

PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN LAW IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Fall 2025

by Bryan K. Fair
Thomas E. Skinner Professor of Law
The University of Alabama School of Law

Fifty years ago, after realizing that I did not have the size, speed, or other talent needed to be a professional football player, I decided I wanted to become a lawyer. There were a few prominent Black lawyers in my hometown, but I didn't know very much about them, how they had become lawyers, or even what most of them did. I admired some of them for their leadership in civil rights and community affairs. I hoped to work in government affairs, perhaps in Congress, and believed legal training would be useful. Those lawyers also appeared economically secure, which I was not. I felt confident that legal training would open many opportunities for me to serve others and to gain economic security for myself and my family.

The challenges to achieving my new dream were daunting. I had no lawyers in my family to consult and many other obstacles to overcome, including learning to read and write well, learning to study, learning to perform on standardized tests, as well as finding ways to pay for college and law school. Even though I knew I was behind academically because of my K-12 education and the lack of resources in my home, I never let go of my dream and never believed anyone who suggested that becoming a lawyer was beyond my reach.

With the help of so many teachers, family members, and friends, I was able to achieve my dream. Over the course of that journey, one thing I have learned is that ***there is nothing that lawyers do that you cannot learn to do and learn to do well.*** Whenever I speak to prospective law students, I tell them that they can learn to do anything that lawyers do, they simply must make sacrifices and commit to the work and learning. I have seen many aspiring law students achieve remarkable successes over the past 38 years.

Since completing college at Duke University and law school at UCLA, I have worked with a large law firm and taught legal writing and academic support classes at UCLA. Today, I am fortunate to teach Constitutional Law at Alabama. I am beginning my 35th year on the faculty and I am still enjoying my career, especially working with our students.

Former students are using their careers in law to serve others and to achieve economic security for themselves and their families. Some devote themselves to nonprofit, public interest organizations. Many others practice in various areas of law, including employment, civil rights, bankruptcy, tax, business, intellectual property, banking, energy, family law, torts, contracts, real estate, environmental, estate planning, personal injury, and criminal law. Others work in business, teaching, higher education administration, serve on state or federal courts, or work with state or federal agencies.

Looking back, I have no regrets about choosing law over other professions or recommending legal education as an excellent field of study. I know legal training is demanding and the rewards of that training are immense. If you choose legal education, I hope it will be as rewarding for you.

Today, one can locate many good sources of information on legal education, and most colleges and law schools have numerous faculty and staff who offer advice on careers in law. The purpose of this brief essay is to provide some general advice to assist students considering a career in law, especially minority and other underrepresented students who historically were excluded from legal education and/or who often have limited sources of advice. Beyond this essay, the internet has opened more resources than ever to find useful information on legal education quickly, so read broadly.

Beyond encouraging you to pursue your goal of becoming a lawyer, there are two recent developments that I hope you will give close consideration. One is the Supreme Court's recent decision that it violates the Constitution and federal law to use race as a plus factor in admissions decisions. The other development is the announcement by the National Conference of Bar Examiners that it will implement a new, re-designed NextGen Uniform Bar Exam beginning in some states as early as 2026. To accomplish your goal of becoming a lawyer, you will need to learn all you can about law school admissions and you will need to prepare for the new Bar Exam.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court held that Harvard and UNC's diversity admissions policies violated the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by using race as a 'tip' or 'factor of a factor' in admissions decisions. The Court's six justice majority held that both the Constitution and federal law prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, absent a compelling state justification and a narrowly-tailored policy. According to the majority, neither Harvard nor UNC met that constitutional standard. For the majority, the Constitution requires colorblindness. Effectively, the Court overruled the *Bakke*, *Grutter*, and *Fisher* decisions, forty-five years of precedent permitting universities to use race, among other factors, when seeking to achieve the educational benefits of diversity. No longer.

In a important paragraph near the end of his opinion for the Court, Chief Justice Roberts wrote: "*Nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her [or their] life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise.*" This language suggests that the **personal essay** will play an even larger role in law school admissions, especially at schools that maintain a commitment to enrolling a student body from a broad cross-section of applicants.

The personal essay is a writing sample and a way for the applicant to distinguish oneself. In future essays, candidates will need to discuss various kinds of life adversity, challenges bested, special skills or knowledge acquired, and lessons learned through such adversity. They will need to discuss how such adversity influenced their character and how they will contribute to the law school community. For example, an applicant might describe one's social or economic disadvantages and how one has overcome them. For underrepresented or first generation students, the essay is a platform to discuss such challenges and how they have been bested.

It may seem too early to think about the bar exam. In my opinion, you should prepare in advance for what's ahead. In almost every state, to earn a license to practice law you must pass a rigorous bar exam. Since 1931, the National Conference of Bar Examiners has prepared a standard bar exam used by most states. You should visit its website, www.ncbex.org, for current information on the newly-designed NextGen Uniform Bar Exam (NextGen UBE), sample questions, and study aids. The new exam will evaluate substantive legal knowledge and professional skills.

Whatever your background, I hope that some aspect of this essay might assist you. After you have read it, you may wish to contact me with additional, specific questions about your circumstances, interests, and goals. I would be delighted to provide you any help in making a good decision about whether or where you might attend law school. My e-mail address is bfair@ua.edu. I will respond as quickly as possible. Alternatively, you may wish to call me at 205-348-7494. The earlier you contact me during your undergraduate career, the more advice I can offer you. If this essay is helpful, please share it with others considering legal education.

