Thinking About Law School

School of Business

SUNY Geneseo

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**Nine Questions About Law School**

1. Should I go to law school?
2. When should I plan to attend?
3. What types of law schools are out there?
4. What factors should I consider when deciding where to apply?
5. Can I trust the law schools?
6. What’s the best preparation for law school?
7. What is the LSAT like, and how important is it?
8. What about the legal job market?
9. Are there some free resources that can help me plan?

**The comments in this outline reflect the opinions of Jim Quinn, and do not necessarily represent the views of SUNY Geneseo or any other faculty members.**

**Should I Go to Law School?**

**Facts**:

1. Even in the best of times law is a demanding, challenging, intense and stressful occupation.
2. Some lawyers may be smarter than others, but at least three traits are more important for a lawyer (or a law student) than raw horsepower. They are diligence, good judgment, and good communications skills. Diligence - the ability to perform lots of hard, focused, detailed-oriented work and keep performing it - is the most critical.
3. The legal profession is still struggling. However, the mood is increasingly optimistic. As of August 2019, the number of people applying to law schools for the 2019-2020 academic year was up 3.2% compared to the 2018-2019 year and up 11.6% compared to the 2017-2018 year.
4. Some law schools have made the situation worse by questionable practices.
5. There are plenty of bad reasons to go to law school. They include picking law:

* Just to make a lot of money;
* For lack of another use for your B.A. in Philosophy;
* Because you can’t think of anything else to do;
* Because of the profession’s depiction in the media;
* Because of family tradition or pressure.

**The Analysis**

1. If you have given the profession a good, critical look, and you truly want to be a lawyer, then law school is the right choice for you.
2. Legal jobs may be hard to find, but think how much harder it will be to obtain one if you never attend law school.
3. Many people will enjoy satisfying and fulfilling careers as lawyers in the years ahead and if you are a reasonably intelligent, very hard-working, analytical, skilled communicator, there’s no reason why you can’t be among them.
4. Even so, if your only law school options are in or near the bottom tier, you might consider waiting for a few years, working in a meaningful job, and building up your credentials.

**When Should I Plan to Attend?**

**Facts:**

1. Many law schools seem to prefer students who have waited. Others, like Buffalo, say it doesn’t matter. The most important question is what’s right for you.

2. Statistics show most entering students have been out of college a couple of years:

Average Age of First Year Class Entering August 2018

Albany 24. Cornell 24

BU 24 Fordham 24

Buffalo 25-26 Syracuse 24

3. **If you are fairly confident law school is in your future within a few years of graduating from Geneseo it makes sense to take the LSAT before leaving Geneseo or shortly thereafter, while you are still in the study mode! Spring after Junior Year or September of Senior Year work best. Take a commercial prep course first.** Law schools vary in the age of scores they will accept – often taking scores that are 4 or 5 years old - so check carefully to ensure your scores won’t expire!

**Disadvantages of Waiting**. If you wait, you might:

- Languish in a menial job (a personal negative *and* an application negative)

- Lose study skills

- Lose motivation

- Become distracted by life’s interventions

- Pay a higher tuition

- Lose a couple of years on your legal career path

**Advantages of Waiting**. If you wait, you might:

- Obtain perspective from the working world

- Increase your maturity and focus

- Gain greater certainty about law school vs. alternatives

- Develop business or professional skills

- Avoid burnout

- Enhance your admission chances - schools value applicants with experience

- Enhance your admissions chances with strong senior year grades

- Offset marginal grades or LSAT results with stellar post-college achievements

- Save money for tuition

- Establish in-state residency for your school of choice

- Pursue fulfilling options like military service, Peace Corps, Teach for America

**What Types of Law Schools Are Out There?**

**T-14** The *T-14* is so named because over the years in which *US News* has ranked law schools, the same 14 schools have been in and out of the Top 10, but have always remained in the Top 14. They are: Harvard; Yale; Stanford; Chicago; NYU; Columbia; Northwestern; Penn; UC Berkeley; Virginia; Michigan; Duke; Cornell; and Georgetown.

