



APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL

Undergraduate Resource Series

Mignone Center for Career Success | 54 Dunster Street

Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences

mcs@fas.harvard.edu | careerservices.fas.harvard.edu



© 2023 President and Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any way without the express written permission of the Harvard University Faculty of Arts & Sciences Mignone Center for Career Success.

08/23

Mignone Center for Career Success
Harvard University Faculty of Arts & Sciences
Cambridge, MA 02138
mcs@fas.harvard.edu
careerservices.fas.harvard.edu

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

Steps to take at Harvard:

Exploration:

- Reach out to your House Pre-Law Tutor(s) to speak about the profession.
- Join the career community at careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/channels/law-government-military-service/ to receive emails about law-related programs and opportunities.
- Attend workshops about the legal profession.
- Become involved with one of the Harvard Pre-Law student organizations (such as the Harvard Undergraduate Law Review, Harvard Black Pre-Law Association, Harvard College Women in Law Association, Harvard Undergraduate Legal Committee, or the Small Claims Advisory Service).
- Conduct research on legal careers using the online resources available through our office.
- Consider an internship with an organization where you can learn more about legal issues.
- Talk to lawyers to learn more about the legal profession. Contact people you know or search the [Harvard alumni database](#) or [Firsthand Advisers](#), accessible through our website, or connect with alumni and other professionals via LinkedIn.

Applying:

- Set up a time to connect with your House Pre-Law Tutor(s) to discuss your application plans.
- Attend one of our “Applying to Law School 101” sessions.
- Attend Law School Night in the fall to learn more about, and connect with, top law schools from across the country.
- Set up an account with the Law School Admission Council – www.lsac.org
- Sit in on a class and meet current students at Harvard Law School or other schools you are interested in attending. (Talk to your Pre-Law tutor(s) and/or contact the professor first.)

Questions to ask:

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

REALITIES OF A LEGAL CAREER

An important step in making your decision is to learn about the market for new lawyers. Make it a priority to explore the various career options for using your legal training. Think about broad categories such as law, government, education, health care, and technology, and consider how the skills that you will receive from a legal education—such as research and writing, analysis and logical reasoning, knowledge of substantive law and legal procedures, and time management—will be utilized. Be sure to meet with your House Pre-Law Tutor(s) to consider non-legal careers for lawyers.

Salaries and work hours vary widely across the profession. The median starting salary for an entry-level Associate at a private firm is \$131,500^[1]. While the median base salary of a first-year corporate lawyer at a top law firm is \$200,000^[2] in the first year out of law school, you may have to work twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. Government lawyers and those who work in-house for a company or organization usually have more reasonable and predictable work schedules but earn a lower starting salary. Most of those interested in public interest law can expect a median starting salary of \$ 58,000^[1]. Lawyers entering a solo practice earn varying amounts depending on their legal expertise and the region where they practice. In addition, many people trained as lawyers work in jobs where their legal training is of value but they are not actually practicing law.

PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL

Admissions committees consider numerous factors when evaluating candidates for law school; among the most important are the strength of an applicant's academic record and the applicant's score on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) or the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).¹ These indicators, with letters of recommendation, a personal statement, and a resume, typically constitute what is required for a completed application. Law schools also weigh the work experience of applicants and welcome applications from students who have taken time off between undergraduate study and law school. In fact, the majority of applicants will have taken time off between their undergraduate and legal studies. Applicants are expected to have a solid understanding of law school and why they want to practice law.

[1] NALP (2022) – Employment for the Class of 2021—Selected Findings. Retrieved from nalp.org

[2] NALP (2023) – Findings on First-Year Salaries from the 2023 Associate Salary Survey. Retrieved from nalp.org

Choosing a Concentration

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

¹ For a full list of law schools that accept the GRE, visit ets.org/gre/consider/law/programs

Your Academic Record

Your academic record is a very important element of your application. Be sure to concentrate in a subject area that you enjoy and do well in. Admissions officers know from experience which departments have strong academic reputations and which courses have high and low curves. According to the Harvard Law School Admissions Office, academic success is important but other qualities that promote vitality, diversity, and excellence in the student body are also valued. As stated on its website, "...we have no computational methods for making admission decisions, no mechanical shortcuts, and no substitutes for careful assessment and good judgment applied to individual cases. We try to assess intangible qualities—concern for the welfare of others, energy, ambition, sound judgment, and high ideals. We have also found merit in allowing several strong factors to offset another factor on which an applicant may perform only modestly in comparison with other applicants. As a result, we emphasize that there are no 'cut-off' GPAs or standardized test scores below which an application will not be considered in its entirety."²

Extra-curricular Activities

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

SELECTING A LAW SCHOOL

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

Faculty

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

National or Regional Schools

Law schools are generally divided into three categories: National, Regional, and Local. Schools with a **National** reputation tend to appear in various "top ten" lists. They draw students from across the nation and around the world and offer geographic mobility to students. Schools with a **Regional** reputation are attended primarily by students from that region who are more likely to remain nearby after graduation, but who may also seek positions throughout the country.