I have divided this short essay into two parts. In Part One, I describe the ABCs of law school admissions. In Part Two, I recommend a strategy for choosing the right law school and a few outstanding books on law study and the culture of law school. I also provide a current, state-by-state list of ABA-approved law schools. In a follow-up essay, *Academic Excellence in Law School*, I set forth general advice for law students on study skills, time management, legal analysis, and exam analysis and writing. I am happy to share that material as well.

Part One-----The ABCs of Law School Admissions

If I were considering a career in law anew, I would do several things differently. Only you can determine whether you are willing to do what it takes to succeed in law. However, you cannot make such an assessment without full information about what it is that lawyers do. Lawyers perform many roles, and the more you know about their work the easier it will be for you to decide if you really want to undertake the demanding tasks required in law school and in the profession. Therefore, as you decide if law is right for you, I recommend that you ask and answer a few questions.

First, ask yourself: why a legal career? Why not engineering, teaching, medicine, business, social work, computer science, or some other discipline? Law is a great field for persons who like to read, write, and talk in front of others. However, you should explore all fields of study and determine why law is best for you. To answer that question, I would research the work and lifestyles of different types of lawyers. Too many students enter law school without any notion of what lawyers do. During law school they become disenchanted or bored and some drop out. Some dislike the case method, the exhaustive examination of prior court decisions to teach students how to think and write like lawyers. Some are not prepared for the long hours of study; others are terrified of speaking to an audience. If you choose law, you should enter the field with your eyes open. The more information you know about law school, law study, and law practice, the more effectively you will utilize your time in law school.

My image of lawyers was largely shaped by television and movies. I grew up on Westerns, *Dragnet*, *Adam 12*, and *Perry Mason*. I was surrounded by inequality, but never understood why there was so much of it. I was fascinated by competing images of the American legal system in popular culture. Unfortunately, those images barely touched the surface of the significant challenges and rewards of a legal career. I was moved by the portrayals of American inequality in the works of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, and Lorraine Hansberry, among others.

Most local libraries contain small collections on law study and careers. I like the clarity and humor in Kenney Hegland's, *Introduction to the Study and Practice of Law*, a former law school dean's

reflection on how to navigate legal education successfully. You might also read Tracey George and Suzanna Sherry's *What Every Law Student Really Needs to Know*, a thoughtful guide to legal analysis with numerous practice exercises. Such works will help you practice the skills you will need during and after law school.

There are many popular books about our legal system. One of my favorites is Nelle Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the compelling international bestseller which introduced Atticus Finch as the model American lawyer fighting local passion and racial discrimination in small town America. And one of the most influential books that I read in high school was Ann Fairbairn's *Five Smooth Stones*, a fictional portrayal about the Civil Rights Movement, North and South, and a young black man's journey to become a lawyer. You might also consider Bryan Stevenson's bestseller, *Just Mercy*, which chronicles his organization's fight for justice for the criminally accused. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste*, and Eddie Glaude, Jr.'s *Begin Again* are also trenchant critiques of mass incarceration and historical discrimination in the United States. There are many other writers who take up similar themes from the perspective of Native Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Pacific Islanders/Asian Americans, LGBTQ persons, or other marginalized groups or identities.

My point is you cannot read too much or too broadly. If I were starting again, I would read as much as I could about law study, law teachers, teaching methods, legal skills, and the culture of law school, as well as about lawyers, judges and famous cases, before deciding to apply. If you read broadly, you will find that there are many skills you must master in law school and many jobs that lawyers perform. All that reading will be time well spent either because it will help you negotiate the reading demands of law school, or it will help you choose a profession more suited to your special interests and talents.

Second, you should ask yourself: am I willing to work long hours, reading, writing, and talking about legal issues? A law degree is very marketable, and most lawyers earn a comfortable living. However, there are some costs associated with the many benefits of a law career. One cost for most lawyers is a demanding schedule. Lawyers may work many hours each day, including weekends. The work can be very stressful. Lawyers conduct legal research and write various types of legal documents. Some spend substantial amounts of time in court or before administrative bodies. You should try to speak with and observe lawyers at work. Perhaps you can work as a legal assistant or clerk, or perhaps you can visit your local court or attend a trial in a nearby federal court. By going to court, you can observe lawyers, judges, and part of the legal system in operation. Also, observing judges and lawyers will help you identify some of the skills necessary for a career in law. Many lawyers and judges in your community are willing to let you observe what they do. You need only approach them, and tell them what you are trying to accomplish. You can also contact local bar associations to learn about events sponsored by local attorneys. Many cities also have specialized groups of lawyers who mentor minority and underrepresented applicants. They may also give scholarships.

The exacting schedule begins the first day of law school, not when you graduate. Some law teachers suggest that you should expect to spend approximately three to four hours studying for each hour you spend in class. So, if you are in class fifteen hours per week, you might expect to spend at least another forty-five to sixty hours per week outside of class reading, reviewing, learning, and applying the material to practice questions.

Successful students take notes while reading for class and write brief summaries of all the main cases. Then, they attend class ready to discuss and apply what they have read by examining hypothetical questions and asserting plausible analyses in light of the rationales offered in the cases. Next, they study their class notes, distilling the key principles from individual cases and constructing links among all the cases and all the topics covered in each course.

Some students will also consult secondary sources like hornbooks to reinforce their mastery of legal principles and cases. Finally, the most successful students find practice exercises to simulate exam conditions. This practice helps sharpen their analysis and writing skills and helps students test how well they can apply the cases and materials they have worked so hard to learn. When one adds up the hours, law school takes on the appearance of a demanding, full-time job. The rigor of law school prepares you for the demands of law practice.