**National/Regional/Local** Many commentators divide law schools into three categories: national; regional; and local. The nomenclature really doesn’t matter in the end, but the categories are used often enough to merit discussion.

**National Law Schools**: These schools draw students from throughout the US, send graduates throughout the US, and historically focus on legal analysis and “national law”, rather than on the law of any one state. There doesn’t seem to be a consensus whether any schools outside the T-14 are truly national law schools. There’s no official designation process.

Some schools ranked just below the T-14 are often considered national law schools. They include: Texas; Vanderbilt; UCLA; George Washington; USC; Minnesota; Washington University; Emory; Notre Dame; Indiana; Iowa; Washington & Lee; U of Washington; Boston College; Boston University; and North Carolina.

**Regional Law Schools:** These law schools draw students from, and place graduates within, a particular region, often largely within one state or metro area. Most of the schools in this group, however, probably consider themselves to be national. They are not. Regional schools include Fordham, William & Mary and many of the law schools at flagship state universities.

**Local Law Schools**: Local law schools focus on the legal market in a particular state or, in some cases, a portion of a particular state. These schools may send some graduates further afield, but not many. Examples include Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse, Dayton, Pace, Cleveland State, and Capital.

**The Bottom Tier**: This tier is crowded. Because law schools can be moneymakers for their universities, many lower ranked law schools have expanded and new schools have opened. Graduates of bottom tier schools have experienced the most severe difficulties in the job market. The *U.S. News* rankings system does a decent job identifying bottom tier schools.

**Unaccredited Law Schools**. Some states, especially California, license law schools that are unaccredited by the American Bar Association. Typically, graduates of an unaccredited law school can only practice in the state where the school is located. Do not spend your time and money at an unaccredited law school.

**Deciding Where to Apply**

**The Location Rule**

1. The first question to ask is, “Where do I want to practice after graduation?” Almost always, the answer to that question will drive everything else.
2. *Who’s Your City by Richard Florida* (2008)

“Finding the right place is as important as – if not more important than – finding the right job or partner because it not only influences those choices but also determines how easy or hard it will be to correct mistakes made along the way. Still, few of us actually look at a place that way. Perhaps it’s because so few of us have the understanding or mental framework necessary to make informed choices about our location.

The place we choose to live affects every aspect of our being. It can determine the income we earn, the people we meet, the friends we make, the partners we choose, and the options available to our children and families. People are not equally happy everywhere, and some places do a better job of providing a high quality of life than others.” Florida at 5-6

1. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t practice in your hometown; it does mean you should be very aware of the importance of place. Try to avoid making the decision by default, or having someone else make it for you.
2. In recent years, upstate New York has experienced slower expansion than most other places. The quality of life is very high in this region, but make no mistake, this is not a growth environment for legal services. Still, our region has very real attractions and can be a great place to raise a family. In fact, some young people, after having left for bigger cities, are returning to the area. See the article, *Two Brains Refuse to Drain*, by Michael Brown and Ana Liss in the March 6, 2013 issue of the *Rochester City Newspaper*

**The T-14 Exception**

1. If you decide you want to work in Big Law, a major national not-for-profit, or a think tank, or if you want to be a law professor or a federal law clerk, and you can get into a T-14 school, then attend one. Your chances of getting one of those jobs will be much higher from a top school. If you can’t get into a T-14 school, then go to the best school you can that places some graduates in those jobs and work hard to graduate at the top of your class. Just remember, many of your classmates will be scrambling to reach the top too.

