



LAW SCHOOL GUIDE

Hamilton
CAREER CENTER

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The Career Center's Guide to Law School Planning

A remarkable number of Hamilton alumni are successful attorneys. In order to keep this tradition alive in the face of more competitive conditions for being accepted into law school, this guide provides a plan of action for your time at Hamilton. It is intended for both those who want to continue directly onto law school after graduation as well as those who choose to take time off first. Currently, there are 202 law schools approved by the American Bar Association. The law school at which you enroll will depend heavily on a number of factors, both quantitative and qualitative. Most notably, the two quantifiable factors, LSAT score and undergraduate GPA, are of crucial importance. While many qualitative factors will play into the equation, the most vital are the personal statement and letters of recommendation.

The Admissions Process

When it comes to the actual application process, take this simple advice: **START EARLY**. All too many applicants sabotage their efforts through last minute sloppiness. Consider the sheer amount of time the law school admissions process will demand: in addition to 200+ hours of LSAT preparation, a single application might take up to 40 hours when you take great care with it. Be very diligent with every step of the application process to maximize your chances of getting into the law school of your choice. Aside from LSAT scores and GPAs, what do law schools actually look for in applicants? Most law school admissions committees attempt to balance their emphasis on cold hard numbers with a good faith effort to understand the minds of thousands of applicants. Thoughtful consideration is given to what sort of human beings they admit - so use your personal statement, optional essays, letters of recommendation and cover letters to show who you are.

Law School Preparation Timeline

Freshmen and Sophomores:

- Meet with a pre-law advisor and visit LSAC.org to learn more about the admissions process.
- Engage in self-assessment and career exploration to be sure that a career in law suits you.
- Keep your grades up! Your GPA must be high for you to be competitive.
- Choose courses and extracurricular activities that will help to develop your writing, speaking and analytical skills.
- Engage in a meaningful summer opportunity (does not have to be law related)

Juniors:

- Keep your GPA high and prep for the LSAT. Take several practice tests, and decide if you will take the test in June or October. Register early to ensure you get a seat.
- Develop a list of law schools that you are interested in. Research them and visit if convenient. An appropriate time to visit schools in less convenient locations, is after admission.
- Register with the LSDAS service on the LSAC website.
- Start writing your personal statement and optional essays.
- Request 2 – 3 letters of recommendation from professors (or professionals if you have worked prior to your application) in the spring or in the first weeks of your senior year. Open an account on Interfolio to house your recommendations.

Seniors:

- Complete your personal statements and other application materials for each school to which you are applying.
- Apply early if you plan to attend in the fall.
- Let your advisor and professors know about your success!

First and Second Year Students

As a first-year or sophomore, you should:

- Engage in self-assessment and career exploration to make certain the law suits your personality and interests. Use self-assessment instruments at the Career Center, such as *FOCUS*, *Self Directed Search (SDS)* and the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*, which are helpful for finding out if your skills are suited to a career in law.
- Explore careers in law online or by reading books: Check out online sites such as vault.com and “Facts on File” through the Career Center’s website.
- Read evaluative books such as, *Should You Really be a Lawyer? The Guide to Smart Career Choices Before, During, and After Law School* by Deborah Schneider and Gary Belsky which can be borrowed from the Career Center.

Conduct informational interviews with several attorneys. It is essential to begin informational interviews long before you sign up for the LSAT or start looking at law school applications in order to know if a career in the law is right for you.

- Research different areas of law you find interesting and contact alumni who work in those fields (Refer to the *Networking Guide* on the Career Center’s website).
- Counselors at the Career Center can explain how you can get started meeting with alumni in positions that appeal to you.
- Write exploratory emails to alumni attorneys and follow up with informational interviews in person or on the phone.
- Be sure to send thank-you notes to anyone you speak with.

After you have spoken to attorneys and have decided you would like to pursue a career in law, speak with current law students about their experiences, spend time at law schools, and attend law classes.