The essential abilities necessary for a successful career in law include outstanding independent learning skills, such as reading, analysis, writing skills, and advocacy skills. The law student must be able to extract meaning from complex legal texts such as casebooks or hornbooks and to organize and present legal materials orally and in writing. Therefore, the applicant to law school must demonstrate the capacity for above average reading, analytical, and writing skills. Law schools use the LSAT and undergraduate grade point average (“UGPA”) to predict an applicant’s capacity for law study and performance in the first year. Many of these skills are developed through classroom instruction in law school as well as through co-curricular activities, such as student participation on one of the law school's journals or trial or moot court teams. Most law schools also have live-client clinics that permit students to gain practical experience with real clients and cases, especially in the second and third year of law school.

1. APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL: Getting Started

Once you have read about lawyers and law study, and you have decided that you are still committed to all the challenges presented by a career in law, you should ask yourself: where can I get the best information about individual law schools? You need information about how law schools select among the thousands of applicants each year. The best sources of that information are law school catalogs or reference books that profile law schools and their admissions criteria.

The Law School Admissions Council (“LSAC”), the designer of the LSAT, has a terrific website for prospective law students. You should become familiar with every resource on the LSAC site. It provides a convenient way to register and report your scores to law schools through the Law School Data Assembly Service (“LSDAS”).

LSAC provides free practice test information on LSAC’s LawHub. LSAC has also partnered with Khan Academy to expand access to the Khan Academy Official LSAT Prep materials. I encourage you to spend significant time exploring LSAC’s website for current information and data on the LSAT. You may also benefit from LSAC’s LawReady program which is designed to assist undergraduates early in their careers by introducing them to certain skills, information about the legal profession, and support networks leading to law school enrollment. There is no better source for information on the LSAT.

The LSAC website sets out links to the websites of all the ABA-approved law schools in the United States and Canada. It also provides research databases for students seeking a law school with certain characteristics. The LSAC sponsors annual law school admissions forums throughout the country that provide prospective students time to speak with representatives from nearly 150 ABA-accredited law schools. Those representatives know firsthand how admission works at their schools. They know the median numeric profile of admitted students, the scholarship programs, the curriculum, the environment, the bar passage and employment rates, and other key information. Please visit the LSAC website regularly at www.lsac.org.

Key Factors in Law School Admissions

Typically, law schools consider many factors when evaluating applications, including:

- LSAT score
- Undergraduate GPA
- Personal Essays/Personal Statement
- Major
- College attended
- Grade distribution
- Improvement in GPA
- College activities
- Work experience
- Graduate or professional training
- Advanced degrees
- Letters of recommendation
- Family background
- Disadvantages overcome
- State of residency
- Community service

Unfortunately, for most of our history, many law schools in the United States adopted exclusionary admissions policies prohibiting the enrollment of some people. For example, some schools excluded all African Americans. Others excluded all women or other ethnic or religious minorities. Such unfair practices were finally declared unconstitutional, but the effects of those policies are evident in many aspects of the legal profession today. For example, only 5 percent of the lawyers in the US are African American. Only 5 percent are Latinx. And, only 2 percent are Asian American. Less than 1 percent are Indigenous Native People.

In response to the legacy of historic discrimination against some applicants, some law schools began to use diversity goals as one factor in admission to seek the educational benefits of a diverse legal education community. For the past forty-five years, the use of race in admission decisions has been under fire as an unconstitutional practice. Some states have banned the use of race or gender in admissions. Other states still permitted limited use of race or gender to promote educational diversity consistent with the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Bakke*, *Grutter* and *Fisher*. As of June 2023, universities are prohibited from using race as a factor in admission. However, applicants can discuss in their personal statement how race discrimination has affected them and shaped their character, or how they have overcome obstacles or bested challenges. Applicants can also discuss how their experiences will help them contribute to the law school community. I expect some schools to devise an adversity test or adversity index to evaluate personal essays. The essays need to be clear, well-written, and where pertinent, to explain how adversity or obstacles shaped an applicant's character and who they are.

The two most important factors in law school admission are an applicant's LSAT score and undergraduate/college GPA. Most schools weight the LSAT greater than half of the total numerical index score. Other schools give most weight to undergraduate grades. To amass the best possible numerical profile, one must begin preparation for applying to law school as early as possible during one's undergraduate training. To gain admission to law school, the applicant should compare his/her numerical profile with the profiles of prior applicants to ensure that the applicant is competitive at a particular school. I emphasize the numbers here because they are very important at all law schools. Usually, students with the highest numbers gain admission before students with lower numbers. They also usually receive key scholarships. Thus, you must do everything you can to achieve the highest LSAT and UGPA. If your undergraduate GPA is lower than the median at a particular school, you will usually need a higher LSAT to remain competitive there. Occasionally, a school will admit a student because of a high gpa or a high LSAT, but you are in the most competitive position if you present both a high gpa and a high LSAT.

Given the Court's decision in the *Students For Fair Admissions*, the personal statement has become the third most important factor in law school admissions. Take extra time to write a detailed essay.

Below I discuss other key factors that may influence law school admission beyond simply numbers.

A. Choosing a Major

Your area of concentration or major is important because it can increase your opportunities after undergraduate school. You may decide that you want to work for a couple of years. If so, you will need some skills that are marketable coming out of college. You may be undecided about a career and want to take courses in a variety of subjects until you identify an area of substantial interest. There is no one major that is best suited for students thinking about a career in law.

Any major which demands substantial reading and writing, oral advocacy, negotiation, analytical or analogical reasoning, and problem solving is a good pre-law study program. While history, political science, and English majors still dominate, many students are entering law

school with majors in science, engineering, and mathematics. Others are entering with business and/or accounting training. As long as your major is rigorous academically and you perform well in it, a major in almost anything, from astronomy to zoology, will be sufficient preparation.

