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Courtney Gabbara and Bridget Shaheen both worked as Assistant Directors of Admission at Michigan State University College of Law and are recent graduates of the Law College. Having met in law school through Moot Court, both women have found a long lasting friendship based on their future career interests, laughter, and love of nachos. Bridget graduated from Saint Xavier University with a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice and has actively pursued her interests in family and criminal law. She is originally from Chicago, Illinois and enjoys college football, specifically Notre Dame (Go Irish!), reading, and country music. Courtney earned her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Michigan State University and has been a Ms. JD Board Member since April of 2011. Her hobbies include scrapbooking, running Warrior Dash, and cooking.
An Insider’s Look at the Law School Admissions Process

Hello from [Ms. JD] We’re making it our goal at Ms. JD to help more women get into the law school of their dreams, and so starting now, Ms. JD is going to take you step-by-step through the law school application process, from deciding whether law school is right for you to deciding which school best fits your needs and everything in between!

Each section will explore different phases of the pre-law process. We will begin by going over steps you can take to familiarize yourself with what being a real lawyer is all about (hint: it’s not quite like what you see on TV!). Next, we will help you weigh the pros and cons of whether law school is right for you. We will talk openly about the fun, the financial commitment, the job prospects and more. In short, we will talk about the good, the bad, and the sometimes ugly that is the reality of attending law school. By the time we’re done, you’ll have all of the information you need to feel good about deciding if law school is the place for you.

Once you have committed to your decision of attending law school, it is our hope that we will be able to assist you in becoming a stronger applicant. To do this, we will talk about how you can highlight your strengths throughout your resume, personal statement, letters of recommendation, and more. We will even tackle the dreaded LSAT and provide you with tips for not just making it through, but shining! You will find that the theme throughout our guide will be to help you feel comfortable being proactive when exploring a law school and its application requirements. Regardless, following our tips will help make your application stronger. Once you’ve submitted what should be a polished application, we’re going to discuss things to consider when choosing a law school and how to prepare for the next three years.

Having been in your shoes ourselves (applied to law school, gone to law school, and working for a law school we have come to know and love), our motivation stems from the idea of helping students avoid the ups and downs of the application process that we experienced. Essentially, we come from a place of “if we only knew then what we know now,” and how we can use what
we have learned during our time as Assistant Directors of Admission to assist you. Our goal during the next several weeks is to help you make educated decisions every step of the way throughout the pre-law process. To do this, we will not only pull from our own experiences, but from the experiences of those we have counseled in the past, as well as perspectives from other experts in the admissions field.

Overall, we hope that you find this guide to be a useful tool during your exploration of attending law school. We always welcome comments and questions and hope that you join us regularly on the Ms. JD blog as we continue to provide pre-law resources.

Photo courtesy of Michigan Law
What ‘Law & Order’ Doesn’t Tell You

“You’re out of order! You’re out of order! The whole trial is out of order!” — *And Justice for All*

“You want the truth? You can’t handle the truth!” — *A Few Good Men*

Sound familiar? It never ceases to amaze us how the media, TV shows, movies and literature portray lawyers. However, the everyday person and people like yourself considering law school often do not realize what being a real lawyer is all about. How the media portrays lawyers and can jade the public’s view of what real “lawyering” is.

Our goal is to ensure that you are being smart and savvy “consumers.” By reviewing the falsities shown in a handful of popular TV shows, we are going to break down some of the common media stereotypes and misconceptions about the legal profession. In highlighting these differences, we will provide you with a more realistic understanding of what the legal profession is all about. Going to law school is an investment in your future that should not be taken lightly, which is why it is important for you to do your research before investing your time, money and resources.

To get started, we will take a look at a few myths put forward by several popular TV shows about lawyers and then take a look at some cold, hard facts that demonstrate the reality of the legal profession and market. (Like any good lawyer, we are going to insert a disclaimer here: No individual’s legal practice looks exactly the same. If there is a particular area of the law that you think you’d like to practice in, be sure to do your research! We’ll give you tips for how to do that in a later post in this series.)
TV Show Myth No. 1
All attorneys spend their careers litigating in a courtroom. This myth is perpetuated by shows like Law & Order and Boston Legal, where almost every episode ends with the jury delivering a verdict in favor of our beloved TV character. In the small span of an hour (well, more like 45 minutes with commercials) there is typically a murder, an investigation, and a trial with Jack McCoy delivering a gut-wrenching closing argument resulting in a verdict of guilty.

Truth: More than 90 percent of criminal and civil cases are resolved without ever going to trial. You may be surprised to learn that the majority of cases, civil and criminal alike, do not end in trial. In reality, most defendants in criminal cases will plead guilty (often in return for being charged with a lesser crime, resulting in less jail time) while in civil cases, a settlement will be reached out of court through an alternative dispute resolution method like mediation or arbitration. For some would-be lawyers, this may take away the glitz and glamour of being an attorney. Nevertheless, it is the rare attorney whose daily job requires her to cross examine a witness or “throw the book” at someone.

TV Show Myth No. 2
All attorneys make six-figure salaries. Almost every attorney-based TV show is premised around the young, charming attorney making so much money they don’t know what to do with it.

Truth: The salaries earned by recent law school graduates are on a downward trend. Today’s law school graduates are not seeing the six-figure salaries once promised to them just for making it through law school. In 2010, a law school graduate’s starting salary saw a 13 percent decrease compared to 2009 graduates. Couple this with another startling fact: more and more law school graduates are struggling to find work.
**TV Show Myth No. 3**
When you’re a lawyer, you get to make your own rules. More than ever, TV’s portrayal of legal practitioners in America is becoming an [office playland] full of romance and fun with a small side of legal work, similar to what can be found on shows like *Franklin & Bash*.

