Advising Undergraduate Students about Law School

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As professors who teach courses in the Sociology of Law at liberal arts colleges, students often seek our advice about applying to law school despite the fact that neither of us attended or worked in a law program. To improve our capacity as advisors and to help others in similar situations, we organized a session for the 2006 annual meetings of the Law & Society Association that focused on advising undergraduate students about law school. We invited Collins Byrd, Assistant Dean for Admissions at the University of Iowa School of Law, and Derek Meeker, Associate Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law to share their professional insights. Session participants received much valuable information through lively dialogue and an engaging set of questions-and-answers. Realizing that others in similar situations might also benefit from this information, we write this short summary of the session to share insights about five key themes that emerged.

1. Is law school a good fit for this person?

   Interest about law and intellectual curiosity are two necessary and obvious prerequisites for a successful law school career. Understanding the practical realities of law school, however, can help candidates make more informed decisions about whether they should pursue a law degree or other graduate study.

   Byrd began by offering six characteristics that are important for a successful first year of law school. In his words, students who thrive will:

   1. Be able to read a lot – Byrd characterized the amount of reading by stating, “You may love to read now, but by the time law school is done you might not want to crack open another book as long as you live;”

   2. Be able to write a lot – Both in law classes and in practice, people write a great deal. “It’s like writing a term paper. It’s like writing a term paper every day.”

   3. Be proficient at research – “Students who don’t like to do a lot of research and don’t like to spend some quality time in the library are not going to have a good time in law school.”

   4. Be comfortable speaking in public – Students will have some activities that require standing in front of people and speaking. In many firms, there is a requirement for pro bono service to making partner, which requires speaking in front of groups of people.

   5. Be able to think critically – As Byrd noted, “Don’t believe everything you see or everything you hear.”

   6. Have a healthy respect for history – Because law is based on precedent, students need to be able to read the historical record and understand what happened and why it happened.

   Whether students will be successful also hinges on how much work they put into their studies. Byrd noted that applicants “need to be smart to get into law school, but the people who are the most successful in getting the degree are the people that know how to manage the grind. They show up every day having the work done, they’ve done the reading, they’ve briefed, and they’ve written the outlines.” These students also understand that a short document that looks like a quick read is often packed with information and thus requires a close, careful read.

   Time and financial commitments also should be important considerations in the decision to attend law school. The recent American Bar Association report *Lifting the Burden* (2003) highlighted escalating tuition fees for a legal education and the accompanying rise in student loans to finance this education. With
the median student finishing law school with over $85,000 in school debt, graduates may face difficult choices about the trade-offs involved in their career options. For example, many students are drawn to law for social justice reasons. But the economic realities of law school means that some applicants may need to adjust their expectations about career trajectories. Byrd noted that working for a few years before joining a public interest or non-profit may be wise: “You make some money, pay down the debt, and you get great work experience. You have to remember, a lot of these non-profit and public interest firms don’t have time to teach you how to practice law. Law school doesn’t teach you how to practice law. It teaches you how to think like a lawyer and how to write like a lawyer. Law firms, or the attorney general’s office or whatever that first job is, they’re the ones that teach you how to practice.” Meeker added that lawyers with such experience also become attractive candidates for public service jobs: “The public interest jobs are harder to get. There’s more demand for them than they are available, so you almost have to get other experience.”

2. If law school is a good fit, which schools are attractive prospects?

When considering law schools, candidates should not be blinded by rankings or tier categories. Instead, students should apply to a range of schools that fit their interests.

For students who are concerned about the career outcomes of attending a third- or fourth-tier school, Meeker noted that, “It doesn’t mean that they can’t have a successful career. Geography becomes more important, chances are that they are going to end up in a job in that city or state because there aren’t going to be employers recruiting from outside. The reality is that they are not going to [get a job elsewhere] until they have some experience. A higher percentage tends to go into government jobs and smaller firms. As long as they’re okay with that, they shouldn’t feel bad about it.” Applying to a range of schools, then, gives students multiple options once they graduate.

3. How do law schools evaluate applications?

Most advisors are familiar with the basic elements of a law school application – an undergraduate transcript, LSAT scores, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement. But for those of us who have not attended law school, we may have little sense of how admissions officers use these elements to select candidates.

According to Meeker, admissions professionals complete “first reads” of the files. As he explained, “front to back, we read every file. We don’t use any sort of index, we don’t employ some sort of cut-offs.” Files are then forwarded to the director of admissions who either makes a decision (admit, deny, or waitlist) or refers the file to an admissions committee that reviews files that raise questions (Was there academic misconduct? Was there academic probation? Was there a really high LSAT but low GPA? Is the undergraduate institution not well known?). The committee then either makes a decision or recommendation.

In putting together an incoming class, law schools seek students from diverse undergraduate institutions and geographic regions. When it comes down to the final places in the class, students with strong but not necessarily standout credentials may nonetheless be considered attractive candidates. As Meeker noted, “You have to be able to assess the whole picture of people you are advising.… We don’t get as many candidates from the Midwest as we do from the East and West Coast. To say that somebody with our 25th percentile SAT – 166 at Penn – to say that somebody that’s below a 166 from a Midwest school is not going to be competitive is not really true. If they did really well there, they’ll be far more competitive than somebody from a school with hundreds of applicants.”

