



PRE-LAW ADVISORY PROGRAM HANDBOOK

2022-2023

Rivier University, Pre-Law Advisory Program Handbook

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I. INTRODUCTION

Law schools look for students who demonstrate strong research, writing and critical reasoning skills, have challenged themselves as undergraduates by taking academically rigorous courses, and will bring unique perspectives and experiences to the classroom and legal profession. No law school requires a prescribed pre-law course of study, and most do not find one desirable.

Consequently, Rivier University does not offer a pre-law program *of studies*, but rather a Pre-Law *Advisory* Program available to all Rivier students. The Program offers quality academic and career advising by an informed member of the Northeast Association of Pre-Law Advisors, and schedules regular workshops and events for those considering law school. Although not required, students interested in attending law school are encouraged to register with the Pre-Law Program to ensure that they receive notice of such events and additional information relevant to their interests in law school.

This handbook provides guidance to students who are considering applying to law school. Such students should familiarize themselves with the material contained herein, and are encouraged to set up a meeting with Rivier’s designated Pre-Law advisor, Attorney Eric Gentes, Professor and Director of the Criminal Justice Program, available at egentes@rivier.edu, or 603 897 8266.

II. DECIDING WHETHER TO GO TO LAW SCHOOL

The only person who can answer the question “is law school right for me?” is you. In doing so, it is important to research the cost of law school, the types of professions that a law degree prepares one for, and the range and distribution of salaries that law graduates can reasonably expect to earn. However, just as important is understanding yourself, including your academic strengths and weaknesses, how much time and effort you are able and willing to devote to law school and your legal career upon graduation, and your true motivations for considering law school. Given the commitment in time, money, and effort that law school and a career in law demand, failure to ask these questions can lead to failure to graduate or professional burnout after graduation. Among the worse reasons to go to law school is because you do not know what else to do.

A. Job Prospects for Law Graduates

According to the American Bar Association (ABA) there were 1,328,692 “active attorneys” in the United States in 2020, a 10.4% increase since 2010. This amounts to approximately one lawyer for every 240 residents in the United States. However, this number can be misleading, as lawyers “are not evenly distributed among the 50 states, or even within the states.”

Unsurprisingly, lawyers tend to be clustered in cities, with particularly large concentrations in economic hubs such as New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Small towns and rural areas are often underserved and may provide opportunities to attorneys willing to

locate and practice there. However, there are some exceptions. Vermont, which is mostly rural, has a relatively large concentrations of attorneys, with 5.8 lawyers per 1,000 residents. By comparison, Massachusetts has 6.2 per thousand and New Hampshire has approximately 2.7 per thousand.

The legal profession has not been immune to the economic ravages caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In its *Profile of the Legal Profession in 2020*, the ABA notes that “the pandemic and recession have resulted in layoffs, furloughs and pay cuts,” and that circumstances “may be quite different a year from now,” let alone when those considering law school now will be graduating.

Despite the challenges facing the legal profession, the United States is a society based on law, and many areas of the law are becoming increasingly more complicated. Therefore, there will always be a need for well-trained legal professionals to help their clients understand and protect their legal rights. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, law school applications dropped dramatically, and law schools were forced to cut the number of new students that they admitted. The numbers have since recovered, but the decline in new attorneys entering the field for several years and the fact that a large number of attorneys are at or nearing retirement age means that current applicants to law school will likely face less competition in the job market upon graduation than they would have otherwise.

In the past, it was often assumed that a law degree prepares graduates not only to become lawyers, but for potential careers in a range of professions, including business, banking, and politics. Observers pointed to the number of law graduates in these and other professions as proof. Thus, law school was sometimes seen as an option for those who did not know what they wanted to do after graduating with an undergraduate degree.

