David O. Brink; UCSD (email: dbrink@ucsd.edu)
Law School for Philosophers and Others[1]
April 2024

I. LAW SCHOOL AND THE PRACTICE OF LAW

Law school and the practice of law are natural destinations for philosophers, political scientists, and others interested moral, political, and legal principles, policies, and issues. The study and practice of law emphasize analytical skills, and many areas of law involve issues of rights, responsibilities, and social justice that are important parts of moral and political philosophy and that can be rewarding practice areas. Law degrees are very flexible credentials, and there are many employment opportunities for law school graduates, including law firms, big and small; in-house counsel; government agencies and prosecutor's offices in the Justice Department and District Attorney's offices; public defenders offices; and public interest agencies. Unlike academics, who often have little geographic control in their careers, lawyers can usually find practice opportunities near family or in cities or regions where they prefer to live. So law school graduates typically have more job opportunities, command higher salaries, and have more geographical control over where they live and work than academics and many other professionals.

Like any other industry, law experiences periodic fluctuations in supply and demand. Though there have been some layoffs in the tech side of transactional law in Big Law firms recently, it's not clear if that trend will continue. Otherwise, demand and supply for lawyers seem now in rough equilibrium. That doesn't mean that law school graduates don't have to worry about their employment prospects or that a legal education poses no financial risk. But it does mean that if you attend a good law school, perform well there, and don't go into too much debt in the process, your career prospects should be pretty good.

II. TWO POINTS OF TRANSITION

There are two ways in which thinking about law schools and the application process are in the process of transition.

1. Rankings. Law schools are ranked by various sources and criteria. The most influential ranking is by U.S. News & World Report (https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools). The U.S. News ranking is based on various objective criteria, including how selective the law school is as measured by numbers of applications, yield, LSAT scores and GPA of entering students, graduation rates, bar passage rates, employment within the first year after graduation, resources of the law school (including faculty and library resources), and reputational surveys within the profession. In protest over various aspects of the U.S. News criteria and rankings in 2023, several prominent law schools refused to share data with U.S. News. U.S. News went ahead with its ranking based on publicly available information. In April 2023 they posted their new rankings, which were immediately greeted with protests from many of the schools that had opted out on the ground that U.S. News was not using reliable data. U.S. News then pulled those rankings and issued revised rankings in May 2023, which were not terribly different from previous ones. My sense is that prospective students were already too sensitive to small differences in rankings. I also expect that the new rankings will not be that much different from the old rankings.
2. The LSAT. for many years, every law school required students to take the LSAT, which is administered by the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) and is scored on a scale of 180 (180 being a perfect score). Recently, some law schools, including some prominent ones (e.g. Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, Northwestern), no longer require the LSAT. But, for now, even schools that do not require the LSAT still require the LSAT or the GRE. Unless you are only applying to schools that do not require the LSAT, you will still have to take the LSAT.

[1] The original audience for this workshop was philosophy majors interested in law school and perhaps comparing the merits of law school and graduate study. However, most of the information here is relevant to a wider range of students.

It's not clear how these developments might affect how law schools are ranked and the admissions process in the future. But I don't think that either development has had a big impact yet. For the time being, it seems safe to assume that the immediate future will be like the past.