**Truth:** Lawyers are held to a very strict code of conduct that is monitored by each state’s respective Attorney Discipline Board Commission. Unlike shows like *Boston Legal* that portray being a lawyer as all cigars, alcohol and romance with clients, almost every state has a code of professional responsibility that attorneys must adhere to, and most have a [provision] strictly prohibiting a sexual relationship with a client. Not adhering to these rules of professional conduct could result in discipline, license suspension, or even becoming disbarred.

**TV Show Myth No. 4**
Women are just as likely to climb the legal food chain as men are. Shows like *Drop Dead Diva* and *The Good Wife* often portray women in the legal profession as “making it.” By increasing the number of [leading ladies] a false comfort is given to the public about equality within the legal job market.

**Truth:** Women are still struggling to find equal footing to men within the profession. Although women have come a long way, we are still not reaching our maximum potential in the legal world. Currently, women only account for 33 percent of lawyers in the United States, despite being about 50 percent of our law school classes. Female practitioners seem to be [earning entry level jobs] but are failing to reach equity partner at the same rates as men. And, similar to our counterparts in business, women in law are not occupying our equivalent of the c-suite in as high of a number as men. In fact, women have been stuck at no more than 16 percent of equity partners for over 10 years.

This unrealistic portrayal of attorneys gives everyone false hopes and expectations about what attorneys are able to do, but like it or not, the public and your future clients each have their idea of what an attorney is. Whether it be a negative or a positive stereotype, as an attorney you must provide competent and diligent representation no matter what, even if it means foregoing the glitz and glamour of a trial in the courtroom or a big, expensive car.

If your idea of what your life as an attorney might be like is based off of a television show, we strongly encourage you to do your research. The truth is attorneys take on many roles during their careers. Lawyers are evaluators, advisors, advocates and counselors. They are relied upon for guidance and advice — an attorney is someone who a client trusts and confides in. As a lawyer, you have a responsibility to your client to always act according to your client’s best interest.

As glamorous as it is to imagine ourselves becoming big shot attorneys with unlimited bank accounts and a quick wit, good sense requires that you consider the reality of the legal market today. Smoke and mirrors aside, evaluate your goals and decide if law school is still right for you.

Now that you know what real lawyering isn’t, we will next discuss steps you can take to get first hand knowledge into what being a real lawyer is all about!
To be or not to be ... a lawyer?

Okay, so maybe Shakespeare didn’t use those words exactly, but in all seriousness: do you want to go to law school? Our intention has not been to scare you, but to shed some light on the realities of the legal market to help you make the right decision for yourself. You should not be considering law school simply because you have nothing else to do after graduation, are great at arguing, or your parents want an attorney in the family.

Now that we’ve broken some of the common myths, we want you to take it further and explore your interests. Law school students come from all sorts of backgrounds. There is no perfect major or perfect path, which is why it is essential to take the time to explore your options by doing one or more of the following: internships, job shadowing, informational interviews, speaking with your pre-law advisor, observing court and cold-calling attorneys.

We have three rules to follow for any of these options:

Getting Started

1. Before you do anything, do a bit of research on your own. What do you want to know before making this (rather hefty!) investment in law school? What makes you happy? What do you like doing? Then, craft questions that help you identify whether your interests sync with the law, and what area of the law might be best for you. Armed with this list of thoughtful, knowledgeable questions, you’re ready to embark on any of our methods below!

2. Professional attire is a must for any in-person meeting.

3. We recommend following up with a thank-you card or email, especially if you can personalize the note with something you learned from the experience. (If you are going to take the time to create a connection, why lose it?)
Speaking with Pre-Law Advisors and Talking with Your Professors

Regardless of what your major is, if your university has [a pre-law advisor] available for you, you should seek them out! A pre-law advisor can tell you what to expect from law school and how to learn more about the legal careers you can pursue. They will also be able to provide you with a variety of resources, such as informational events and workshops, relevant internship opportunities, and coursework you might want to take while considering law school. (Our favorite law school resource is [this one]… but we may be a little biased!)

If your undergrad does not have a pre-law advisor, seek out attorneys who are professors at your school. Consider taking a course with the professor who may be a great resource for your law school application, or for future job opportunities. Even if you decide not to take a course that the professor teaches, reaching out to have a candid discussion about law school and the profession is likely to be very helpful.

Informational Interviews

[Informational interviews are a great tool] to gain helpful insight into the legal field. An informational interview is an interview that is used not to gain employment, but to gain knowledge (e.g. what the attorney’s job is like or what responsibilities he or she has). When contacting attorneys for an informational interview, be clear that the purpose of the meeting is informational. Even though this is not a job interview, you should act professionally. Use the questions you’ve prepared from your research and feel free to take notes during the meeting. (After the interview, don’t forget rule No. 3!)

Hit the Courtroom

Step outside of your comfort zone and into a courtroom. You have a right of public access to courtroom proceedings, meaning anyone is allowed to enter a courtroom and watch a trial or a hearing. It is a rare occasion that a judge will close his or her court to the public. Take notes on what you observe and after, when things are wrapping up, take the bull by the horns and reach out to the attorneys or even the judge! Then, schedule an informational interview.

Job Shadowing

Job shadowing allows you to explore career opportunities by spending time with a person working in your career field of interest. Shadowing is best done when trying to learn what a “day in the life” of a lawyer is like. By observing their daily activities, you will also get a chance to have your questions answered. To set up a job shadowing day, survey your connections. Reach out to professors, advisors, and even your parents! See if anyone knows an attorney who might allow you to observe them for the day. Second, be proactive. If you visited the courthouse, you may have gotten some face time with an assistant district attorney or a public defender. Ask him or her if you can shadow. Be mindful of the fact that there may be places you cannot go with an attorney (e.g. if he or she is giving a client privileged advice).