Placement of Graduates

Be sure to look at the data regarding placement of law school graduates and the percentage of

² <https://hls.harvard.edu/jdadmissions/apply-to-harvard-law-school/jdapplicants/admissions-faqs-regular-jd/>

graduates who succeed in passing the bar exam. The websites of the respective law schools should have this information or you can connect with law school admissions offices to get an idea of where graduates tend to work.

Facilities and Resources at the Institution

Connect with the schools you are interested in to inquire about the facilities, resources, and affiliations of the law school.

Cost of attending law school

Attending law school is very expensive. In 2022 the average student debt upon completion was approximately \$135,183 for graduates of private law schools and \$93,643 for graduates of public law schools.³ Some law schools are more expensive than others and they have varying financial aid incentives. Although some schools provide grants and scholarships, loans still constitute the bulk of most legal educations are financed—most students do take loans to pay for their law education and consider this, amortized over time, a good investment in their future earning potential.

Location

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

APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL

Meet with your House Pre-Law Tutor

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

Attend our Applying to Law School 101 Session

This overview session is offered during the fall semester and is geared toward juniors and seniors who are currently in the process of applying to law school. This session helps introduce students to the application process and to helpful resources.

Take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) or the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) or the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is required for admission to all American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools. The LSAT is accepted by all ABA-approved law schools, while the GRE is only accepted by a select number of law schools. The LSAT is administered by the Law School Admission Council (LSAC). The

³Law School Transparency (2023)- Law School Costs. Retrieved from Law School Transparency Data Dashboard. - data.lawschooltransparency.com

LSAT is offered as a remotely proctored exam, and will also be offered at testing centers starting with the August 2023 administration. There are eight test administrations scheduled from August 2023-June 2024. More detailed LSAT information, including dates, fees, deadlines, and registration information, is available online at lsac.org.

The optimal time to take the LSAT is in the summer before the fall in which you apply. However, taking a fall test administration will still allow you enough time to submit your score with your fall applications. If you decide to take the test and apply in a future cycle, your score will be valid for five years.

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

- 1) one reading comprehension section
- 2) one analytical reasoning section
- 3) one logical reasoning section
- 4) one unscored variable section (can be any of the above question types)
- 5) a 35-minute writing section (administered separately; not scored)

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

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

The GRE is administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The exam is computer-based, and offered multiple times throughout the year. At the time of publication, ETS is offering an in-person and an at-home option for the GRE General Test. The duration of the GRE exam will be reduced from approximately 4 hours to less than 2 hours starting on September 22, 2023.

The current exam consists of the following six sections:

1. One Analytical Writing section (two separately timed tasks; 30 minutes each)
2. Two Verbal Reasoning sections (30 minutes each)
3. Two Quantitative Reasoning sections (35 minutes each)
4. One unidentified unscored section or research section

The shorter exam beginning on 9/22/23 will consist of the following five sections:

1. One Analytical Writing section (one section; 30 minutes)
2. Two Verbal Reasoning sections (41 minutes each)
3. Two Quantitative Reasoning sections (47 minutes each)

The GRE score scale is 130–170 (in one-point increments) for the Verbal Reasoning sections and for the Quantitative Reasoning sections and the score scale for the Analytical Writing section is 0–6 (in half-point increments). Detailed GRE test information—dates, fees, and deadlines—and registration information is available online at www.ets.org.

Not all law schools accept GRE scores.⁴ If you are thinking of applying to multiple law schools or considering other graduate programs, consider which exam will be the best option for you. For help thinking through your decision, please consult with your House Pre-Law Tutor(s).

⁴ For a full list of law schools that accept the GRE, visit ets.org/gre/consider/law

The Credential Assembly Service (CAS)

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

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

The Application

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

Personal Statement

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

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

Letters of Recommendation

Most law schools request that one or two letters of recommendation be submitted on behalf of applicants. Admission committees will be seeking information not provided elsewhere in the applications. Recommendation letters should include concrete examples of intellectual strength, judgment, motivation, and leadership, along with an appraisal of communication skills and a comparison to peers.