4. What else makes a candidate look attractive?

While students often enroll in our Sociology of Law classes believing that the course will prepare them for law school, there is no one prescribed course of study that undergraduate students interested in law school should follow (unless the student has very strong interests in some particular aspects of the law, such as intellectual property, where a stronger background in science is advisable). Admissions committees are instead interested in the breadth
of the courses taken. In fact, when comparing two candidates with similar grades from similar institutions, admissions officers often favor the student who took courses across the curriculum. According to Meeker, “I like to see applicants who take risks with the classes that they are taking, that they’ve stepped outside of their comfort zone or the box. We want to see that they’ve continually challenged themselves throughout their college career.” At the same time, students who took courses in departments that typically assign lower grades will not necessarily be penalized in the admissions process.

After taking the LSAT, the Law School Data Assembly Service compiles reports of the students’ score and GPA. While applicants might use this information along with data from the Law School Admissions Council (officialguide.lsac.org) to gauge their relative standing, they need to keep in mind that their academic performance is also reported relative to students from their undergraduate institution who have taken the LSAT within the last three years. “It allows you to compare that person to other students who are taking the LSAT — you can get a good idea of how the analytical skills compare to other students at that school, the students with whom they were competing to get their grades,” said Meeker. Additionally, in considering the data reported about LSAT scores by the LSAC, Byrd suggested that it may be better to add a point to the quartile ranges because students offered admission typically have higher scores than those who enroll.

Schools vary in their use of the LSAT writing sample — some use it only in limited circumstances while others consider it for nearly every applicant. The practical advice about the writing sample matches what many of us tell our students about papers: make an argument, choose an answer, support it, and explain why you did not choose the alternative. When reading these essays, admissions counselors focus on the ability to make and support an argument clearly, rather than evaluating the substantive conclusion.

Applicants’ personal statements give admissions officials the opportunity to assess the contribution the applicant will make to the law school and the surrounding community. Much like a personal interview, applicants should think of their statement as the means to make a positive and favorable impression: “If they forget everything else about me, they will not forget these things.” To begin this statement, students should follow the guidelines specified by each school to which they are applying. Then, they should perform a brief life inventory, listing all the things that they have accomplished, important life experiences they have had, and significant challenges they have faced. These preliminary steps can help candidates write statements that connect their experiences to their aspirations. As Meeker noted, “If they are going to talk about an interest, there should be something there to back it up: what have they done, what experiences have they had.” Without such detail, the statement may simply ring hollow.

Personal statements are best if they incorporate a reasonable amount of detail. According to Byrd, a coherent essay will address some but not necessarily all of these topics:

1. Demonstrating good interpersonal skills — The ability to have civil disagreement and dialogue make for a superior learning environment and provide the foundation for a more successful career after law school.

2. Highlighting work experience — Applicants should explain what they have gained from this experience.

3. Explaining the relevance of activities in which they have been involved — Applicants should not provide a long list, but focus on those things that really stood out and were important to the point of impacting their life to the point that law school is important to their goals.

4. Providing details of a career focus — While it is not required to have a specific focus, applicants who demonstrate some sense of how training in the law is important to their future goals come across more prepared for law school.
5. Demonstrating motivation – Simply put, applicants should show that they can ‘manage the grind’ of law school.

6. Showing the ability to have empathy – Having sensitivity to others’ conditions and the ability to look at the world through others’ eyes are important skills.

7. Possessing problem-solving skills – To succeed with law, an individual needs to be able to step back, rise above a problem and solve it. Byrd noted: “If you are not interested in solving another person’s problems or another entity’s problems, then law school isn’t for you.”

If anything in a student’s application will raise questions, such as poor grades in a particular semester or year of study, an explanation should be included as an addendum. “Whether it was illness, work, family emergencies, or a change in choice of major, there are factors that might influence a particular semester’s or year’s grades,” said Byrd. Such an addendum provides applicants the opportunity to discuss factors that may have influenced their life and academic career, whether positively or negatively.

5. The reference letter

Writing letters of recommendation requires the greatest direct involvement on the part of faculty but they can be challenging for faculty who are not familiar with the law school environment and its expectations for students. Byrd and Meeker imparted this wisdom: it is better to err on the side of providing more specific information than less. This information may include detailed examples of the candidate’s work, comparisons between the candidate and other law school applicants, and putting the candidate’s course performance into a more specific perspective by providing benchmarks by which to judge the course grades. Admissions officers also find it helpful when letters provide an assessment of candidates’ personality and intellectual curiosity.

In selecting letter writers, law school applicants should ask individuals who are best able to write about their work. Meeker noted “One of the most common mistakes with letters of recommendations that applicants make is that [they think] who writes the letter is more important than the content.” Applicants should meet with potential letter writers and assess whether these individuals can write a strong, positive letter. For those applicants who are applying directly from their undergraduate education or within two years of the bachelor’s degree, most law schools will prefer to receive two letters from former professors.

Byrd and Meeker also offered this final piece of advice to faculty members: Don’t be afraid to call admissions offices with questions or to discuss a student whom you believe is a strong candidate for law school. While these offices are often busy, they also want to ensure that applications are complete and that both applicants and their letter writers are well informed about law school and the application process.

Trivia Section:

Interesting Ex-Lawyers Dept.

Howard Cosell  Julio Iglesias
Otto Preminger  John Cleese
Geraldo Rivera  Robert Louis Stevenson
Charlie Rose  Noah Webster