Given the skyrocketing cost of a legal education, the range of post-graduate academic programs now available, and the increasing specialization needed to be successful in various professions, accepted wisdom now holds that law school should not be viewed as simply one more step in a well-rounded education. Rather, it should be considered only by those who intend to become attorneys after graduation. Moreover, the likely explanations for the number of law graduates working in professions other than the law is the sheer number of graduates that law schools churned out before the decline began in 2011, and the high rate of burn-out among lawyers, which causes many go on to second careers outside of the law.¹

¹ Law can be an extremely stressful and demanding profession. Consequently, attorney burn-out is a real phenomenon. Those considering law school should speak to actual attorneys about their experiences before making a final decision about whether to go to law school, and about which areas of the law to pursue as a career.

B. Average Salaries for Legal Professionals

A detailed discussion on lawyer wages can be found in the *ABA Profile of the Legal Profession, 2020*,² which reports that “the average lawyer salary in 2019 was \$145,300.” The ABA goes on to report that:

The average lawyer’s salary has increased slowly in recent years, at less than the rate of inflation for most years since 2010. For example, from 2018 to 2019, it rose 0.7%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That’s less than half the 1.6% inflation rate for the same period. (Note: BLS statistics cover wages for all lawyers but do not include profits for law firm)

It is important to remember that attorney salaries vary greatly depending upon the area of law and the geographic location that one practices in, the clients one represents, and the firm or employer that one works for. For example, lawyer salaries are highest in metropolitan areas that also have the highest costs of living, such as Boston, Massachusetts, where the average salary is \$169,920. By comparison, the average salary in New Hampshire is \$99,289. Regarding areas of the law/types of positions, the ABA reports the following:

Position/Type of Office	Year	Median Salary³:
Public Interest Organizations	First year	\$50,300
Public Interest Organizations	11-15 years	\$80,500
Local Prosecutors	First year	\$56,200
Local Prosecutors	11-15 years	\$84,400
Public Defenders	First year	\$58,300
Public Defenders	11-15 years	\$96,400
Law Firms 50 or fewer employees	First year	\$115,00
Law Firms 50 or fewer employees	Eighth year	\$138,00
Law Firms 251 to 500 employees	First year	\$160,000
Law Firms 251 to 500 employees	Eighth	\$197,600
Law Firms over 700 employees	First year	\$180,000
Law Firms over 700 employees	Eighth	\$252,200

² The report is available for download at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2020/07/potlp2020.pdf>

³ Median means that 50% fall below the given number and that 50% fall above the given number.

Areas of the law that many find most fulfilling personally, such as being a prosecutor, public defender, or working for a non-profit, tend to pay the least. These comparatively low salaries may be partially offset by various loan forgiveness programs that many law schools offer. However, even with such programs, those who decide to make a career in these fields will likely have to accept a lower standard of living than many people associate with the legal profession. The same is true for the majority of individuals who work as solo practitioners or in small law firms.

At the other extreme are those lawyers who earn substantially more than \$252,000 per year. Such positions are relatively few, usually with large law firms located in major cities, and involve representing corporate or wealthy individual clients in business and tax matters. The firms that pay such salaries tend to recruit only the top-ranked graduates from the most prestigious law schools. Associates and even partners of such firms usually work extremely long hours throughout their careers and often have to make themselves available to their clients 24/7.

The areas of the law that one intends and reasonably expects to enter after graduation should be a major consideration in deciding which law schools one applies to, and how much one is willing to spend (or go into debt) in order to attend law school.

C. The Cost of Law School

For years, law school tuition rates have increased faster than the rate of inflation. However, tuition is only one factor in the overall cost of attending law school, which also includes how much financial aid one receives and the cost of living in the area where the school is located. One should also factor in the lost-opportunity cost of attending school for three years, when one could otherwise be working full-time.

Law school tuition rates vary greatly, and are based on factors such as: (i) whether the institution in question is private or public (and if public, if the student is paying in-state or out-of-state tuition); (ii) the school's geographic location; (iii) the ratio of faculty to students and how highly faculty are compensated, and (vi) how highly the school is ranked, including but not limited to by, U.S. News and World Report.⁴

The amount of financial aid law schools give out also varies greatly. For many prospective students, differences in aid packages offered by various schools will have a greater impact on how much they will actually pay than differences in tuition rates. Often, schools with higher tuition rates have more resources that they can devote to financial aid than schools with lower tuition rates, and so it may actually cost less to attend these schools for many students.

