



1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

(1998) "Parting Advice: Timelines for Applying to Graduate School, Law School, and Finding a Job," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 3
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol3/iss1/11>

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Parting Advice: Timelines for Applying to Graduate School, Law School, and Finding a Job

Keywords

Employment

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Timeline for Graduate School

Once you have made the decision to pursue an advanced degree, the question of where to go becomes the next issue. There are several considerations to think about concerning the choice of grad schools. You should give thought to the reputation, workload, curriculum, location and cost of all prospective programs. The most prestigious school may or may not be the best for you, depending upon your postgraduate plans; and it is important to consider whether or not the curriculum addresses your personal goals. Moreover, you must be realistic about your ability to handle a demanding workload. The size, location, and cost of a graduate program are also critical; you cannot realize your full potential in an environment that is too big or too small for your needs and social habits no matter how great the program; and of course, you must have a way to pay for your schooling through fellowships, TAships, loans, etc.

You also need to decide whether to pursue a Masters or a PhD, or both. Perhaps a terminal Masters is right for you; or, if your ultimate goal is a Doctoral degree, you should decide whether or not to directly enter a PhD program or go for your Masters, then your PhD. Many programs do not offer a terminal Masters degree, and it may not be easy to enter a terminal Masters program and then have to reapply for a PhD program in a few years. You should consider which route is most amenable to your long-term personal and career goals.

Even before you address the above considerations, you should begin to make preparations for the admissions process. Most programs require some standardized testing, usually the GRE, and some programs may require you to take one or more of the GRE subject tests. It is generally a good idea to take these tests early in your senior year if not before. You will probably want to take the GRE by October of your senior year so that your scores will arrive in time.

In addition, many programs require a writing sample to complement your scores and grades so it is a good idea to have a paper in mind; you might consider expanding upon one of your best papers, or pursuing an independent study or honors project so that you will have a substantial writing sample to send out.

And, as most programs require several recommendations, usually two or three, it is best to seek out these recommendations as soon as possible. And be sure to ask professors who will not only write a favorable recommenda-

tion, but also have the ability to assess your work specifically within the context of the degree you wish to pursue. In other words, just because your English professor will write the most glowing recommendation does not mean she is the best choice if you are looking to pursue a degree in philosophy or political science.

Once you have put together the best application you can and sent them off to your schools of choice, the waiting game begins. Most programs contact applicants by mid-March, and all programs will have made their decisions by April 15. So, sit back and wait for the acceptance letters to roll in.

Timeline for Law School

The correct formula to get into law school does not exist. The paths into law school are as varied as the individuals who tread them. Fortunately, this gives students interested in law many options during their undergraduate years. However, for some, the ambiguity of standards and expectations can become overwhelming. As someone recently accepted into law school who has been through the difficulties and confusion, I will try to articulate what I have learned.

Despite conventional wisdom, it is not necessary to study political science to get into law school. In fact, some say it could be a disadvantage. Since most people applying to law school do study political science, it will hardly make you stand out to the admissions committee. However, don't shy away from it either. The best advice I have come across is, "Study what you enjoy." Not only does it make college more interesting, but it should also help your G.P.A., one of the most important determinants of getting into law school. It is easier to perform well in a subject matter you don't dread studying.

Like the choice of major, choice of classes depends on your preferences. However, some types of classes are very important for preparing for law school. First, make sure to take classes that will make you write. When you arrive at law school, it is assumed that you can communicate effectively with the written word. Almost any subject matter can fulfill this requirement. What is important is not what you write, but how well you write. In addition, it might be helpful to take some classes requiring analytical thought. This is the type of thinking that law school will exploit, so you should begin preparing your mind to work in that way. It will also probably help with the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). Philosophy and political theory classes work very well in developing this skill.

The LSAT consists of four scored multiple choice sections, and an unscored essay. The multiple choice part is divided into two sections of logical reasoning, one section of analytical reasoning or logic games, and one section of reading. The essay consists of a scenario and two options; you have thirty minutes to argue in favor of one of them. No legal knowledge is required to do well on the test. In fact, the test doesn't even require specialized

knowledge. It focuses on how well and how quickly you can think. For some, that makes it even more intimidating, because you can not really prepare for it like your undergraduate exams.