You should select as your major an area which really interests you and in which you are motivated to work for the highest possible gpa. It may take you one or two years to select a major. Even then, you may discover that your choice was wrong. For example, I started college as an Economics major. After five courses and several C grades, I switched to History where I earned mostly A's. High grades really help a law school applicant. And, the higher an applicant's cumulative GPA, the greater the number of potential law school choices. Law school admissions personnel believe that a student who consistently earns high grades is a dedicated learner and will make the necessary commitment to be successful in law school and in the legal profession. In addition, many schools will evaluate the quality of an applicant's undergraduate school and rigor of the applicant's course of study when making admissions decisions. Therefore, I recommend that you go to the best college that you can afford and that you choose a major that has a reputation for academic rigor.

I also recommend that you take several courses with the same professors. Most law school applications will encourage or require you to submit letters of recommendation preferably from professors who have seen and evaluated your academic performance. By taking several classes with the same professors, and doing well in those classes, you can create a pool of potential references. You may find that your interest in the subject or motivation to work hard increases because you are no longer anonymous to those professors.

B. Co-/Extra-Curricular Activities

Most law school applicants have impressive resumes. They have been student leaders and participants in a variety of organizations. Large numbers of activities do not, however, excuse low grades. It is a mistake to think that because you excelled in student leadership your grades are less important. In fact, most of the applicants you will compete against will have many activities and high grades.

Whenever possible, try to participate in academic extra-curricular activities like college bowl, the debate team, pre-law clubs, etc. Also, study abroad programs can be rigorous and expand your understanding of other countries. Such academic activities will confirm that you are dedicated to learning and hard work and that you will likely meet and exceed the challenges of law school. I did not take advantage of all of the opportunities available because I did not think I could afford them. Be sure to explore all options before you close any door. Try to take advantage of every learning opportunity.

During college many demands will be made on your time. Many organizations with important goals will seek your leadership or support. You must resist the urge to participate in every worthy organization. I chose to be a Big Brother, but otherwise I limited my club time to one or two groups like the Black Student Association or Student Government. Often, time spent on activities means sacrificing study time. **Your priority in college should be your studies, especially if you are planning to go on to graduate or professional school.** You want to achieve the highest grades that you can, and you need to prepare rigorously for your standardized tests for law school.

C. LSAT Preparation

Nearly all ABA-accredited law schools require applicants to take the LSAT. You might think of it as the common denominator for all applicants. By requiring the LSAT, law schools can compare you with thousands of other applicants in terms of reading comprehension, analytical and logical reasoning, and writing skills. Your LSAT score is used to predict how you will perform in your first year of law school. Despite criticism of its use, there appears to be no movement to reduce the use of the LSAT. (Recently, a few schools have indicated a willingness to accept the GRE in place of the LSAT.) Therefore, you must accept it as the standard and spend as much time as you can mastering each component of the test.

The LSAT is a half-day, standardized test. It provides a standard measure of reading and analysis skills. The test will consist of four 35-minute sections of multiple-choice questions and one 35-minute writing section. Three of the four multiple-choice sections contribute to an individual's score. The one, non-scored multiple-choice section is used to test experimental questions. The student does not know which multiple-choice section is not scored. The 35-minute writing test is not scored, but copies are sent to all law schools to which an applicant applies. The score scale for the LSAT is 120 to 180.

The LSAT is designed to measure skills in reading comprehension, the ability to organize and process complex information and to draw reasonable inferences based on it, and the ability to analyze and evaluate the reasoning and arguments of others.

There are three types of questions:

- a) Reading Comprehension
- b) Analytical Reasoning
- c) Logical Reasoning

The LSAC's LawHub contains information and practice materials for each type of question. You must familiarize yourself with each type of question and the test mechanics. You should begin your preparation as early as possible, even during your first year of college.

There are a couple of ways to prepare for the LSAT, including taking a preparation course, working through a self-study guide, or a combination of the two. I would try every approach until you identify one that helps you perform well on each type of question.

It is never too early to begin to prepare for standardized tests like the LSAT. That is why many wealthier, professional families arrange for their children to take standardized tests like the SAT in the seventh grade, and why those children, after repeated practice testing and coaching, become "good" test takers. The term "good" in this sense is synonymous with "experienced." You need to gain as much experience as possible with each aspect of the test. It may take months of practice before you are prepared to take the real LSAT. Practice as much as you can before you take the actual test.

Many minority and underrepresented students, including many African American and Latinx applicants, are not experienced test-takers. First, many have less coaching experience and often much less successful practice with standardized tests. Second, many do not have excellent reading and reasoning skills because they have attended poor schools throughout their lives. Many do not take full advantage of the available test preparation classes or books because they have no advisors or anyone who has taken the test to tell them what to do. Many take the test during times when they are too busy with school, work, or other commitments. The result is that the national average for African American and Latinx students taking the LSAT is approximately 143-144. The average of all takers is approximately 152-153. Because there is a nearly ten-point gap between the average LSAT scores of black and Latinx students and the average scores of all students, there are additional obstacles for some students who seek to compete for spots in top-ranked law schools.

It is imperative that educationally-disadvantaged students, whatever the causes of the disadvantage, take a better approach to LSAT preparation. One should not take the LSAT until one has taken sufficient time to prepare. One's preparation must be focused and disciplined. I suggest that you spend a minimum of six to nine uninterrupted months preparing for the LSAT, preferably during a summer and fall or spring and summer when the impact on your GPA will not be too great. I recommend that you enroll in a preparation course that meets regularly for six to eight weeks. The course should expose you to the basic components of the LSAT. It should provide you with opportunities to learn the directions for each section, to improve time efficiency, and to improve your multiple-choice test performance. The course instructors will offer tips or strategies.