⁴ News and World Reports' list of "Best Law Schools" is discussed in Section IV, B below, and can found at <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/law-rankings> .

Whichever law school one attends, one is likely to graduate with a large debt. As reported by the U.S. Department of Education, the average cumulative student debt for law school graduates rose from \$82,400 in 2000 to \$145,500 in 2016, the most recent year that such data is available. In 2020, the ABA surveyed 1,100 new lawyers, 48% of whom reported postponing or deciding not to have children, 29% reported postponing or deciding not to get married, and 56% reported postponing or deciding not to buy a house because of debt.

III. PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL

A. Undergraduate Course Work & “Real Life” Experience

Law schools seek applicants who have maintained high undergraduate GPAs while challenging themselves by taking academically rigorous courses as undergraduates. Harvard Law School’s website emphasizes the importance of a liberal arts education, as opposed to “vocational training” in preparing one to succeed in law school and as attorneys. As the website notes “a broad college education is usually preferable to one that is narrowly specialized. ... [T]hose programs approaching their subjects on a more theoretical level, with attention to educational breadth, are better preparatory training for the legal profession than those emphasizing the practical.”

Just how high a GPA an applicant needs in order to be accepted depends upon the law school in question. However, even modestly ranked schools are generally looking for students who have scored above a 3.2. Although not as important as a student’s GPA and LSAT score (discussed below), law schools also seek applicants who have participated in student organizations and other extra-curricular activities.

Increasingly, law schools seek applicants who have gained “real life” experience outside the classroom. A prospective law student whose undergraduate GPA is not as high as she would like may be able to increase the chances that she will be accepted by the school(s) of her choice by spending one or preferably more years working in a professional setting or gaining otherwise relevant experience after graduation.⁵

Rivier University helps its students prepare for law school by emphasizing research, writing and critical reasoning skills throughout the curriculum. In addition, all Rivier students have numerous opportunities to gain practical experience in legal, law enforcement, political, non-profit, and business settings through numerous internship programs offered by various academic programs at the University. Students who are interested in exploring potential internships are

⁵ Admissions personnel of several area law schools have informed the author that, in their opinion, one year is not enough time for an applicant to gain sufficient experience in most professions to make it a significant factor in the application process.

The author of this *Handbook* spent two years teaching English to primary school students in Prague, in the Czech Republic and to technical college students in Poznan, Poland soon after the Iron Curtain fell, and strongly believes that this experience helped get him accepted to Boston College Law School.

encouraged to contact the author of this *Handbook*, Attorney Eric Gentes, at egentes@rivier.edu or 603 897 8266.

Rivier students who are considering going to law school need to maintain a high GPA and should challenge themselves by taking a range of 300 and 400 level courses,⁶ both in and outside their major. Students can further increase the likelihood that they will be accepted by the school(s) of their choice by participating in the wide range of student clubs and other campus activities that Rivier University offers. Finally, Rivier students should seek opportunities outside the classroom to gain professional and other real-world experience through jobs, internships, and volunteer activities, particularly if such positions involve leadership roles.

B. The Law School Admissions Process

The Law School Admissions Counsel (LSAC) is a non-profit organization that facilitates the admissions process for all ABA-approved law schools. In addition to administering the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), the LSAC processes the actual applications, which are done entirely online. Students who are considering law school should set up an account with LSAC as soon as possible, which can be done through its web page at <http://www.lsac.org/>. Students who plan to go on to law school immediately after obtaining their undergraduate degree **should register with LSAC no later than the fall semester of their junior year.**

In addition to a student's GPA, the most important admissions criterion for most law schools is a student's LSAT score. As noted by the LSAC, "the LSAT is administered in two parts. The first part consists of several 35-minute sections of multiple-choice questions. The second part of the LSAT consists of a 35-minute, unscored LSAT Writing sample." Descriptions of the types of questions on the exam and some prep resources are at <https://www.lsac.org/lsat/prep/types-lsat-questions>.