Internships

Are you an experiential learner? Then consider pursuing a legal internship. Unlike shadowing, internships give prospective law students a chance to actually assist in some sort of legal work. Interning can take up quite a bit of your time, but besides helping you decide if law school is meant for you, it will stack your resume. We suggest you check with your local courthouse. Many have volunteer opportunities available. Other good avenues are legal services organizations (there’s at least one in every state thanks to federal funding!) and law school clinics. While you won’t be arguing motions (you need a JD or at least some legal training to do that in any state) you can get a great sense of what lawyers do by supporting their administrative tasks.
Note: Having a legal internship prior to law school will not make or break your competitive edge when it comes time to submit your application. A legal internship while in undergrad is essentially viewed like any other pre-law school experience.

**Cold-Calling Attorneys**

Not everyone has an attorney in the family to turn to with questions. This means that the majority of us have to **dig a little deeper** to gain a realistic perspective on what the legal profession really entails. We understand the thought of **calling up a total stranger** for information can be scary, but we assure you, most attorneys are there to help! To make cold-calling a little less, well, cold, look for an attorney who attended your college or university, had similar academic interests to yours, or participates in another community organization you’re involved in. (Or try the **board of directors** of Ms. JD!) Those similarities can provide an excuse for why you reached out to that specific attorney. To make the interaction more successful, when you reach an attorney, be sure to ask if this is a good time. If not, quickly explain why you’re calling and ask if there would be a convenient time to reschedule. To ensure positive dialogue, see rule No. 1! If need be, practice! You’ll feel better and more prepared when your nerves hit.

This is not an all-inclusive list but these research tools are tried and true. By following one or more of them, we hope that you are able to answer the question: to be or not to be… an attorney!
3 Things to Consider Before Deciding to Go to Law School

Assuming you’ve done your homework on the realities of the legal profession, you’re probably feeling as though you are at a crossroads (if this little guy doesn’t cheer you up, we don’t know what will!). That’s understandable! Now it is time to weigh the pros and cons of moving forward with the pre-law process or finding a different path. We have come up with a few questions for you to consider while you are weighing your various options. Take a moment as you are reading along to think about your honest answer to these questions before moving on to our suggestions. Give yourself the opportunity to reflect, as it will only help you to make your decision. Here’s what to consider:

What Attracts You to the Law?
Now that we have debunked some of the common myths about the legal profession and law school, it is time for you to dig deep and think about whether you can really see yourself as an attorney. Hopefully, your reasons to attend law school [do not include] “because I’m bad at math,” “I’m good at arguing,” “because everyone else in my family is an attorney,” etc.

As we have mentioned numerous times before (and we will continue to emphasize this point) law school is an investment and involves a lot more consideration than a single, flimsy reason such as “I don’t know what else to do after college.” If you still aren’t sure of the answers to the questions above, don’t be afraid to drop in at a law school in your area and ask to sit in on a class, take a tour, and gain a general impression of what the law school atmosphere is like. This should help you determine whether you can see yourself entering law school and the legal profession.
How Are You Planning to Finance Your Legal Education?

We know this is a topic we have touched on several times now, but that just goes to show how important it is to keep in mind. Finances are probably one of the most important things to think about when deciding whether or not to go to law school. Essentially, you have to ask yourself: Is law school worth the investment? If so, how much is law school, and how will you pay for it?

The first thing to note when looking into law schools is whether they are public or private. Although sometimes not significantly, tuition tends to be less expensive at public law schools. Note, however, that many private schools are more well-known for giving generous grants. Don’t write-off the law school that you are interested in based off of tuition alone, especially because you may be able to negotiate your financial aid package. This is where we expect you to start doing your homework again and exploring the financing options each school has to offer its students.

Scholarships: Most, if not all, law schools (public or private) tend to offer a wide range of scholarships and grants to incoming students — not to mention the possibility of increasing or gaining a scholarship after the successful completion of your first year. If your goal is to earn a scholarship, make sure to note important scholarship deadlines. Does the law school require you apply for its scholarships? Is each application instantly reviewed upon receipt? Look at renewal criteria — is it difficult to maintain the scholarship award? (Hint: The ABA requires law schools make renewal data available on their individual school websites)

Loans: Yes, that’s right. Loans! We said it. There. Now the elephant in the room is out in the open. In today’s economy, the idea of taking out loans can be scary. What you need to remember as the savvy consumers we know you are is that there is bad debt and there is good debt (even we were stumped by a few of these). When investigating the types of loans you should take out, consider the difference between private loans and public loans. Remember that most lawyers do come out with a high amount of loans. For better or worse, it’s part of the law school game.

LRAP: If you’re someone who wants to work in public interest after graduating from law school, be on the lookout for law schools with successful LRAP (Loan Repayment Assistance Programs). These are private programs that help students working in the public interest repay their loans. Depending on what you do, you may also be eligible for federal loan forgiveness after working in the public interest for a certain number of years. If you think you’re going to go into public interest work after law school, we recommend that you get to know an organization called Equal Justice Works more. They’ve got great information on everything from job opportunities and grants to loan repayment.

Budgeting with the option of taking a few years off to enter the workforce, save money, and then apply: At the risk of sounding like a broken record, we want to reiterate that it is important to do your homework on law schools. Sometimes that means slowing down and taking a step back. This may mean that you take a few years off between undergrad and law school. You may be thinking, “What? Take time off? That’s not a part of the plan!” However, taking time off before going to law school is not unusual, some schools prefer it, and it can make you more marketable when you’re applying for jobs after law school. Plus, you have the added benefit of making money and setting money aside into savings. (Note: Your LSAT score is good for five years!)

What Will Your Job Prospects Be After School?

Look back at your previous answers as to why you want to go to law school and do some research as to what those career choices will offer. Make sure you are being realistic about
where you want to go with your career in law while also looking at the financial aspect of the investment of law school discussed above.

