office**. Ask about the following:

- What sorts of positions do graduates take? What starting salaries do they earn? Where do they locate?
- Look at interview sign-up sheets -- see which employers come to visit the law school to interview students.
- How do those in the top 10% of the class do, and how do those in the middle and lower thirds do in terms of finding jobs? Everyone can't finish in the top 10%, and you will want to know what your prospects are if you don't do as well as you hope.

## **Financing Law School**

Law school is an expensive investment. It would not be difficult to incur a cost of \$200,000 or more for a three-year legal education – tuition alone is above \$55,000 per year at some private institutions. Books, housing, food, and personal expenses also add up.

Eighty percent of law students rely on loans as the primary source of financing for their education. Think carefully about how much debt you are willing to assume and what salary you will need to earn to pay back your loans.

*“I wish I had sought financial advice. I borrowed every dime to pay for law school and am now facing repayment upon graduation.”* American University 3L

The law schools to which you apply should be your primary source of information about the availability of funds. In general, you will be considered independent of your family for the purposes of determining **federal aid eligibility**. Law schools, however, will often require parental income information in order to determine eligibility for institutional scholarships and loans.

Start the financial aid application process in December. Apply for a Personal Identification Number from the U.S. Department of Education ([www.pin.ed.gov](http://www.pin.ed.gov)), a prerequisite to filing for federal financial aid. Once you have that (it may take several weeks), file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (**FAFSA**) as soon as you can after January 1. Copies are available in the Student Financial Services Office and on-line. If you plan to apply for aid from the law schools themselves, submit those applications as early as possible to be considered for scholarship money. Each school has its own forms and deadlines -- be sure you submit the right materials. If you are unsatisfied with the package offered you, ask whether there is an appeal process, and if so, use it. Some schools offer Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAPS) to their graduates working in low-paying and/or public interest jobs. Look for this information on school web sites.

*“I think the best advice I received was to limit my debt to a minimum.”* Washington University 2L

If you have current indebtedness, get some **financial counseling**. Save as much money as you can before you begin law school. Pay off any outstanding consumer debt. **Maintaining a good credit record is critical to eligibility for federal loans.**

More information on financing a legal education can be found in a brochure published by the Law School Admission Council and available on their website.

## **Conclusion and Contact Information**

A career in law can be wonderfully fulfilling but it's not the right fit for everyone. Now you know more about some of the important decisions you will need to make and about the nuts and bolts of the application process. Let us know how we can be of help to you. Good luck!

**Undergraduate PreLaw Office:** 104 Cupples II

**PreLaw Student Information E-mail Address:** sign up at [artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu](mailto:artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu)

**PreLaw Advising:** [artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu](mailto:artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu) or 935-6472

## Appendix A

### Checklist for Applying to Law School

- \_\_\_\_\_ Prepare for and take LSAT no later than the fall prior to the year you plan to matriculate in law school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Register for CAS by the fall prior to the year you plan to matriculate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Request letters of recommendation from professors who taught courses, preferably during your junior or senior year of study, who know you and your academic work well. Have the letters sent either to the Washington University PreLaw Office or, more commonly, directly to LSAC's LOR service.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Research law schools. Visit campuses if possible. Try to identify what qualities you are looking for in a law school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Consider attending a Law School Forum.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Attend prelaw information sessions held on campus. Notification occurs via prelaw email list (sign up at [artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu](mailto:artsci-prelaw@email.wustl.edu).)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Request that official transcripts be sent directly to CAS from each undergraduate and graduate institution you have attended.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Write your personal statement. The Writing Center will help you to refine your work. PreLaw advisors will review personal statements as well, as time permits.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Write a resume and include it with your applications. The Career Center can help you to refine your resume.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Check your CAS report for accuracy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Send in your applications. **TRY TO COMPLETE APPLICATIONS BY EARLY NOVEMBER.**
- \_\_\_\_\_ Provide the PreLaw Office with Dean's Certification forms (see page 10.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Review financial aid information for each school and apply as necessary.

## Appendix B

### Recommendation Request Form

If viewing this document online, you may download the Letter of Recommendation Request Form at [http://college.artsci.wustl.edu/prelaw\\_handbook](http://college.artsci.wustl.edu/prelaw_handbook)