Get hands-on experience: over winter breaks and summers secure career-related experiences so that you can get a feel for the law and gain relevant experience to build your resume for law school or jobs after graduation.

- Shadow an attorney in an area of law that interests you.
- Volunteer for an attorney, firm, or government office.
- Intern over winter and summer breaks to see the day-to-day operations within the law.

Develop the specific skills necessary to succeed in law school & become a good lawyer:

Analytical and problem-solving: Take classes that involve critical thinking about important issues and evaluating arguments. Consider Philosophy 200 Critical Reasoning or math courses.

Critical reading: Develop reading and critical analysis skills. As a law student, you will be required to read and understand large amounts of information and you will particularly need these skills on the LSAT. History and government courses generally require heavy reading loads.

Writing: Lawyers must be able to express themselves well, clearly, and concisely. Plan to take courses that require rigorous and analytical writing. Be able to write both long and short pieces well. Take writing-intensive and English courses; also, use the **Writing Center!**

Oral communication: Learn how to speak clearly, confidently, and persuasively. Try Rhetoric and Communications courses like 210 Rhetorical Act, 212 Argumentation and Advocacy, and 365 Persuasion. Public speaking during class and participation on the Mock Trial team and in Debate Club are good practice.

Interpersonal/listening: You will need these skills to be able to interact well with clients and peers. Clubs and sports teams will help develop these skills.

General research: Law school classes require extensive research. Take upper-level courses in any departments that include a major research paper. Theses and Senior Projects necessitate in-depth research, analysis, and writing.

Organization/Time management: Law school and a career as an attorney are demanding, so try to acquire good time management skills early. Balancing a busy schedule of extracurriculars and jobs with school work will provide good practice.

Serving the public good and promoting justice: Those who are applying to law school are particularly expected to uphold civic duty and be active in the community. Government course 241 Survey of Constitutional Law will give you a feel for the areas that you would be studying in law school to see if you like them or not. Ethics courses in any field will give you a background in the concept of justice.

Study what you love: it's no secret that students perform best when they are engaged in the material. Law schools care less about what specific area you choose to concentrate in, and more about the fact that you are engaged in meaningful study and are performing well. One note: if you decide to major in a "pure" art, such as theater, dance, studio art or music performance, be sure to have another major, or at the least, significant work in substantive academic courses.

Junior and Senior Year Students

In your last two years you should:

Start thinking about LSAT preparation NOW!

- A recent study by LSAC reports that ***students must spend at least 200+ hours preparing for the LSAT in order to do their best.*** By starting in your first or second year, you will become accustomed to the types of questions that are on the test (logic games, logical reasoning, and reading comprehension).
- Attend free KAPLAN *10 question challenges, test-drives, and workshops* that are offered on campus. These will help train your brain to work like it needs to for the test since the LSAT measures skills that most Hamilton students are not accustomed to using.
- Buy an LSAT prep book and practice different types of questions.
- Research formal LSAT prep courses, including timing.
- If you are planning on applying to law school in October of your senior year, register to take the LSAT in June of your junior year or October of senior year. (If you choose to take a prep course you should take it spring semester or over the summer).
- Prepare as though you will take the test once, but do not let stress get the best of you. Since the vast majority of schools now pay most attention to the highest LSAT score, you can always re-take the exam.
- Register for the LSAT well in advance of the date you wish to take it to secure your test site.

Begin the application process in the spring of junior year or the following summer if you plan to apply in the fall of your senior year.

- Develop a list of schools that you are interested in, then research and visit them if possible.