The LSAT is given four times a year, generally in February, June, September, and November/December, throughout the United States and at some overseas locations.⁷ However, the LSAC has substantially revised the testing schedule in response to Covid-19, including allowing the LSAT to be taken online. The complete schedule can be found at <https://www.lsac.org/lsat/lsat-dates-deadlines-score-release-dates>. The deadline to register is approximately five weeks before the testing date. However, seats are limited and can fill up before the deadline. Most schools require that applicants have taken the LSAT by December for admission the following fall. Students may want to take the LSAT in September or even earlier in case they are unhappy with their score and want to retake it. The LSAT Report, which is released to all law schools that an individual applies for, includes: (i) the applicant's current score; (ii) the scores of all other LSATs that s/he has taken; (iii) the average score if the student

⁶ Prospective law students should avoid trying to inflate their undergraduate GPAs by taking lower level, less demanding courses, as this is a technique that law school admissions personnel are well aware of.

⁷ The author of this *Handbook* took the LSAT in December 1993 in Munich, Germany.

has taken the test more than once; (iv) the applicant's score band, which is an estimate of the applicant's proficiency in the skills tested; and (v) the applicant's percentile ranking. Law school admissions offices vary in what they consider when a student has taken the LSAT more than once. Some only consider the highest score, while others consider other scores to varying degrees.

The LSAC offers free sample LSAT questions and explanations on-line, and sells a variety of preparation materials (see <https://www.lsac.org/lsat/prep>). In addition, a number of companies offer LSAT prep courses and materials. Some individuals find that taking a private LSAT prep course helps them understand the material better, and just as important, provides them with the structure, discipline, and additional incentive to help them better prepare for the LSAT. Many applicants successfully prepare for the LSATs on their own.

The LSAC posts a "Checklist for the Law School Admission Process" online at: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/overview>. **Students interested in law school should familiarize themselves with this checklist, and follow it.** In addition, the LSAC describes the type of questions contained in the LSAC and provides information on how to prepare for the exam at: <https://www.lsac.org/lsat/prep/types-lsat-questions> .

C. Fitness & Character Questions

Most law schools ask prospective students about their character and fitness to practice law because all state bars require applicants to meet such criteria before they are allowed to practice. It is important to answer such questions truthfully, even if some answers are embarrassing. Many law school applicants have done things in the past that they are ashamed of, and in most cases, disclosure will not prevent admission to law school. However, if a law school does, it is far better to learn this before devoting the necessary time, effort and money to attend law school than after graduation, when one applies to entry to a state bar. Failure to disclose is itself a character issue and reflects badly on the applicant.

IV. DECIDING WHICH LAW SCHOOLS TO APPLY TO AND ATTEND

A. Criteria & the Importance of Finding a "Good Fit"

The ABA has issued a statement on law school rankings that states in full:

Neither the American Bar Association nor its Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar endorses, cooperates with, or provides data to any law school ranking system. No ranking or rating system of law schools is attempted or advocated by the ABA. Rather, the ABA provides only a statement of the accreditation status of a school. Fully approved schools have demonstrated that they are operating in compliance with each of the ABA Standards for Approval of

Law Schools. Their compliance is regularly monitored, and comprehensive reviews are conducted every tenth year. Provisionally approved schools, also considered "ABA-Approved," have been determined to be operating in substantial compliance with the ABA Standards for Approval of Law Schools. Prospective law students should consider a variety of factors in making their choice among schools.

There are 200 ABA-approved law schools in the United States that offer first degrees (the J.D. degree). A complete list, which includes links to descriptions for each school, is available at: <https://officialguide.lsac.org/Release/SchoolsABADData/SchoolsAndLocation.aspx> . A page that allows students search for particular schools based on such criteria as undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores is at https://officialguide.lsac.org/release/OfficialGuide_Default.aspx . Just as only you can decide whether to go to law school, only you can decide which law schools to apply to, and which school you should ultimately attend.