**Back to the Location Rule**

1. If you want to pursue anything other than one of the careers listed in the above paragraph, then geography is key. For example, the University of Maryland Law School is ranked somewhat higher than SUNY Buffalo Law School, but if you want to practice upstate, attend Buffalo rather than Maryland.
2. If you want to practice in upstate New York and are accepted at Buffalo, Albany and Syracuse, you have several options. Seriously consider the school closest to your part of upstate. Recently, Albany and Syracuse have been trying to match Buffalo’s tuition rate for in-state students, and that can eliminate one key decision point. All three schools have many graduates at all levels of practice throughout upstate. Syracuse has more name recognition outside upstate.
3. If you want to practice downstate, but not in Big Law, and Columbia, Cornell, and NYU are off the table, there are many other solid choices. You should check the stats and the *US News* rankings and draw your own conclusions, but some people rank the non –T-14 downstate law schools as follows: Fordham, then Cardozo and Brooklyn, then everyplace else. CUNY has a law school, but it is not very competitive. Also, do not confuse New York University Law School, one of the best in the country, with New York Law School, one of the former defendants in the student class action fraud cases.
4. If you want to practice out-of-state and T-14 is not an option, then go with the best regional school sending a lot of graduates to your target city. If you want to practice in Atlanta, for example, Emory is a great choice, but if you want to work in Los Angeles, USC would be better than Emory. If resources are an issue, and they are for most people, then a good strategy for our Atlanta example would be to live and work in Georgia long enough to qualify for in-state admissions treatment and in-state tuition eligibility from the University of Georgia. If you know you want to work in Atlanta, that would be a much better plan than going to Buffalo Law, and then moving south.

**Miscellaneous Advice**

1. T-14 schools offer large advantages in job placement and richer lifelong networking opportunities. Plus, you will encounter some extraordinary people in your classes, and you will find your horizons are significantly broadened in many ways. However, your actual legal education won’t be much different from the training you’d receive at a regional or local school. You’ll be no more ready to practice law after three years at Harvard than you will be after three years at Dayton, and maybe less so.
2. Don’t assume that workload, challenge and competition diminish as you move down the law school ranking scale. While some people are smarter than others, those smarter folks can be found in every school. More importantly, diligence and hard work are the single biggest keys to success in law school (and legal practice) and there are some incredibly hard-working students at every level of institution. If anything, since graduates of lower ranked schools have far fewer job options, there will be more competition and pressure to graduate near the top of the class.
3. What’s more, many lawyers and guidebooks will tell you, and I agree, that attorneys’ law school pedigrees are not good indicators of their legal practice skills.

1. Nevertheless, if the only school accepting you is in the bottom tier, and you don’t have a job lined up in a relative’s law firm or somewhere else, then you should consider working for a while to build up your resumé, and then trying for a better school. Some guidebooks give good advice on this topic.
2. Don’t pick a school for the wrong reason. Wrong reasons can be because:

* You want to be near a boyfriend or girlfriend, or even a fiancé;
* Acme is the best school you got into;
* You want a change of scenery;
* Acme gave you the most money (but you don’t plan to practice nearby.)

1. Most of the best legal jobs for 2022 law school graduates will be filled, for all intents and purposes, by November of 2020. That’s because most laws firms of any size recruit law students in the fall of their second year for clerkships the following summer. Then, those firms choose their new lawyers from among the class of clerks, inviting the successful clerks to return in a year, after they graduate. That means two things. First, if your law school is not part of that hiring cycle, or if you don’t seize the initiative during that period, you may be precluded from obtaining one of those jobs. Second, your first- year grades are extremely important.
2. Plan on applying to at least six law schools. You may have used a similar strategy in college; include a couple of stretches, a couple of strong possibilities, and several safeties. Many law schools use their own formulas (Admission Indexes) to assist in their admissions decisions. These indexes balance LSAT scores, GPAs and other factors to rank applicants. When you register with [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org) as a prospective law school applicant, you can review the formulas used by your target schools. Even without registering, you can use the LSAC calculator for a rough idea of your chances.