Start writing your personal statement and optional essays over the summer before your senior year

- The personal statement is most likely the next most important factor after your LSAT score and GPA. A good personal statement can mean the difference between being accepted or rejected.
- Think of the personal statement as your interview on paper, particularly since the vast majority of law schools do not have the time or resources to interview applicants. Tell a story that demonstrates something that schools cannot glean from the rest of your application.
- Typically, you can tweak your primary essay slightly to fit the majority of your applications. However, each law school may ask you to answer different questions. Check each application carefully.
- Your primary task in writing your statement will be to demonstrate your writing skills. Law school performance depends heavily on your ability to communicate

in a clear and sophisticated manner, and law schools want to be sure you are up to the task. Admissions committees will see innumerable applications from bright candidates with good grades and high LSAT scores. The personal statement presents you with an opportunity to put your intellectual ability into context and distinguish yourself from all other applicants.

- Your essay needs to convey what kind of thinking, feeling human being you are, and a two or three page limit allows for no fat. Clarity, conciseness, and candor are essential. Your writing must be well-organized and highlight your strengths and abilities. A thoughtful, illuminating essay that offers true insight will stand out and be remembered.
- Read, revise, and have several others who know you well read it and give you their feedback.

Ask two or three professors or professionals who know you well to write letters of recommendations for you.

- Whether academic or professional, letters of recommendation should come from individuals who know you well enough to present a truly informed assessment of your abilities. At least one letter of recommendation *MUST* be academic in nature. If you plan to attend law school within three years of college graduation, at least two letters should be academic. Remember, above all, law schools are evaluating you as a potential law student.
- Ask for recommendations in the spring of junior year or by the first week of school senior year. It will provide recommenders with ample time to complete the letters. Assume that it will take each recommender about a month to complete their letter, so the sooner you ask them, the better. This also holds true if you plan to take a year or more off before enrolling in law school, as this is the time when Professors know you the best and when your coursework is most fresh in their minds.
- Provide your recommenders with an updated copy of your resume and perhaps your personal statement. You may also want to guide them on specific things you would like them to mention in the letter so that each recommender writes on different areas of your skills and accomplishments. The better your recommenders understand why you want to go to law school, the better their letters will contribute to your application. If possible, make an appointment to meet with your recommender to ask for the letter face to face. This will give you the opportunity to discuss your plans and highlight the parts of your application that are most important to you. It will also allow you to gauge your professor's attitude toward your work and your general "fitness" for law school. The best recommendations will fit neatly with the picture you present of yourself in your personal essay. An effective law school application will compile a cohesive picture of who you are and why that law school should admit you. NEVER ask for a letter of recommendation via email- at the very least, make a phone call if geographic distance prohibits a personal meeting.

What should letters of recommendation include?

- Your ability to excel in the rigorous academic environment of law school.
- Enthusiastic endorsement from a professor in your major.
- Specific reference to your work in a particular course or on a particular project. (Provide your professors with copies of work you have done in order to help them).
- Indication of who you are as a person.
- Extracurricular involvement (especially community service) because law schools value applicants who show long-standing commitment.

Establish an academic or professional credentials account on Interfolio.com.

- Go to <https://www.interfolio.com/product/index.cfm> to manage your letters of recommendation.
- Your recommenders will submit their electronic letters directly to Interfolio.com.
- Interfolio.com will forward your letters confidentially to LSAC/LSDAS which will distribute them electronically to the law schools to which you are applying.
- Check with recommenders by early October to ensure they have submitted their recommendations.
- Remember to write thank-you notes to each recommender!

Register for LSDAS (Law School Data Assembly Service provided by LSAC) to which most law schools require you to subscribe.

- This is where you will have your transcript and letters of recommendation sent. LSDAS will compile them into an electronic “report” to send to each law school.
- It is important to do this early as processing at LSDAS slows down due to volume starting in October.
- In early September request that a transcript be sent to LSDAS from the Registrar’s Office.

Write addendums, when appropriate. If your LSAT score or cumulative GPA hides something important, you may want to point it out on a separate sheet attached to your application.