Outside of the course, you can perform timed exam simulations and evaluate your performance on specific sections. For example, if reading comprehension questions are difficult for you, spend several weeks or months working outside of the course on those types of questions. Again, I suggest that you consider a program like Khan Academy.

Your preparation should include substantial instruction, practice testing, and evaluation. If you have a choice, it is probably a mistake to work during your preparation. All of your extra time should be spent in class or performing diagnostic exercises and practice tests. It might take a couple of months before you notice any improvement in your performance. If possible, treat your preparation like a full-time job. If not, create a schedule that revolves around your preparation.

Some schools weigh the LSAT and UGPA equally. For most schools, your LSAT score is probably a little more important than your GPA because it is difficult to evaluate grades from different schools, and the LSAT is standard for all applicants. You should sacrifice all nonessential activities to obtain the highest score on your first attempt. It is best to take the LSAT only once and to fully prepare for it the first time. Some students who take the test without preparation obtain scores in the 130s or low 140s. **Very few of these students get into law school. Today, students who score in the high 140s are routinely denied admission, especially at schools ranked among the top 50 to 100.** On the other hand, students who score in the 150s and higher are often admitted. Remember, the higher your score, the more competitive you will be for admission and for scholarships. Plan ahead and practice as much as possible, and prepare in ways that will produce as high a score as possible.

a) Preparation Courses

Most of the students who take the LSAT each year report that they enrolled in a preparation course such as Stanley Kaplan, Princeton Review, or LSATMax. Therefore, you are at a decided disadvantage if you do not take a course. Search online for the latest courses available. While courses may cost \$1,500 to \$2,500 dollars, some companies offer tuition reductions for students with limited financial resources. Some students might consider taking the preparation course more than once for even greater practice and reinforcement. Many courses offer a reduced rate for repeaters. I cannot overstate the importance of your LSAT preparation. Some schools offer preparation courses through university extension programs as well.

If you cannot afford a preparation course, then utilize the resources available through the LSAC website and Khan Academy. To design your own preparation course requires excellent discipline and organization. Such self-study should not be attempted half-heartedly. As I wrote earlier, it is a good idea to visit the LSAC website, www.lsac.org, for more information about the test and the materials available from the creators of the test. Plus, you now have the Khan Academy's free materials and assistance with LSAT prep.

Today, **there is no excuse for taking the LSAT unprepared.** Even if you must take a year or two off after you graduate to create preparation time, you will likely be better off than taking the exam unprepared.

b) When Should You Take the LSAT?

The test is administered seven times each year, from January to December. The LSAC website will list the specific administration dates and deadlines for registration for each test. You should not plan to sit for the test until you have prepared for at least six months or more, especially if you have a history of lower standardized test scores. Therefore, the optimal time to take the test will vary depending on individual schedules. However, you should take it as early as possible between the spring of your junior year and the winter of your senior year.

It can take several weeks for the Law School Data Assembly Service to submit your score to the law schools you designate, therefore you want to take the exam well in advance of any application deadline. Also, in the event that you need to re-take the exam, if you wait too late to take it the first time, you can miss the application deadline, and you may have to wait another full year before you begin law school.

c) General Test-Taking Tips

- Visit the test site before the actual exam or take a virtual practice exam.
- Get a good night's rest before the examination.
- Eat a nutritious breakfast before the examination.
- Dress comfortably and for variations in room temperature.
- Memorize the directions for each section before you take the test.

- Keep track of your time and work as quickly as possible.
- Work through all of the questions you understand first, then return to more difficult problems.
- Do not leave any questions blank; there is no penalty for guessing.

d) What is a Good Score?

The answer depends on where you want to go to law school. It may be difficult to gain admission to the law school of your choice. It will certainly be more difficult to gain admission with a low LSAT score.

Contrary to what one might hear, the current admissions programs at most law schools desire that all applicants have the highest LSAT score possible because the selectivity of the law school is one factor in law school rankings. At the same time, schools can admit an applicant because of a high gpa. For black students and other minority students, the goal is the same: you must present the highest LSAT and gpa possible. Therefore, your LSAT score and gpa can dictate the number of law schools to which you should realistically apply.

If you take the LSAT and score between 145-155, you should probably consider taking the test a second time. By increasing your score, you improve your admission and scholarship prospects. Since some law schools average all your LSAT scores, it is equally important that you make the preparation time available well in advance of the second test.

Part Two-----Choosing the Right School for You

For the past several years, law school admissions statistics for minority students have been grim. For example, in some recent years, less than fifty percent (50%) of the black students who applied to law school were admitted. There are two primary reasons for the low admission rate: low LSAT scores and poor selection of law schools to which they apply. I have already discussed the LSAT and ways to improve performance on that test.

1. APPLYING TO THE "RIGHT" LAW SCHOOLS

All students need to make more informed selections of law schools to which they apply. Apparently, there is little or no guidance or independent research done on application choices. Many minority students apply to the law schools with national reputations, such as Harvard, Yale, UCLA, Michigan, Columbia, Penn, Stanford, Berkeley, Texas, NYU, Cornell, Chicago, Duke, Georgetown, Virginia, to name a few in no particular order. If a minority applicant does not have a 165 or higher on the LSAT and a GPA in the 3.8-4.0 range, most, if not all, of the schools listed above should be considered longshots.