There is no reason to be worried, however, because you can prepare. Learning the process of the test is probably the best way you can get ready. If you know what types of skills the test is looking for, it is much easier to practice them and do well. If you prepare, it may also reduce some of your anxiety on test day.

People have varying opinions on how worthwhile it is to take a course. The deciding factor in controlling the effectiveness of a course comes down to how much you put into it. No matter what course you take, if you don't do the recommended exercises, your effort is futile. Some people require the structure of the course for motivation to work on the test. Others do just fine without the extra help. It comes down to a matter of individual needs.

Many books have been written purporting to know the exact formula for getting into law school. Although one probably does not exist, there are certain areas that admission committees do seem to focus on. Your LSAT and GPA are the two most important determinants. They are not the only two indicators of your admission, but they can decide if you are almost certainly in, almost certainly out, or on the bubble.

If you are in the bubble pile, the committee moves next to the other aspects of your application. Although different schools and individuals vary in how they weigh the criteria, it seems that the letters of recommendation and the personal statement are most important after your numbers. They give the admission committee an idea of who you are. Most law schools suggest seeking recommendations from professors that know you well. Although the source of the recommendation will, of course, be considered, the substance and detail of the recommendation is most important. If you come from a small school, like Illinois Wesleyan University, the admissions committee will expect that the person writing your recommendation knows you well enough to be sufficiently detailed. Most law schools don't give you the opportunity to interview, so the personal statement is your one chance to make an argument for yourself. It might best be approached like a case. Take this statement and the rest of the application to develop an argument for why they should admit you. The subject matter of the personal statement should fit you and your personality. Write honestly and persuasively.

These suggestions did not provide a template for getting into law school. Each person has different skills, interests, and goals. The best advice is to take these, do as well with them as you can, and, when you are ready, articulate the results to the law school through the application process.

Timeline for Applying for a Job

If you are anything like I was at the beginning of my senior year, you have no idea how to go about looking for a job in the public policy process once you graduate from college. If you are not, then you will be able to compare this plan of attack for getting a career against your own experiences.

First, while looking for a job in the political sphere, I feel it is important to be pro-active. The burden of proof is on you to sell yourself and demonstrate how you can be a useful employee. This means you need to start early, send out your resume to as many people as possible, decide where you want to work (geographically), and pick a specific area of politics in which you wish to be involved. Although you do not want to seem annoyingly overzealous, it is advisable to illustrate that you are not just going through the motions by sending out resumes. A follow-up phone call to ensure that the resume was received and processed is one way to establish a personal connection. However insignificant it may seem, it is just one more reason (in addition to all of the reasons that your resume itself will provide) that this person, who probably receives several such resumes each week, has to give you special consideration. Since all politics, as the saying goes, is personal, this is a good way for you to show yourself to be personable.

Of course, the substance of the resume is the key to many of the chances you will be given. Internships and extra-curricular activities that pique your interests give perspective employers ideas about your talents and abilities. As someone who waited until late in my college career to begin my preparation, I feel that I am not necessarily the best person to offer advice on this issue. However, I do have one piece of advice, participate in the American University Washington Semester Program. It has been one of the best educational experiences in my college career. It has also helped me focus on finding an area in the policy process that fits my talents. It gave me the opportunity to learn directly about the policymakers, bureaucrats, and media representatives responsible for the system we read about in so many books. Washington provided me with some of the best research resources in the world and gave me the chance to work firsthand on a research project that interested me. Finally, the program helped me gain firsthand experience in the policy-making process through an internship in our nation's capital. Over and above the invaluable experience this provides, it also gave me contacts with powerful decision-makers that will serve me well in the future. The Washington Semester program, as well as all other experiential learning programs offered by IWU, both in the US and abroad, offered me a perspective beyond my own campus and, more importantly, beyond the conventional way of learning. This is experience that most employers readily appreciate.

The most important step in making the decision whether or not to study abroad, in my opinion, is talking with and benefiting from the experiences of those who have already gone through these programs.

The only other suggestion I have is be persistent in all aspects of the job search. Everything we do from the time we decide on a career to the time we sign the contract is important. Focus on what the employer will be looking for on a resume to take away some of the guesswork and stress once it comes time for the interview. Also, staying persistent is still important even after sending a resume out and beginning the interview process. This persistence and the confidence it engenders may just be the defining difference between you and many other suitable candidates for a perspective job.