Given the investment in time and money needed to complete law school and the importance of finding a “good fit,” prospective students should visit the campuses of the schools that they are considering, and ask to meet with admissions personnel, current students, and members of the faculty.

B. Pros and Cons of Law School Rankings

Even though the ABA does not support any law school rating system, many prospective students place a great deal of emphasis on such rankings when choosing which schools to apply to and attend. The most well-known ranking system is U.S. News and World Report’s annual list of “Best Law Schools,” which is available on-line at <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/law-rankings>.

U.S. News’ list has been criticized as arbitrary and subject to manipulation, but still generates a great deal of attention each year it is released. Moreover, there is truth in the adage that perception is reality; how high a law school is ranked is among the most important factors in determining the number of applicants it receives, and therefore how selective it can be in its admissions. Selectivity in admissions, in turn, is among the most important criteria that U.S. News uses in compiling its list. In addition, prestigious law firms in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston continue to recruit largely, if not exclusively, from among the top-ranked graduates of the top-ranked schools on the list. Thus, if your goal in attending law school is to land a well-paying associate’s position at such a firm, you may want to limit your applications to top-ranked schools and reconsider going to law school if you are not accepted by any of them.⁸ Finally, in addition to ranking schools, U.S. News and World

⁸ You should also ask yourself if you are academically strong enough to be ranked in the top quarter, or above, of your graduating class.

Report's provides other resources that prospective students will likely find helpful. To being your search, go to <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools> .

For students interested in fields such as public interest law, working for the government (particularly at local and state level, but less so at the federal level), or setting up their own practice after graduation, how highly a given law school is ranked is not nearly as important as whether it provides an in-depth and well-rounded legal education and the resources necessary for students to succeed at law school.

C. Law School Curricula

Most law students complete their degree in three years. An increasing number of law schools have been offering part-time programs that permit students to complete their degree in four years or more. Depending on the school, courses are offered on campus (generally in the evening), online, or both. In New England, these are:

- University of Connecticut School of Law, Hartford, CT
- New England School of Law, Boston, MA
- Suffolk University Law School, Boston, MA
- Western New England School of Law, Springfield, MA
- Quinnipiac University School of Law, Hamden, CT
- Northeastern University School of Law, Boston, MA

A ranking of law schools nationwide that offer part-time and flexible programs is published by U.S. News & World Report, with links to the schools' programs, and is available at <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/part-time-law-rankings>

In general, there is a great deal more consistency in law school curriculums than there is at the undergraduate level or in most other graduate programs. This is particularly true for first year students since law schools have a prescribed first year course of study, which typically consists of the following:

Fall Semester:

Civil Procedure [focusing on the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure]

Constitutional Law (focusing on the United States Constitution)

Contracts [focusing on the Uniform Commercial Code and Restatement (Second) of Contracts]

Criminal Law [focusing on the Common Law and Model Penal Code]

Spring Semester:

Property [focusing on the Common Law and Restatement of Property]

Torts [focusing on the Common law and Restatement (Second) of Torts]

Legal Reasoning, Research & Writing [sometimes broken up into two courses]

After their first year, students are able to choose most of their remaining courses. However, all students at ABA-accredited schools must complete a professional ethics course, and individual schools may have their own additional requirements.

Some schools are well-known and highly regarded for particular areas of study. For example, the University of New Hampshire School of Law has what is generally regarded to be among the finest intellectual property programs in the country. The same is true for Vermont Law School's environmental law program. Students interested in a particular area of the law should conduct research to learn which schools are particularly known for that field of study.

Nearly all law schools are placing a greater emphasis on hands-on training through clinics, in which students represent clients in actual legal cases under the supervision of a law school faculty member, and internships and externships, in which students gain experience with law firms and other outside employers, for which they sometimes receive salaries. For years, Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts, has been known for its "practical learning educational model" in which students participate in four three-month, full-time legal placements, comprising a full year of practical legal work before graduation.