You should not apply only to schools that are longshots. You should apply to a range of schools to ensure that you have several choices for law school. For example, when I applied to law school, I applied to UCLA, Stanford, Berkeley, Davis, Oregon, Washington University at St. Louis,

Ohio State, Howard, and Georgetown. I wanted to attend law school in California, so I applied to several schools there. But, I applied to Howard and Georgetown because I was willing to live in Washington, D.C. I applied to Washington University at St. Louis because my advisor told me I would probably gain admission there. I applied to Ohio State because my family is in Columbus, and my numerical profile exceeded the profile for applicants like myself to that law school. I applied to Oregon because Derrick Bell was then the Dean. Only UCLA, Stanford, Georgetown, and Berkeley were longshots for me. According to my research, I had a good chance to gain admission at all the other schools. Fortunately, I had several choices and selected UCLA.

I write all of the above by way of example and to make the point that you must apply to a range of schools. You must match and compare your numerical profile with the profiles of other applicants to the same law school. If your numbers are higher than the median profile, chances are good for admission. If your numbers are lower than the median profile of other applicants, your chances for admission are poor. If your numbers are about the same, then your letters of recommendation, course of study, personal statement, and other factors will likely influence the result.

Many schools keep track of numeric profiles of entering classes. Most probably will not report separate numbers for minority students because to do so might be seen as illegal. Thus, minority students must compete against other applicants' profiles. The best way to find that information is through the admissions office, the school's website, or if you attend law day or LSAC forums, ask the representative.

2. OBTAINING INFORMATION ABOUT LAW SCHOOLS

At last count, there were approximately 200 ABA-approved law schools in the United States (see attached list). You can find links to all the law schools at the LSAC website. Some states such as California have many accredited law schools; other states have few ABA-approved schools. For example, in Alabama, there are only three: The University of Alabama School of Law, Cumberland School of Law at Samford University, and Jones School of Law at Faulkner University.

Many of the schools offer application fee waivers to some applicants. Most have catalogs available by late summer. It is your responsibility to evaluate the pool of law schools and to determine those to which you should apply. If you do not have time to research law schools before you graduate, then you should take time off after you graduate.

There are many people who know about legal education. Some of them work at the law school on your campus. Some travel around the country to law days at your school. Some attend regional law school information forums sponsored by the LSAC. Some are pre-law advisors. In addition, there are many books available at your local libraries on law school, law study, and law skills. And, LSAC has an excellent, informative website. With so many ways to learn about law schools and law study, students who are motivated or who have good independent learning skills can access and evaluate such information.

After you research the law schools, you must ask evaluative questions about the schools. For example, it may be important that there are few women on the faculty, or that the student-run law review competition is based on first-year grades, or that half the minority students do not have

permanent jobs before graduation, or that there are no academic support programs, or that attrition for black students is several times the rate for nonblack students, or that the bar passage rate for minority students is extremely poor. By asking such questions, you might determine that some of the schools on your list are not a good fit for you. No one can ask such questions for you, and no one has as much at stake.

You should create your own list of top schools based on your numerical profile, your interests, and your environment preferences. Your list does not have to parallel other national rankings. I recommend that you identify schools that you would be glad to attend. There are many schools that do not appear in the national rankings but that are excellent. Also, there are many administrators and teachers at schools around the country that are dedicated to increasing the success of minority law students. You must identify such people at the law schools that interest you.

For black students who would prefer to attend a predominantly black law school, Howard University, Texas Southern, North Carolina Central, Southern, and FAMU should be on your lists. Howard remains the most prominent predominantly black law school. It has a distinguished tradition and an ideal location. It also has a diverse, talented faculty. The other HBCU law schools have had significant success training and graduating black law students. These are all mission schools; their aim is to train large numbers of underrepresented minority students. There are other mission-driven schools with larger enrollments of Latinx students. Some students begin their law studies at one of the above-listed schools, do well in the first year, and then transfer to a higher-ranked law school. I am not endorsing such transfers, but want you to be aware of that possibility.

You can probably find several law schools in every state that provide excellent legal training. Those I have listed are only illustrative of my point that you must create your own list.

3. SUBMIT APPLICATIONS EARLY

Most law schools have applications available in August or September, and the deadline for submitting applications is early spring (between February and April). For some reason, many minority applicants submit their applications near the deadline. That is a mistake for several reasons. First, the applications that arrive first are processed first and probably receive the greatest level of review and evaluation. Second, if your numbers are above the median of other applicants, you will probably receive early admission. (Many schools begin admitting students in September or October.) Third, schools distribute scholarship money to applicants with the highest numbers first. Once the money is given out, it is not available again until early admittees release the funds by declaring their intent to enroll at another school. That money may not be available for other applicants until May or June. In addition, if there are problems with your application, they can be corrected well in advance of the deadline. Also, it takes time for the law schools to process an application. As the deadline draws near, more applications arrive and admissions staff are overburdened. Therefore, there are several benefits to applying early and none to applying late.

- a. To expedite your applications you might meet with your recommendation writers to provide them a chance to become reacquainted with your outstanding qualities. Provide them a resume and follow up to ensure letters are sent in a timely manner. Many schools now receive recommendations as uploaded files. Make sure your recommendations arrive on time.

- b. Follow the procedures outlined in the application for each law school. If you have questions or problems that you cannot answer, ask for help. Do not harass the admissions staff. Usually, someone is available to assist you in the admissions office by email, telephone, or on a drop-in basis.
- c. Spend sufficient time writing your personal statement to ensure that it is interesting, clear, and void of technical errors. You can write about anything, but you may benefit yourself by writing about your family background, academic experience, or reasons for going to law school. Your statement should distinguish you from other applicants. If you are from a lower socio-economic background, first generation college student, have overcome significant obstacles, or race discrimination, I encourage you to write about your journey and how it has shaped your character and your goals.