**Can I Trust the Law Schools?**

Pressure from the American Bar Association, the media, disgruntled students and numerous lawsuits have improved the disclosures made by U.S. law schools. The website [www.lawschooltransperancy.com](http://www.lawschooltransperancy.com), started on a shoestring, has grown over the years into a major force in the push for reliable data. Nevertheless, you should be a very critical reader of any statistics coming from the schools. For example:

1. Placement data – when a school reports employment data, is it including:

* All graduates – the employed, underemployed and unemployed;
* All jobs, legal and non-legal;
* Paying jobs only;
* Full-time permanent jobs only;
* Jobs requiring a law degree;
* Law firm jobs only, or all legal jobs;
* Jobs for which law degrees are useful, but not required (J.D. Advantage);
* Jobs paid for by the schools to bolster their employment stats.

1. Starting Salary Data – the salary data reported by some schools is simply wrong. Since only the largest firms in the nation pay $180K per year to start, and since schools outside the T-14 send few grads to those top firms, it is simply impossible for the median or mean starting salaries for graduates of the vast majority of schools to even approach $180K, despite their claims.
2. Geographic Dispersion – schools will state that they are “national law schools,” but data on where their grads practice will show you which schools are exaggerating. It takes more than a few grads per year moving to a region to establish a school’s name recognition and alumni network.
3. LSAT Data – has a school reduced the number of 1L acceptances to “maintain quality,” while adding large numbers of 2L and 3L transfer students from lower ranked schools to make up the lost revenue? Schools playing this game receive a double benefit – they do not have to report LSAT scores and GPAs of transfer students who, after all, didn’t get in the first time, and they do not have to pay any merit aid to attract them..
4. Merit Aid – how many IL recipients of merit aid will continue to meet the eligibility requirements for aid as 2Ls and 3Ls? Some schools continue merit aid only for those students meeting certain GPA or class rank requirements.
5. Schools in Difficulty – a good Google search will reveal which schools are experiencing difficult times. Albany Law School, for example, received a lot of press a few years ago concerning cutbacks and retrenchments.
6. Required Reporting – in a response to past misleading practices by some law schools, the American Bar Association requires all accredited law schools to complete an **ABA Standard 509 Required Disclosure** regarding admissions practices (including data about applicants and accepted students, attrition, scholarships and transfers.). Schools are also required to file reports regarding **Employment Outcomes** and **Bar Passage Rates**. This information should be available through links on the website of every law school. All three reports can also be found by searching for “ABA 509 required disclosures.”

**Best Preparation for Law School**

**Reading, Reasoning and Writing**. Most commentators state – and I agree one hundred percent - that the best preparation for law school is any curriculum emphasizing reading, reasoning, and writing. Lots of majors can fit that bill.

**Demanding Courses**. Obviously, experience with demanding courses in college will help ready you for demanding law school courses, and law schools appreciate that. Keep in mind, however, that some law schools have preconceived notions – well founded or otherwise - about the relative difficulty of various courses and majors.

**Political Science.** If political science courses involve challenging reading and include demanding writing assignments – often the case – then they are good preparation. However, the mere fact that you studied government in college won’t help much in understanding the substance of the legal topics covered in the first year of law school.

**Pre-Law Classes.** These classes are not particularly useful as law school preparation, but they can be very interesting and might help you decide whether to pursue the law as a career. For, example, I loved taking Constitutional Law in college, and it further solidified my interest in the law, but it was of no help to me when I took the same subject in law school. Taking too many of these courses would be a mistake.

It is also a mistake for students who know they are headed for law school to major or minor in areas like *Legal Studies* or *Pre-Law*. The first-year of law school is devoted in large part to sharpening the analytical skills of new students, to helping them begin to “think like lawyers.” Law courses are much more valuable once students have begun this process – something that does not occur until they get to law school.

**Financial and Technological Literacy**. People disagree about this, but I believe a course in accounting would be very useful for life generally, and for legal practice, maybe not for law school in particular. It is the one course I wished - over and over again - I had taken in college. Also, law schools increasingly expect you to be technologically literate.

**Economics, Finance, and Corporate Financial Policy**. Anyone interested in practicing business law will be well served by taking one or more courses in Economics, Finance, and perhaps Corporate Financial Policy.