Even after all we have told you, if your main reason to go to law school is still to make that six-figure salary, you should probably consider doing much more research. While salary is important when determining your future career, being an attorney is much more than salary. It is important to keep in mind what lawyers can do and what they are worth beyond the salary they make, especially since so many attorneys are assisting those that are less fortunate. So take your mind off those dollar signs, and take a look at the bigger picture! Look at how many attorneys who lives are fulfilled by their jobs beyond salary and how many attorneys are helping people in the United States and beyond. If you are hoping to gain a larger return on your investment into law school beyond a hefty salary, law school may be in your near future.

While all this information may seem daunting, breaking through these various myths and doing research into financing your degree and your legal areas of interest sets you up for success. Ultimately, law school is your decision. You are the only one who can decide if law school is truly worth the investment. At the end of the day, it’s probably impossible to know that you’re making the right decision. (FYI for future law students: knowledge is a really high standard.) Therefore, at some point, you have to make a leap of faith. And remember, "you were made to be awesome".
Does it Really Pay to Have a Clearly Defined Path for Law School?

By now, you’ve probably decided that law school is the place for you (time to do a happy dance)! We’re so happy for you because we know that to get here, you busted through myths, left no stone unturned, and really did your homework.

Now that we know you are going to go to law school, we want you to start thinking about how to select which law schools you will be applying to. We know it may seem a little early in the pre-law game to be thinking about specific schools. However, by exploring what specific schools offer in your areas of interest, you’ll be better prepared for the application process and ensure that you’re a competitive applicant. Also, narrowing your application list early will help you focus on scholarship and financial aid opportunities at the schools you’re most interested in!

Consider this—law school applications cost roughly $60 a pop, not to mention all of the extra fees associated with taking the LSAT and sending your application directly to each law school through LSAC. Traditionally, prospective law students have applied to roughly seven to ten law schools each. Recently, however, LSAC has identified a declining trend in the number of schools students have applied to. Potential reasons for the decline vary from the ease of gaining legal aid online to the decline in jobs.
Narrowing down the number of schools you apply to can save time and also money. The question is how do you decide which schools make the final cut? The answer: explore your legal interests! Figuring out what you’re interested in before you apply helps you match your interests with what each law school has to offer. It also helps you mold your application to explain how the particular law schools you selected can help you pursue your future professional goals. For example, if you have an interest in Intellectual Property (“IP”), it would be beneficial to learn what the top IP law schools are; if fashion is your thing you might want to tailor your application appropriately. Your personal statement should mention the law school’s programs that match your legal interest (hint: we will talk about this more later but law schools love to know you have a genuine interest in their programs!).

On the other hand, you may be like many students and not yet know what your particular interest is. Do not fret! You won’t be harmed during the application process if you are unsure of what type of law you would like to practice. What you need to figure out is why you want to go to law school and be prepared to craft a story around that! To figure out what interests you (and, therefore, will help you write a better application), look back on our previous tips and follow our steps. At the very least, you should find something that ignites a passion and helps you write a stronger application!

When we asked Nicole Chiu-Wang what guidance we should provide law students who may not know what they want to focus on during law school, she provided this sage advice: “If you are not going straight from undergraduate to law school, or you majored in something translatable in the legal field, think about what you did and did not like and let that help guide you when choosing the areas of law you are interested in.”

There are pros and cons to a more specialized approach. By taking a more specialized route or want to take a liberal arts approach to legal education, as Nicole reminded us, it’s okay to switch routes! The key is to focus on quality experiences. Look for programs that will offer you flexibility including a broad curriculum and experiential learning opportunities. If you think you’ll prefer one type of learning experience over the other, you should consider that when deciding which schools are right for you.

It is really as simple as that—a small piece of the puzzle—but a piece nonetheless. Utilize the following pre-law checklist of things you need to start doing now that you’ve made the jump and decided you’re going to law school!
Below is a step-by-step checklist on what you need to do to prepare for the application process.

**Step 1:** Go directly to the source. Make sure you have taken advantage of several of these strategies to ensure you have really understood the realities of the legal profession.

**Step 2:** Weigh the pros and cons of going to law school by asking yourself these three essential questions to ensure that you are making the right decision.

**Step 3:** Figure out test dates, locations, and registration deadlines. When deciding when to take the LSAT, don’t forget to consider the application deadlines set by each school that you are applying to.

— Write down the last LSAT exam that the schools that you’re applying to will accept. For example, some law schools may not accept a February LSAT score for the fall semester, but will accept it for the following school year.

— Ask yourself if the date you take the LSAT will influence your qualifications for scholarship. Some schools have scholarship priority deadlines that are earlier in the spring semester. Waiting to take the LSAT can mean a lower chance of scholarship aid.

**Step 4:** That you are interested in, whether it be by state or program. Then put together your final list of applications!

— Attend law school fairs and forums (i.e., recruitment events). This is an easy way to gather a lot of information about various schools directly. It also gives you an opportunity to put a “face to the name” by meeting one of the law school’s recruiters or admissions advisors.

— Informational phone interviews and one-on-one meetings with admissions staff members are always encouraged.
After you have done your homework, come up with a list of schools that you are interested in and compare your options. Go back to your list of pros and cons about going to law school and consider whether any of those are factors you want to consider in deciding which schools are right for you (e.g., if finances are a factor, consider a school’s scholarships and financial aid).

**Step 5:** Sign up for LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service. This service will provide you with a secure place to gather all of your law school application documents (CAS registration is typically required for most law schools).
— You should sign up and pay the fee for the Credential Assembly Service at least four to six weeks before your first law school application deadline.

**Step 6:** Establish a LSAT study schedule; consider taking a LSAT prep course. On average, students should be spending at least 50 hours studying for the LSAT.

**Step 7:** Start to think about who you will ask for letters of recommendation (“LOR”). Students tend to forget that their LOR must also be in before an admissions office considers their application complete!

**Step 8:** Take the LSAT!

**Step 9:** Once the LSAT is over, focus on drafting your personal statement and conveying yourself effectively on paper.
— Hint: the personal statement should be considered a substitute for an on-campus interview.