4. CHOOSING WHICH LAW SCHOOL TO ATTEND

If you amass a good numerical profile and select which schools to apply to wisely, you should have several choices. My advice is to attend the “best” law school to which you are admitted and that you can afford to attend. I use the term “best” to mean the school you would most want to attend based on your needs and goals. For example, I chose UCLA because it offered the greatest opportunity for exposure to a diverse student body and a large legal community in a warm environment and climate. In addition, UCLA was one of the least expensive law schools in the country, even for a nonresident. It was also ranked as one of the top 25 law schools in the country. You may have different needs, and you should try to articulate them as you decide where to attend law school.

a. Curriculum

Some schools are known for special curricular programs, such as Entertainment Law, International Law, Public Interest Law, or Clinical Education. Most catalogs describe in detail such unique programs. Some schools are also known for their student journals or law reviews. Still, other schools are known for on-the-job training programs during law school and job placement after graduation. Any of the above programs might influence your decision to select one school over another. You might try to visit some of your choices while they are in session and to meet some of the students and faculty.

b. Location

Most law schools offer comprehensive course offerings. Therefore, many students go to law school in one state but practice in another. It is rare for a law graduate to be limited to one region, and it is often for reasons other than where the person went to school. For example, my law school roommate returned to the Midwest, then worked in D.C., and then practiced in New York. Other friends from UCLA went to Chicago, Boston, New York, Atlanta, Miami, Seattle, and Dallas to

practice. There may be other reasons to go to law school in the state you plan to practice, such as summer jobs and general networking, but I do not think that you should limit yourself to one state or region.

c. Financing Law School

It is your responsibility to develop a plan to finance your legal education. Most law schools give scholarships and some scholarships that cover a substantial portion of a student's costs. While you await admissions decisions, you should also complete financial aid applications and obtain information about other sources of public and private funding. There are state and federal financial aid programs and many private organizations that provide monies for legal education for blacks, other minorities, and women. For example, the ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship Fund will award 20 annual \$5,000 scholarships to recipients who attend ABA-accredited law schools. You can find a downloadable application at www.abanet.org/fj. The application deadline is March 1st. The NAACP now offers the Marshall/Motley scholarship. The National Bar Association and the Hispanic National Bar Association may have scholarships available as well. You might also contact AccessLex for potential law school scholarship opportunities.

Read your law school catalogs closely, and ask prelaw advisors and admissions counselors about other possible sources of money. If your numerical profile is high enough, many schools will eventually offer you some form of scholarship.

1. State and federal loan programs are probably the best source of funding for law school. Your legal education is an investment in your future earning potential, so some debt is worth incurring. However, it is easy to borrow the maximum amount allowable each year and to amass huge loan balances. Loans are rarely forgiven. Before you borrow too much, think about how you will be able to pay the loans back.
2. The Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO) sponsors several annual Regional Summer Institutes. CLEO participants undergo six weeks of intensive study of legal method, including legal analysis, research, and writing. Many participants receive assistance in law school placement. Also, graduates of the Institutes receive financial stipends when they matriculate to law school.

CLEO is especially designed for students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. You can write to CLEO for information at:

Council on Legal Education Opportunity
740 15th Street, N.W., 7th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 662-8630 or toll free (866) 886-4343
CLEO Scholars.com

3. Most law schools discourage first-year students from working, and the ABA prohibits students enrolled at ABA-approved schools from working more than 20 hours during a semester. Again, if you must take time off to save money for law school, you would probably perform better when you start. Many second- and third-year students work part-time. Some work for law firms. Others work on campus as research assistants. Part-time work during school and summer employment can help defray some of your law school expenses.

d. What Should You Do During the Summer Before Law School?

There are many valuable activities that you might undertake before you matriculate to law school. For example, you might try to travel, or you might work for a law firm. You might attend a summer law program. Whatever you do, I recommend that you begin reading as much as you can about law school and law study. There are so many good books that have been written about law school and what you can expect from your professors and classmates. Other authors have written about the legal education process, including how to prepare for law examinations or to interview for law jobs. Still others have written about their personal approaches to law school. Hundreds of thousands of people have successfully completed law school, and a good number have written about their success. You can gain great insights from reading about the experiences of former law students.

The best book I have read about law study is *Introduction to the Study and Practice of Law* by Kenney Hegland. Professor Hegland, a former law school dean, wrote about the relationship between what lawyers do and what law students do. Now in its 8th edition, the book discusses why law students read appellate cases and how a student can learn lawyering skills by reading cases. He also wrote about the trial process and how lawyers argue and distinguish cases. Part two of the book focuses on law school skills, including studying, notetaking, case briefing, outlining, legal writing, appellate advocacy, and writing law school exams. Part three discusses the different experiences of law students, career choices, and includes an interesting section where lawyers write about their jobs. I highly recommend Hegland's book. I use it with my students regularly.

Another valuable book is *What Every Law Student Really Needs to Know* by Tracey George and Suzanna Sherry, a rigorous discussion of legal analysis and lawyering skills that each student must develop.

There are many other books you might read to prepare for your legal education. Below, I have listed a few books that I have read that contain useful information about law study, law school, and law careers. Some of those listed are books on legal reasoning, philosophy, and the structure of the legal system.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL PRE-LAW READINGS

HOW TO MAKE IT THROUGH LAW SCHOOL
Davis, J. P.

THE COMPLETE LAW SCHOOL COMPANION
Deaver, Jeff

BECOMING A LAWYER
Dvorkin, E., Himmelstein, J., and Lesnick, H.

GOING TO LAW SCHOOL
Ehrlich, T., and Hazard, Jr., G.