**STEM Courses**. Many law schools are quite interested in attracting students with backgrounds in science, technology, engineering or math. That is one reason many law schools have begun accepting GRE scores as an alternative to the LSAT.

**Courses That Will Help You in Practicing Law.** You should seriously consider non-legal courses that give you substantive knowledge you can use in your practice. These will vary, depending on your area of legal interest.If you think, for example, that you want to be an environmental lawyer, then courses in biology and chemistry will be extremely helpful. If you think you might want to be a trademark lawyer, then a course in marketing will be very useful to you later.

**Note: To Prospective Patent Lawyers.** Patent lawyers must have obtained their undergraduate degrees in one of several technical fields recognized by the US Patent & Trademark Office, or else must satisfy rigorous alternative technical training requirements.

**What Law Schools Like to See**.

From what I can tell, admissions officers like to see applicants who have taken challenging courses involving significant reading, writing, analysis, and hard work. They seem less concerned about the particular major.

Happily, Geneseo is extremely well regarded as an academic institution. If Geneseo sends a lot of applicants to a particular law school, that law school’s admissions staff will have its own opinions about the academic strength of various undergraduate programs on campus. However, if you are applying to a law school unfamiliar with Geneseo’s programs, then you’ll want to find a way to ensure the admissions office understands more about our college and the demands of your course of study.

Richard Montauk describes an ideal undergraduate record at page 165 of his excellent book, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*.

- “Top-quality school

* Demanding course load (i.e. no path of least resistance); advanced work in a second, unrelated (to your major) field is particularly helpful
* Top grades throughout (with few courses taken pass/fail), but especially in the junior and senior years
* Courses requiring substantial reading, strong writing ability, good research skills, and analytical prowess
* Courses developing useful substantive knowledge for your future legal field” Montauk at 165

Law schools often like candidates with several years of serious work experience. These candidates could include artists, writers, veterans, bankers, entrepreneurs, teachers and people from a host of other occupations. On the other hand, a year spent working odd jobs will be a negative.

Several guidebooks have pointed out that law schools are flooded with applications from paralegals. So, if working as a paralegal for a couple of years will allow you to better predict whether you want to practice law, then go for it. However, don’t become a paralegal with the idea that it will help you get into law school, because it probably won’t.

**What About the LSAT?**

**Perspective.** First let me give you some perspective. Every year tens of thousands of people prepare for, and successfully take, the LSAT, and if you are having a good academic career at Geneseo, you will be better prepared than most. The LSAT involves a lot of work, and it is a bit of a hurdle, but thousands of people less able than you clear that hurdle every year. (You will want to remember this same, unassailable logic even further down the road when you are taking the bar exam.)

**What is the LSAT?** The Law School Admissions Test is a standardized test that must be taken by candidates for admission to US law schools. It is quite different than the SAT and ACT. The LSAT doesn’t predict whether you will be a good attorney; it is designed to predict your success in the first year of law school.Some law schools have begun giving applicants the option of submitting GRE scores or GMAT scores in lieu of LSAT scores.

**Are LSAT Scores Important?** Yes, they are extremely important, often considered more important than your GPA. To the extent they do help predict first year success, they are of great interest to law schools. Plus, a law school admissions officer can look at a score of 165 from a Geneseo applicant and have at least one significant point of comparison with a 160 from Bucknell, for example.

For better or worse, you can get a pretty good idea of the relative credibility of law schools by comparing the LSAT scores of their entering classes. (Differences of a couple of points aren’t significant. It’s better to think of the scores as falling within several bands.)

**When Should I Take the LSAT?** If you plan to go to law school straight from college, then you can take it in the June after your junior year or the fall of senior year. Do not wait until winter of senior year if you are applying to law school for the following fall. Even if you are not planning on law school right away, it still makes sense to take the LSAT before you graduate or shortly afterwards. Scores keep for a couple of years.