**Step 10:** Begin the application process.

This list is by no means exclusive. However, it should guide you through the pre-application process and help ensure that you are properly setting aside enough time dedicated to researching potential schools, LSAT prep, and getting your application materials together.
Applying to Law School: What You’ll Need and How You Should Prepare (Part I)

Alright, time to get down to the nitty gritty of the law school application! We know that up until this point we’ve been guiding you on the decision of whether or not to go to law school. Recognizing that you’ve made this big decision, now is the time to go over your application and evaluate how much emphasis is placed on each aspect. Since this is a whole new world for you, use our tips as a starting point. We still encourage you to research each school you are applying to so you know that you’ve satisfied their individual requirements.

**LSAT and GPA**

Given that these are just two little numbers, it can seem odd that law schools place so much weight on them! Here’s what you need to know: the LSAT is considered a predictor of law school success, which is why schools rely on it so much. It tests the prospective law student on logical reasoning, reading comprehension, and analytic skills which are all used in law school. A predictor, yes, but a perfect predictor? Not always. When preparing for the LSAT, be sure to look into different LSAT prep providers. Sometimes these programs can be pricey, so plan ahead (more to come soon on how to best prepare for the LSAT).

Typically, admissions committees look at your LSAT score and GPA side by side. Why? Because these are the only two universal indicators schools have to compare you to every other Jane, Joe, and Jackie. The fun and unique thing about law school is that students who are applying come from all walks of life, so to ensure that each student isn’t judged solely on a subjective basis, they use the GPA and LSAT scores as predictors of academic success. A high GPA and a high LSAT score indicates that you will do well in law school.

Are you concerned about those blips on your transcript? If you’re in that boat, rest assured that admissions committees tend to be well-trained to identify specific patterns, so they’re generally not analyzing your transcript on a semester-by-semester basis. Nevertheless, key considerations include the academic rigor of your major, the types of classes you took, and if
there are any grade trends (i.e. a weak semester, a switch in major, and/or continuous improvement throughout your education).

*Letters of Recommendation*

It is interesting to hear the differences in opinion about the weight given to letters of recommendation (“LOR”). Whatever you have heard, forget it! LORs are just as important as any other part of your application. Why? Because it gives admissions committees the chance to hear from a third party about what makes you tick and what you bring to the table as a possible future admit. So who should be writing these LORs? Easy—anyone who knows you, minus family!

Students come to us all the time and ask if a LOR from ‘Senator Fill-in-the-Blank’ would make them stand out. You know what the first question is that we ask back? “What can they tell us about you?” At the end of the day, you have to remember that your entire application may be the only ‘face time’ you have with the admissions committee—your one opportunity to make an impression. Why would you waste that opportunity with a big name and no substance? We suggest looking at people who really know you. This means professors who may be able to speak to your natural enthusiasm or curiosity in their course, an employer or colleague you have done an assignment for that you knocked out of the park, or even a clergy member or director of a volunteer program you have come to invest your time and energy into. It is our hope that these people can really speak to your character and tell the admissions committee what an asset you would be to their school.

*Resume*

The resume can be an extremely important piece in your application. If throughout your application you are emphasizing that you are a hard worker, driven, love to help people, etc., admissions committees want to see you ‘put your money where your mouth is’ and show them through your experience. (Note: for those trying to go straight from undergrad to law school, your resume shouldn’t include anything from high school, unless it is extremely relevant.) Many prospective students think it is essential to have a legal internship on their resume when they apply (we don’t necessarily disagree); however, law schools want diversity when building an entering class and therefore, not every resume should look the same.

Essentially, schools are looking for experiences that tell us about you, your interests, and what moves or motivates you. When highlighting those experiences, be sure to create a clean, easy-to-read, one-page (and in some cases two-page) resume with bullets that start with action verbs and use numbers to emphasize or highlight your level of responsibility. Organize everything into sections with each correlating experience falling under it in reverse chronological order. Voila! You now have a strong resume!

Now you can get started on your application! Next, we’ll consider two of the tougher parts of the application process: the personal statement and addendums!
Starting now, we are going to help you tackle two of the tougher parts of the law school application process: the personal statement and addendums. Both can be scary and overwhelming for prospective students and therefore, we encourage you to take advantage of additional resources if you have any questions!

Personal Statement

The personal statement varies from school to school (note: there are also lots of books and articles out there on these issues). Some schools will give you free reign to write about whatever you please. Some schools will give you focused questions. Whatever the law school asks for, personal statements tend to give students the most trouble, especially for schools that allow you to write about anything.

To overcome the writer’s block, the advice we offer most often is to look at the personal statement like it is an actual interview. Very few law schools require personal interviews anymore. Therefore, the personal statement gives you the chance (most often in three pages or less) to tell the admissions committee about yourself and what you have to contribute to the law school and the legal profession as a whole. The personal statement is also the place to showcase your writing skills and abilities beyond your LSAT and GPA. But as we mentioned before, it is very helpful to have your personal statement at least touch on why you are applying to that specific law school. If the law school you are applying to is your number one choice, don’t be shy! Point that out in your personal statement!

A few words of caution: some students tend to use the personal statement to talk about a rough experience in their life whether it be a parent’s divorce, a death in the family, or various other devastating circumstances that are extremely difficult to deal with for any person. While we share the utmost sympathy and compassion for that person, it is difficult for an admissions
committee to evaluate that applicant when they are merely sharing the experience instead of relating it back to law school.

If you are going to write about an experience that you have gone through and that you have overcome, you must make sure that you are connecting it into how you will be a successful law student and attorney. Relevance should be your mantra! Why is this experience relevant to my success in law school and the legal profession? Use the personal statement to talk about that experience, but also detail to the admissions committee what qualities and strengths you have gained as a result. Also, make sure your personal statement isn’t being used to explain away rough spots in your application (see addendum section below). Lastly, remember to look at the law schools you are applying to and tailor it to their requirements—i.e., double spaced, 12-point font, etc. Do not forget to proofread!