LAW SCHOOL ORIENTATION
Makdisi, John

READING SKILLS FOR LAW STUDENTS
Mayfield, Craig

HOW TO SUCCEED IN LAW SCHOOL
Siegel, Brian

I wanted to write this essay to assist prospective students with law school preparation and the application process. My hope is that one day more minority and underrepresented students will be admitted to law school in larger numbers. That will happen when those students prepare better for the LSAT and apply to the right law schools.

Good luck!

e. U.S. LAW SCHOOLS

(ABA Approved) (for updates visit the link to law schools at www.lsac.org.)

ALABAMA

The University of Alabama
Cumberland School of Law of
Samford University
Jones School of Law of Faulkner
University

ARIZONA

University of Arizona
Arizona State University

ARKANSAS

University of Arkansas-Fayetteville
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

CALIFORNIA

University of California at Berkeley
University of California at Davis
University of California College of
Law, San Francisco
University of California at Irvine
University of California at Los
Angeles
California Western
Chapman
Golden Gate University
Loyola
University of the Pacific- McGeorge
Pepperdine University
University of San Diego
University of San Francisco
Santa Clara University
University of Southern California
Southwestern University
Stanford University
Western State

COLORADO

University of Colorado
University of Denver

CONNECTICUT

University of Connecticut

Quinnipiac College
Yale University

DELAWARE

Widener University School of Law
Wilmington University

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

American University-Washington
Catholic University of America
University of the District of Columbia
Georgetown University
George Washington University
Howard University

FLORIDA

University of Florida
Florida A&M University College of
Law
Florida State University
University of Miami
Nova Southeastern University
St. Thomas University
Stetson University
Barry
Florida International
Ave Maria School of Law
Jacksonville University

GEORGIA

Emory University
University of Georgia
Georgia State University
Mercer University
Atlanta's John Marshall Law School

HAWAII

University of Hawaii

IDAHO

University of Idaho

ILLINOIS

University of Chicago

Illinois Institute of Technology
Chicago-Kent
DePaul University
University of Illinois
University of Illinois- Chicago
Loyola University
Northern Illinois University
Northwestern University
Southern Illinois University

INDIANA
Indiana University-Bloomington
Indiana University
Notre Dame Law School

IOWA
Drake University
University of Iowa

KANSAS
University of Kansas
Washburn University

KENTUCKY
University of Kentucky
University of Louisville-Brandeis
Northern Kentucky University

LOUISIANA
Louisiana State University
Loyola University-New Orleans
Southern University
Tulane University

MAINE
University of Maine

MARYLAND
University of Baltimore
University of Maryland

MASSACHUSETTS
Boston College
Boston University
Harvard University
New England School of Law
Northeastern University

Suffolk University
Western New England College
University of Massachusetts

MICHIGAN
University of Detroit-Mercy
Michigan State-East Lansing
College of Law
University of Michigan
Thomas M. Cooley Law School
Wayne State University

MINNESOTA

University of Minnesota
Hamline Mitchell College of Law
St. Thomas

MISSISSIPPI
University of Mississippi
Mississippi College School of Law

MISSOURI
University of Missouri-Columbia
University of Missouri-Kansas City
Saint Louis University
Washington University

MONTANA
University of Montana

NEBRASKA
Creighton University
University of Nebraska

NEVADA
Nevada-Las Vegas

NEW HAMPSHIRE
University of New Hampshire

NEW JERSEY
Rutgers-State University-Camden
Seton Hall University

NEW MEXICO
University of New Mexico

NEW YORK

Albany Law School
Brooklyn Law School
Cardozo School of Law- Yeshiva
Columbia University
Cornell University
Fordham University
Hofstra University
City University of New York- Long
Island
State University of New York-Buffalo
New York Law School
New York University
Pace University
St. John's University
Syracuse University
Touro College

NORTH CAROLINA

Campbell University Norman Adrian
Wiggins School of Law
Duke University
Elon University School of Law
University of North Carolina
North Carolina-Central University
Wake Forest University

NORTH DAKOTA

University of North Dakota

OHIO

University of Akron
Capital University
Case Western Reserve University
University of Cincinnati
Cleveland State University
University of Dayton
Ohio Northern University
Ohio State University
University of Toledo

OKLAHOMA

University of Oklahoma
Oklahoma City University
University of Tulsa

OREGON

Lewis and Clark Law School
University of Oregon
Willamette University

PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania State- Penn State
Duquesne University
University of Pennsylvania
University of Pittsburgh
Temple University
Villanova University
Widener-Harrisburg
Drexel University Earle Mack
School of Law

PUERTO RICO

Inter-American
Pontifical Catholic
Puerto Rico

RHODE ISLAND

Roger Williams

SOUTH CAROLINA

University of South Carolina
Charleston School of Law

SOUTH DAKOTA

University of South Dakota

TENNESSEE

Belmont University
Lincoln Memorial
University of Memphis
University of Tennessee
Vanderbilt University

TEXAS

Baylor University
University of Houston
St. Mary's University School of Law
Southern Methodist University
University of North Texas Dallas
South Texas College of Law
University of Texas

Texas Southern University
Texas Tech University
Texas A&M

UTAH
Brigham Young University
University of Utah

VERMONT
Vermont Law School

VIRGINIA
Appalachian School of Law
George Mason University
Regent University
University of Richmond
University of Virginia
Washington and Lee University
College of William and Mary
Liberty University School of Law

WASHINGTON
Gonzaga University
Seattle University School of Law
University of Washington

WEST VIRGINIA
West Virginia University

WISCONSIN
Marquette University
University of Wisconsin

WYOMING
University of Wyoming