**What About Preparation?** You **MUST** prepare for the LSAT. Do not take it unless you have prepped diligently. Most people who wind up in good law schools will have spent a lot of time preparing. High SAT scores do not mean you can skip the LSAT prep. Why? You must prep because they are different tests, and because just about every serious candidate with high SAT scores will be prepping for the LSAT anyway. My single most important piece of advice is to prepare very thoroughly.

**How to Prepare?** Theoretically, self-disciplined students can prep on their own, but for the vast majority of people there is no substitute for a good commercial prep course. These can be expensive, but if a substantially higher score can get you into the school of your choice, and perhaps get you more financial aid from that school, the cost is money well spent. In any case, there are numerous sources where you can legitimately purchase prior tests, and if you have any doubts about the importance of a prep course, set aside a morning, time yourself, and take the test. Preparation should definitely include practice on the Microsoft Surface Go tablet on which the test is administered.

**What About the Job Market?**

**The Market**. The job market for lawyers has been slowly improving in recent years. Even though some new lawyers are not finding jobs, thousands of other new lawyers are hired each year.

**Strategies.** Past job scarcity makes three strategies all the more important:

1. A top tier school will offer better placement opportunities;
2. The net cost of school is an even bigger decision factor than before;
3. Taking on massive student debt can be dangerous.

**Statistics**. Taken with several grains of salt, statistics can still be useful. The ABA and the National Association for Law Placement have published data about employment outcomes for the law school class of 2018.

**Watchdog Group**. Law School Transparency is a new and very active watchdog group. Its website has a treasure trove of great information. See: www.lawschooltransparency.com

**Caution about Lawyer Earnings:** It may go without saying, but it would be a mistake to decide to become a lawyer, or any other type of professional, solely to make a lot of money. Intellectual challenge, enjoyment/job satisfaction, interest in a field, social responsibility and quality of life are all equally important factors in a career choice. Law, in particular, is hard, demanding work, and while many lawyers love their careers, more than a few do not. Plus, most lawyers, while able to lead comfortable lives financially, are far from wealthy.

**Valuable Pre-Law Resources**

**1. SUNY Geneseo Pre-Law Advisors:**

**- Dr. Anne Eisenberg (Natural Sciences, Communication, Education, and Social Sciences, except PLSC-IR);**

**- Dr. Graham Drake (Humanities, Languages, and Arts);**

**- Prof. Jo Kirk; (Political Science and International relations);**

**- Prof. Jim Quinn (Students in the School of Business)**

<http://www.geneseo.edu/prelaw>

**2. Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) – *Choosing a Law School***

<http://www.lsac.org/jd/choose/customize-your-law-school-search.asp>

**3. Law School Admissions Council GPA/LSAT Calculator – *Compute Your Chances***

<https://officialguide.lsac.org/RELEASE/UGPALSAT/UGPALSAT.aspx>

**4. Boston College Law School Locator – *Compute Your Chances***

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/gradschool/law/lawlocator.html>

**5. Free LSAT Practice Test – *A Sobering Experience***

<http://www.princetonreview.com/law/free-lsat-practice-test.aspx>

**6. Other LSAT Options**

- Manhattan LSAT - <http://www.manhattanlsat.com/>

- Kaplan LSAT - <http://www.kaptest.com/LSAT/Home/index.html>

**7. Paying for Law School – *Information and a Good Video from LSAC***

<http://www.lsac.org/jd/finance/financial-aid-overview.asp>

**8. Financing Options for UB Law School – *Information about a Good Option***

<http://www.law.buffalo.edu/admissions/financing.html#financing>

**9. Stanford University Legal Careers Website – *Great Review of Career Options***

<http://slsnavigator.law.stanford.edu/>

**10. Best How-To Book (per JMQ):** Richard Montauk, *How to Get Into the Top Law Schools,* Fifth Ed. 2011 (Prentice Hall Press) ISBN 978-0-7352-0457-7

**11. Perspective on the Importance of Place**: Richard Florida, *Whose Your City?,* 2008 (Basic Books) ISBN 978-0-465-01809-3