Addendums
A big question we tend to get is “when is it appropriate to submit an addendum along with your application?” Addendums vary from school to school. Some allow multiple addendums, while others limit you to specific areas. The most common addendums or supplemental statements that students submit include pieces discussing a lower GPA or LSAT score, character and fitness issues, and diversity statements.

Since these are the most common addendums, we recommend following this theme: Take Responsibility. While it seems like that would be a no-brainer, most students tend to excuse away their behavior without providing the admissions committee with information on how their behavior has changed.

Make sure to be short and sweet. Addendums should not be over two paragraphs. If you are discussing a lower GPA (i.e., a rough semester, change in major, death in the family, etc.), point out your past academic success in your undergrad studies and how you have been able to do well since. Had to take the LSAT more than once or just didn’t score where you expected? That’s okay. Take ownership and describe how it is not a reflection of who you are as a student.

Most students tend to have questions about what to disclose on a character and fitness addendum. We advise students to disclose anything above a parking ticket. Yes, this even includes speeding tickets! It is important to err on the side of full disclosure—this will only help you when you are preparing your materials for the bar exam. A character and fitness addendum should explain the infraction, the disposition, and basic facts surrounding the incident. Supporting documentation need not be disclosed, unless the application tells you otherwise.

Diversity statements tend to allow a bit more flexibility than the other addendums we were speaking about above. It is another facet that an applicant can add to their application to tell the admissions committee about themselves and provide some background on what diverse perspective they would bring to the law school itself and the legal profession as a whole. When contemplating including a diversity statement, ask yourself what value it adds to your application. It isn’t essential that you write an addendum for everything, so if you do not feel like a diversity statement or any other addendum really adds value to your application, do not include it (minus the character and fitness addendums).

For more of an insider’s guide to the pre-law process, we would encourage to read over this [The Law School Admissions Game](#) and see what several law school admissions experts say.

**What is the LSAT, and How Can You Ace It?**
Standardized tests.

These two words have struck fear in the hearts of more people than we can count. These two little words can, without warning, make your palms sweat, your knees shake, and your heart race. The LSAT is no different, which is why today’s post focuses on steps you can take to prepare yourself for the LSAT and avoid some test day jitters.

In previous chapters, we’ve explained how prospective law students should attack the law school application process. Today, we show some respect to the exam that gets you into law school. Given the importance of the LSAT, we’ll take it in pieces. First, we review the parts of the exam. Next, we take a look at how the exam is scored and where you can turn to ensure LSAT success! Finally, we provide a few general tips to help you walk into exam day ready.
Test Format

To know the exam is to do well on the exam. The LSAT is administered by the Law School Admission Council, better known as LSAC. It is a half day standardized test administered four times each year: February, June, October, and December. The test consists of five 35 minute multiple choice questions sections. Four out of the five sections contribute to your score with one section being viewed as experimental. The placement of the experimental section varies on each test, so you never know which section does not count. Lastly, a 35 minute writing sample is administered at the end of the test. LSAC does not score the writing sample, but each law school you apply to receives a copy. How each law school weighs the writing sample varies.

There are three multiple choice sections on the LSAT: reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning. The reading comprehension section is the testing tool most similar to other standardized tests you’ve taken. It asks you to read, comprehend, and analyze a large amount of information in a limited amount of time. The analytical reasoning questions measure your ability to understand a structure of relationships and draw logical conclusions from that structure. Lastly, the logical reasoning questions assess the test taker’s ability to analyze, evaluate, and complete arguments as they occur in everyday language.

Scoring

Your LSAT score is based on the number of questions answered correctly – your raw score. Your raw score is converted to an LSAT scale that ranges from 120-180 with 120 being the lowest possible score and 180 being the highest. The maximum score for the test is 180, but a score of 170 usually puts you in the 98th percentile.

No points are deducted from your score for answering questions incorrectly so fill in EVERY bubble! When you begin to narrow down your list of law schools for the application process, it is important to research the scores each school will accept, if they accept multiple scores, and if they average multiple scores. Keeping this in mind will help you plan accordingly.

Test Prep

Managing your time is half the battle when it comes to preparing for the LSAT. We know that many students find themselves taking a full course load or working full time while trying to get ready for test day. When you begin the law school process, don’t forget to make a plan! It is
essential that you utilize your time management skills to ensure you are spending the right amount of time preparing for the LSAT.

When debating between spending the money for a prep course or studying on your own, consider your personal habits. If you know that you won’t have the self-discipline to study on your own, it may be best to invest in a LSAT prep course. However, if you have the willpower to stay on schedule when hitting the books, perhaps using a test prep course isn’t for you. To find the best program for you, talk to your friends, call the law schools you plan to apply to, speak to your undergrad adviser, and do your homework! All LSAT prep providers are not built alike, so research them to figure out which will fit best with your study style and budget. Either way, take advantage of the free materials that LSAC offers including practice questions and a full practice exam!

So what are our tips for LSAT studying? Do a minimum of 3,000 problems. Study for about 2-3 months in advance of the test. Take A LOT of timed practice exams. The most typical problem on the LSAT is time management. Continuous practice under timed conditions will improve your ability to manage your time. Look at it this way: a person can only teach you so much about riding a bike or driving a car—the best way for you to learn is by practicing. The same goes for the LSAT—you will continuously improve by taking practice exams under timed conditions. We hate to say it, but practice makes perfect!