D. Geography, Size and Cost

In deciding which law schools to apply to, and which school to ultimately attend, you should also consider each school's geographic area, including: (i) the area's cost of living; (ii) whether you want to live in a city or small town; (iii) whether you want to be close to family, which may be able to provide valuable economic and emotional support while you are in school; and (iv) where you ultimately want to practice law.⁹

A school's size is another important factor to consider, since it may influence students' relationships with each other (including how competitive they are) and with their professors. It may also influence the size of the school's curriculum and the level of academic and other support resources enjoyed by its students.

As noted above, a law school's tuition is only one factor in determining the cost of attending law school. Other factors, which may actually impact the final cost more, include the cost of living associated with the area in which the law school is located, and how much financial aid a student receives.

⁹ This last factor is less important for students who go to top-ranked law schools, especially if they plan to apply at large law firms in major cities, since such employers typically recruit top-ranked students from top-ranked schools nationwide.

E. How Many Law Schools Should One Apply To?

Finally, there is the question of how many law schools prospective students should apply to. In some cases, a student's living situation, such as the unwillingness or inability to move to attend law school, may dictate this choice; there may be a limited number of schools, or even a single school that one may be able to attend.

For prospective students with more options, it is important to keep in mind that the investment in time (several hours) and cost (between \$0 to \$85 per school) of applying to individual law schools¹⁰ is extremely small when compared to the time and cost of actually attending school. Moreover, differences in how much aid schools are willing and able to provide can have a tremendous impact on whether a student is able to attend, and if so how much it will cost. Finally, finding the "right school" can be a difficult process that depends on multiple criteria, not all of which are easily explicable. The bottom line is that it does not make sense to try to save money by greatly limiting the number of schools one applies to.

One strategy that many applicants employ is to follow a tiered approach, in which they apply to a certain number of "dream schools" – those that they believe they are unlikely to be accepted by, but would love to attend. In deciding which schools to include on this list, students should be realistic and not apply to schools that they realistically have **no** chance of getting into. At the next level, these students apply to a similar number of schools that they are fairly confident will accept them. In some cases, students may decide that given the investment in time and money needed to complete law school, they are not willing to go below this second tier. However, if students are determined to go to law school, they should apply to several "sure-bets."

V. NEW ENGLAND LAW SCHOOLS

Below is a list of all law schools located in New England:

New Hampshire:

University of New Hampshire School of Law (public) - Concord.

Connecticut:

Quinnipiac University School of Law (private) - Hamden. Offers a part-time, evening program.

University of Connecticut School of Law (public) - Hartford. Offers a part-time, evening program.

Yale Law School (private) - New Haven.

¹⁰ If asked, the admissions offices of many law schools will waive the application fee.

Maine:

University of Maine School of Law (public) - Portland. Offers a “Flex Time” program allows students to complete their degree within four to seven years.

Massachusetts:

Boston College Law School (private) - Newton.

Boston University School of Law (private) - Boston.

Harvard Law School (private) - Cambridge.

New England School of Law (private) - Boston. Offers a part-time program that allows students to complete their degree in four years, taking courses either during the day or evening. Also offers a “Flexible Part-Time” program that allows students to complete their degree in six years.

Northeastern University School of Law (private) - Boston. Offers a part-time program that may be completed on-campus or online.

Suffolk University Law School (private) - Boston. Offers a part-time, evening program.

University of Massachusetts School of Law (public) - Dartmouth.

Western New England University School of Law (private) - Springfield. Offers a part-time, evening program.

Rhode Island:

Roger Williams University School of Law (private) - Bristol.

Vermont:

Vermont Law School (private) - South Royalton. Offers a part-time, day program.

In addition to the schools above, the Massachusetts School of Law, a private institution which does not require applicants to have taken the LSAT, is located in Andover, Massachusetts. The school is NOT ABA-approved. Graduates are eligible to take the Massachusetts and Connecticut Bar Examinations immediately upon graduation. After passing either of those bar exams, graduates are then eligible to take the bar exam in New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Vermont, Maine, California, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and West Virginia.

REFERENCES and ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

American Bar Association has a comprehensive website that provides information on ABA-approved laws schools. Retrieved from

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/aba_approved_law_schools/

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