- For instance, if one particularly bad semester or course lowered your GPA and if you can argue plausibly that those low grades should be viewed as anomalies, do so.
- If your GPA for your course major is significantly higher than your overall average, you might highlight that.
- Even better, if your GPA masks an upward trend in your performance, make certain to call attention to your improvement.
- If you feel that your LSAT score is inconsistent with your ability to handle rigorous work, you may want to point it out.
- Also use an addendum to explain any extenuating circumstances that may have

impacted either your academic performance or LSAT score. Some examples include: death in the family during a particular time period, need for full or part time work while in college, illness prior to LSAT exam, consuming illness during a particularly semester, etc. Admissions offices benefit from background information like this.

Essays of specific Interest

If there is a law school(s) that you have identified as your top choice, you may consider writing a short (one or two paragraph) essay expressing your specific desire to attend the school. This is an opportunity to cite specific programs or qualities that draw you to the school. Just be careful not to make the essay sound contrived by “name dropping” too many programs that are not supported by your interests or experiences. For example, if you have never taken an economics or finance class and/or had a related internship or experience, do not identify a school’s “finance law” program as an area of strong interest for you. For this reason, this type of essay should be reserved for top choice schools in which you have a genuine and specific interest.

Dean’s Certificate

A Dean's Certificate is a form that some schools require in order to verify you are or were in good standing at your academic institution(s). It is presently requested by only a handful of law schools, and of those, many only require the document if there is an academic or non-academic violation on record. The form can be found in a law school's application. With most law schools requiring candidates to apply through the LSAC application process, candidates need to look for the Dean's Certificate under the "Supplemental Materials" link which is in most cases directly under the link to the law school's primary application.

Develop a resume specific to the law school application process. If you have had some legal experience in the form of jobs or internships, you may want to incorporate a “legal experience” or “related experience” section. If not, just be sure to highlight substantive experiences. (Peer counselors and career counselors can help you with this).

What sort of work experience you have had is not as important as what you have learned through that experience, particularly if you can show that you gained skills that will help you succeed in law school (ie writing, communication, interpersonal skills, analysis, etc.).

Send in your applications by October 1st to guarantee them being read in the first read and increasing your likelihood of being accepted. Do note, however, that many schools do accept applications throughout the spring. While it may not be the optimal time to apply, this provides you with the opportunity to add schools in certain ranges depending on earlier outcomes.

Working Prior to Law School

If you choose to work for a year or more before law school, the process will be somewhat different. You will go through the job search process during your senior year and then complete the law school application process while you are working.

Consider the variety of places in which you can work:

- Large, medium or small private law firms in metropolitan areas.
- Legislative, lobbying, and federal government opportunities in Washington, DC or state and local government offices.
- Nonprofit organizations
- Programs such as Peace Corps or Teach For America.
- Post-Graduate fellowships in any field.

Since many firms and organizations hire in the spring semester, it is helpful to begin networking early with individuals at places that you may want to work after graduation.

The LSAT

Consider the best time for you to take the LSAT exam. Do you have a lighter course load senior spring that would lend itself to exam study? Will you have a period of time over the summer before starting work that you can devote to exam prep? Will your job have a set schedule that will allow for study time in the evenings? These are factors best considered early.

Personal Statement

The time you spend working after graduation will probably provide inspiration for your personal statement, or at least part of it. Law schools will want to hear about what you have done and how you have succeeded in the past year or two.

Letters of Recommendation

- Ask your recommenders to write letters in the spring of your senior year and upload them to your file on Interfolio.com so that you will have them available when you want to apply.
- The benefit of having your recommenders write letters while you are at Hamilton is that you, as well as your achievements, are still fresh in their minds.
- You may wish to ask a supervisor from your job during your time off to write a letter. He or she would be able to attest to what you have accomplished since college that pertains to law school. They should also upload their letters to your file on Interfolio.com.

LSDAS

- Register for LSDAS in August or September of the fall you wish to apply to law school.
- Request that Interfolio.com send your letters of recommendation to LSDAS.
- Ask the Registrar to forward a copy of your transcript to LSDAS.

Applications

- Complete applications online when they are available in September.
- Update your resume and send a copy with your application.

7/14 (HW & PG)