**General Tips**
- Do practice exams under a variety of testing environments—a quiet library, a coffee shop, or somewhere with background noise. This helps you build the confidence to test well under any and all circumstances.
- Scout out your testing center. Take away some test anxiety by knowing how long it takes to get there, where to park, and where the testing room is.
- Review the instructions at least two days in advance. Know every rule. There are restrictions on what you can wear, bring in, and what you need to check in. Avoid being thrown off your game the day of the test by knowing LSAC’s policies.
- Bring a healthy snack with you just in case.
- Take a break the night before! Relax and give your mind the night off. Most importantly, make sure that you go to bed early and get some rest.

Now that we have gone over the ins and outs of the LSAT, take a deep breath, wipe off those sweaty palms, and go into that exam with confidence!! Just remember, life will go on after the LSAT—we promise!
Decisions, decisions, decisions. At this point, it’s probably safe to assume that you’ve taken our advice and have been accepted to several great law schools. Congratulations! Now comes the fun part: choosing which one to attend!

As we’ve discussed before, law school is a BIG decision. Students often hear the following advice when it comes to choosing a law school:

1. **Follow the money:** Students are being told that, given the legal market and the increased expenses of attending law school (i.e. tuition, fees, housing, living expenses), it would be financially irresponsible to attend a law school that isn’t providing some sort of financial package or scholarship.

2. **Climb the ladder to the top:** The highest ranked schools open the most doors, so why attend a lower ranked school that will potentially leave you eating Ramen Noodles for the rest of your life? Those with this type of mentality tend to eat, sleep, and breathe the law school ranking systems, the most popular being [US News & World Report](https:).

3. **“Hometown Hero”**: If you know that you want to practice in State X and your family is from State X, then you should go to law school in State X to build your network there.

While relevant, these shouldn’t be the only factors you consider. Take a hard look at what each school you’ve been admitted to has to offer. To help, this chapter provides a list of questions you might consider when making your acceptance decision:
**Experiential Learning Opportunities**

— Does the law school have a formal judicial clerkship program? What is its success rate?

— How advanced is the law school’s clinical program? What types of opportunities or experiences can a student gain from participating in the clinics that are different than at other schools? (Note: You may want to look at each state’s specific rules of civil procedure. Sometimes there are rules in place that bind or restrict what a law student can or cannot do before sitting for the bar exam.)

— How successful is the career services office at placing students in externships or helping them gain summer experience? If you are from out of state, how will they support you with finding externships/internships in your home state?

— What kinds of firms/companies/organizations recruit from the law school? (Take notes and then look those places up. Do they appeal to you?)

**Professional Training**

Unlike undergrad, law school is a professional school where you should get professional training. Look at the curriculum and the courses that are offered compared to your specific interests.

— If you are interested in being a litigator, will you learn trial advocacy?

— Interested in corporate work? Do they have any classes that will give you practical experience?

— Look at the school’s moot court program and other experiential learning opportunities available to you.

**Public Interest Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAP)**

If you know that you ultimately want to work in public interest, it would be helpful to research whether your law school has a LRAP program in place and their eligibility requirements. While each law school’s program will differ (some require a minimum loan amount and max salary), most LRAP programs provide either loan assistance or loan forgiveness.

**Financial Aid**

Financial aid is at the forefront of many students’ minds, as it should be. Keep in mind that most law schools will reconsider your initial scholarship offer or will reconsider you for aid if you received no scholarship offer.

Note: This is the time to start practicing being a lawyer! Use those negotiation skills to try to get a higher scholarship or convert loan money to grants. It never hurts to try!

**Post-graduation**

Students often don’t ask these questions until graduation:

— How will they support you after graduation? (Ask career services to tell you about recent alumni they’ve supported … if they can’t tell you about one, that’s a good indication of how much alumni actually use the office.)

— What benefits would you gain as an alum? (Would you still have access to their career services office? Library? General resources?)

— In what regions do a majority of the school’s alumni practice? (That tells you about where your alumni network will be located and where the school draws firms from.)
The Next Step
— Visit each law school you are interested in attending: (Try to at least visit your top two choices once you’ve narrowed them down!)
— Tour the building and learn about the resources available to you at the law school. Ask: Is printing free? Is there a page quota? (This can get expensive and may mean you’ll want your own printer if you prefer to work in paper.) How many research librarians are there? Do you get access to Westlaw and/or Lexis Nexis?
— Not from the area? Be sure to explore and learn about the city. Get a feel for whether you would be comfortable there or not.
— Find out where most students live and see if you can tour a few housing options. Also find out if where students live varies by class year!
— What is public transportation like? Do you have a car? Will you need one?

Start the Conversation
When you have questions that need answers, don’t be afraid to be proactive! Here are just a few ways to get started.

— Talk to current students: Contact the school and ask to speak to a student. If you’re interested in a particular area of law or organization, most schools will post contact information on their websites so you can reach out. Ask them, what’s the environment like there? Is it competitive? Is there a lot of academic support available? What is a day in the life of a student like? What activities are you involved in?
— Talk to faculty: If you are interested in a specific school because of a specialized program, speak to faculty in that program to learn more about it. You’re going to law school to learn to be a lawyer, so it is essential to get an idea of who you will be learning from. Ask them, what is the student/faculty ratio? What are the faculty/student relationships like? How involved is the faculty? Do professors have an open door policy? If you want to be a part of a specific clinic or program, don’t assume that admission to the law school = admission to the program! Ask what it takes to get in!
— Talk to alumni: Ask for names and contact information from the admissions office. Ask about their experience finding a job where you’d like to live and practicing the type of law you’re interested in practicing. Ask how the school assisted them get to where they are. Ask if they’re still in touch with people they attended school with and what their classmates are up to today.

It’s important to consider everything we listed above and more. Once you have visited all the law schools you are interested in, sit down with all the information you gathered about each law school and weigh the positives and negatives. While so many students focus on rankings and prestige (and those are important), it is really important that you choose a law school where you feel comfortable and know you will succeed. High rankings won’t matter if you are so unhappy with the environment that you won’t succeed academically.