III. THE APPLICATION

1. Historically, law school admissions are incredibly numbers driven — the two most important parts of your application are your GPA and your LSAT score (or perhaps your GRE score, where applicable). Other components, such as your letters of reference, your personal statement, and your personal history, can make a difference, especially at the margins, but your prospects are largely determined and predictable by your two objective scores. You can often reliably plot your chances of admission at a law school knowing only your GPA and LSAT. Indeed, some good law schools (e.g. Virginia) don't even factor the strength of your undergraduate institution into how they weight your GPA.
2. The LSAT. The LSAT is administered by the LSAC and is scored on a scale of 180 (180 being a perfect score). For what it is worth, philosophers tend to perform pretty well on the LSAT (and the GRE), whether that reflects causal influence or common cause. For some time, philosophers and economists have been neck and neck for the highest average LSAT scores by major. Though some law schools are beginning to accept applications with the GRE and without the LSAT, for the time being, you still need to take the LSAT to apply to most law schools. The LSAT is administered several times during the calendar year: in 2024, January, February April, June, August, September, October, and November. You should plan to study for the LSAT on a part-time basis for at least 4-6 weeks, whether on your own or as part of a course. Many law schools have rolling admissions, so it is to your advantage to get your application in early, say, sometime October-December. Though it's great if you get a strong and representative LSAT score on your first try, you should allow for the possibility that your first score might not be your best and that you might want to take it a second time. That means that you should take the LSAT in the spring or summer before you apply, so that if you need to retake it, you can do so in the fall (October or November) and still submit your application before the end of the calendar year.
3. LSAC. Your law school applications will be centrally processed through the LSAC, so you need to set up an account there.
4. Letters of Reference. Most law schools require two or three letters of reference. These can be academic or work-related letters. But if you are interested in strong law schools and you have no unusually significant work-related references, it is better to get academic references. Try to get to know at least two professors well (take more than one course from them and have some contact with them outside of class), so that they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic references. Provide your references with work you did in their courses, your transcript, a rough draft of your statement of purpose, and a list of the schools to which you plan to apply.
5. Personal Statement. If you have an inspirational personal story about your interest in the law or obstacles you have overcome, tell it. That could be a game-changer at some schools, especially if you are otherwise on the bubble. Otherwise, don't try to concoct something profound. A good personal statement should explain your interests in the study and practice of law and be thoughtful, mature, and well written.
6. Interviews. Roughly half the law schools in the T20 conduct interviews. A few (e.g. Northwestern) interview all applicants; most (e.g. Harvard, Chicago, and Columbia) do interviews selectively by invitation.

IV. CHOOSING WHERE TO APPLY

1. Most students apply to several law schools, anywhere from half a dozen to a dozen or more. Form an honest assessment of the strength of your application and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. Add a couple of "aspirational" and "insurance" applications.
2. The law school you attend and how well you perform are important professional credentials at all stages of your career, but especially early in your career.

3. Law schools are ranked by various sources and criteria. The most influential ranking is by U.S. News & World Report (https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools). (See comments above.)
4. Many websites allow you to predict fairly reliably your chances of admission to different law schools by using only your GPA and LSAT scores and a scatter plot that uses this data on the x-axis and y-axis.
5. You can find useful information about the admission procedures and criteria on the websites of individual law schools that interest you. There are also websites that provide general information about law school rankings and admission procedures and criteria, such as Top Law Schools (https://www.top-law-schools.com).
6. If you expect to practice in a certain region, put a thumb in the scales for strong schools in that region.
7. If you know the area of law in which you are interested, especially if it is a specialized area, put a thumb in the scales for schools that have faculty and program strengths in those areas of law.

V. CHOOSING WHERE TO ATTEND

1. Your employment prospects are likely to reflect your educational credentials — where you went to law school and how well you performed there (e.g. your class rank). This may be true at any point in your career, but especially at the beginning, typically becoming less important the more professional experience you acquire.
2. Some legal career opportunities are more pedigree sensitive than others. The markets for academic legal careers, high profile judicial clerkships, and Big Law firms are especially pedigree conscious.
3. Other things being equal, attend the most highly ranked law school to which you are accepted, though don't attach much significance to small differences in rankings.
4. Other things may not be equal if you have regional employment interests. For instance, although any employer will be impressed by a JD from Yale, Harvard, or Stanford, you might prefer Stanford to Yale if you want to practice IP in Silicon Valley or you might prefer UCLA to NYU or Columbia if you intend to practice in CA.
5. Other things may not be equal if the financial aid is very different at different law schools. Law school is an expensive proposition, costing as much as $70K per year, and you want to minimize the amount of debt you have at the end of three years of law school. Not only do you want to repay no more debt than necessary, but the need to repay loans can constrain your career choices. (N.B. Some law schools have tuition forgiveness for students who commit to practicing public interest law after law school.) All law schools offer need-based financial aid, and all but Yale, Harvard, and Stanford offer some kinds of merit-based aid. For instance, one might choose USC over NYU if one was offered significantly more aid at USC.
6. Other things may not be equal if you have family or friends near one law school but not another. Law school can be an emotionally challenging period in your life, and it's nice to have the support of family and friends.
7. Most law schools have open houses for prospective students in the spring. Though it's not necessary to attend these events, they can be useful in conveying the ethos of the school, faculty, student body, and community. If you are interested in particular areas of law, make a point of trying to talk to faculty or students in that area.