In early fall, you should plan your recommendation-gathering strategy, or see what recommendations are already in your House file. If your House Pre-Law Tutor is not familiar with you and your application plans, be sure to introduce yourself and discuss your goals.

Two academic letters of recommendation are the usual request in law school applications, but you should be sure to check each application for possible variations. Letters should be requested early enough so that the writer is not rushed and can comfortably complete the task in time. Letters can

also be requested (and kept in your House file) if you think you will apply in the future but are not doing so immediately. Plan to keep in touch with potential recommenders.

When you reach out to potential recommenders for a letter, be prepared. You might make an appointment to discuss the ways in which they know you, perhaps bringing a paper (with comments) written in their class, or a set of class discussion topics in which you participated. They may ask for a resume and your personal statement, and even a transcript. Such documents could help provide writers with a more well-rounded view of you, but, in fact, it is an analysis of your performance in their field of expertise that schools specifically seek.

We strongly suggest that all Harvard candidates use the **LOR** (Letter of Recommendation Service), a recommendation-collecting and distributing service which is part of CAS.

Resume

Law schools typically require a resume as part of the application. Refer to our [resume guide and templates](#). Have a copy of your resume reviewed by one of our advisers before you submit your application.

Dean's Certifications

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

Law School Deferral Programs

There are currently two law school deferral programs to which students can apply: the Junior Deferral Program (JDP) through Harvard Law School and the Leadership Experience Admission Deferral (LEAD) Program through Columbia Law School.

Harvard Law School Junior Deferral Program (JDP)

The Junior Deferral Program (JDP) allows you to apply to Harvard Law School as an undergraduate junior. If admitted, you will defer your admission for at least two years after graduation before matriculating to Harvard Law School. Application requirements for JDP applicants are the same as for regular JD applicants. However, the JDP application opens in the spring and does not have rolling admissions; instead, admission decisions are released during the summer, after spring grades become available. For more information about the JDP application and deadline, please visit the [JDP page](#) at hls.harvard.edu.

Columbia Law School Leadership Experience Admission Deferral (LEAD) Fellowship Program

The Leadership Experience Admission Deferral (LEAD) Fellowship Program allows you to apply to Columbia Law School as an undergraduate junior or senior. If admitted, you will defer your admission for two years after graduation before matriculating to the Law School. If you wish to pursue an entrepreneurial venture during the deferral period, you can apply for a LEAD funding grant for support. If admitted, LEAD Fellows will be assigned a mentor, and given priority access to the Law School's leadership and lecture series.

The application components of the LEAD Fellowship program are similar to the JD application with the exception of the personal statement. LEAD applicants will need to answer three required essay questions in lieu of a personal statement. Additionally, the LEAD application opens in the spring, and does not have rolling admissions; instead, admissions decisions are released in early summer, after spring grades become available. For more information about the LEAD application and deadline, please refer to the LEAD Fellowship section of the Columbia Law School J.D. admissions website: law.columbia.edu/admissions/jd/apply.

PUBLICATIONS AND OTHER RESOURCES

Financial Aid:

- **Free Application for Financial Aid (FAFSA):** studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa
- **LSAC “paying for law school” section:** www.lsac.org/choosing-law-school/paying-law-school
- **AccessLex Institute:** www.accesslex.org (information about financing a legal education)

Guides:

The Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools. This guide provides comprehensive information on the 199 American Bar Association-approved law schools.. The guide is accessible free of charge through the LSAC website at <https://officialguide.lsac.org/>

Harvard Law School Legal Careers Self-Assessment

Helps potential students assess their interest in public interest law, and to consider a wide variety of career and life planning issues when weighing their desire to practice.

<https://hls.harvard.edu/bernard-koteen-office-of-public-interest-advising/opia-job-search-toolkit/self-assessment-questions/>

Trials:

A residential summer scholarship program for students of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that are currently underrepresented at the nation’s leading law schools. Partnership between Harvard Law School, NYU School of Law, and the Advantage Testing Foundation.

<https://trials.atfoundation.org>

Test Prep:

Khan Academy Official LSAT Prep

Free online LSAT prep resources are offered through Khan Academy in partnership with the Law School Admission Council (LSAC).

<https://www.khanacademy.org/prep/lsat>