At the end of the day, we know this is not an easy decision. At the risk of sounding cheesy, you will just know what law school feels right. You will get a sense when visiting what school will be the best fit for you, what law school will be home.
Finding Diversity in Law School

Up to this point, we’ve talked about everything law school-related under the sun. We’ve walked step by step through what prospective students need to consider before applying all the way to creating a successful application. We’ve also touched on how to select a law school that’s the right fit for you. What we haven’t examined is the importance of diversity and the policy of acceptance at the law school you select.

Given the time commitment students make to law school, it is essential to explore the efforts being made by your potential school to promote diversity. This is why it is our mission to help women and men alike find working spaces that they feel comfortable in and where they feel supported!

Over the years, law schools and legal organizations have worked hard, taking steps to fill the pipeline of the legal profession and addressing historic inadequacies. A shining example is LSAC’s Diversity Committee that has, since its creation, spent over $5 million on projects aimed at increasing the number of minorities entering law school. Also, the ABA holds law schools to strict standards that require that they commit to providing full opportunities to minority groups seeking to enter the profession.

So what is considered diverse these days? By law school standards, diversity includes, but isn’t limited to, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, gender, nationality, gender identity, age, disability, geography, religion, sexual orientation, race, and language. Why does it matter, you ask? Well, unfortunately, minority group members have historically been underrepresented in the legal profession. Law schools are still working to build student bodies that accurately reflect our diverse population.

The good news for a student applying to or choosing a law school is that all of the focus on building a pipeline has created a wealth of resources that will help you. The bad news is that sometimes knowing what a law school offers can be difficult, which is why the ABA has created
a search engine called the Pipeline Diversity Directory. The directory is a great place for diverse students to find services and programs that may be available! Other resources can help target scholarships and organizations available to minorities to support diversity in law school and the legal profession.

To learn more about a particular law school’s diversity, check to see what services they may have dedicated to ensuring students with diverse backgrounds have support throughout their entire law school career. You might also want to read the law school’s diversity statements, which are often found on their website and/or see if the law school has a diversity services office for recruitment and support for diverse students.

Another way to learn how law students are supported is to learn more about the student organizations in place. Some law schools have information on their student organizations with contact information for the officers on their website. If that information is not on the website, call the law school’s admissions office to put you in touch with the student organization. Reach out to the leadership in the student organization to get a feel for the diversity level in the law school and how supported diverse students are. A few questions to keep in mind to ask current law students include:

— How supportive are faculty of the minority/diversity student organization and its activities?
— Is there a faculty advisor, or do faculty informally support or attend student organization sponsored activities?
— How often does the student organization meet, formally or informally? What kinds of activities does it organize? Does it ever co-sponsor activities with other student groups?
— Do minority students feel supported, or is a lack of organized activity due to lack of time or interest?
— Does the school publicize its nondiscrimination policy?

You may also be able to look outside your chosen law school for support. There are tons of diversity bar associations and organizations that can support you. A few that we partner with include BlueprintJD, OBABL (On Being A Black Lawyer), NBLSA (National Black Law Students Association), APALSA (Asian Pacific American Law Students Association), LLSA (Latino Law Students Association), the National LGBT Bar Association and, of course, NWLSO (National Women Law Students Organization—a student arm of Ms. JD).

Having these questions answered will give you an idea of what the environment is like for students at a specific school. Researching other organizations and even talking to their officers can give you one more data point in your law school decision process. For many students, it’s important to find a strong community and network of both student and staff alike where students can succeed and feel comfortable. Finding that support network of friends, colleagues, and peers can only help to fulfill your academic, social, and career needs!

Law school can be hard. Studies and our own anecdotal experiences have shown that diverse students sometimes face unique challenges. Our point is that you don’t have to struggle with any particular frustrations alone! There are lots of tools and organizations out there to help you if you choose to seek them out.
The End of the Beginning: Starting the Next Chapter

It’s hard to believe that time has passed so quickly and that we suddenly find ourselves at our last chapter for this series. In the words of Leonard DiCaprio (a.k.a. Shakespeare), parting is such sweet sorrow! But we couldn’t leave without saying goodbye and leaving you with a few words of wisdom.

Over the past few chapters, we have taken you step-by-step through the process of becoming a successful law school applicant. First, we provided tips and tricks on how to determine whether or not law school is for you. The purpose of this information was not to scare or intimidate you, but to inform and educate students at all graduate levels about the importance behind the decision they are faced with making about their futures. Then we took you through the pieces of the application, including the dreaded LSAT! Finally, we gave you some advice to ensure that you had a strong foundation in place before kicking off your first year. These tips were just the beginning. Although this is our last chapter, this is not our final farewell.

Law school, just like any other graduate program, is a big commitment—both of your time and your finances. Keep in mind that while higher education may not always be fun, it will always be worth it. The knowledge that you will gain will last you a lifetime. When you reach those bumps in the road, you will have our support and a network of women and men to turn to who are always cheering you on. Just think of how exciting it was when you got that first letter of acceptance… when you first realized that all of the pieces were falling into place and dreams were coming true. In a couple of short years, you will be out there practicing in an area that you love and pursuing your professional goals.

We want you to know that Ms. JD will always be here for you as a resource to get you through all of the highs and lows of law school and any other graduate profession your heart desires. However, it doesn’t stop there! Ms. JD will work hard to ensure you have support during, after, and beyond law school. We want to help your climb the ladder (or the jungle gym, as Sheryl Sandberg would say) of professional and personal success.
So when you need help leaning in, a place to talk about your concerns, or just a new friend, stay in touch! We invite you to tweet and email us at @msjdtweets, @CourtneyGabbara, @SheehanBA, or gabbara@ms-jd.org. But don’t just think you can only reach out with questions. Our hope is that you will reach out to us about your successes as well! We’re invested in you and know that you can do it! Onward and upward, ladies. LET’S DO THIS.