

Playing the Law School Admissions Game

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Want to know the secret of getting into law school? It's simple: get a 4.0, ace your LSAT, and join every worthy cause and activity that you can. True, it's not that difficult, but it is close. As more people apply to Law School and their qualifications become better, the competition at major law schools around the nation has drastically increased. Having a parent who is an alumnus of a particular law school no longer spells probable acceptance to that school.

As times have changed, so have admission procedures. According to Mary Duckwitz, a Law School Admissions staff member, "In the early 60's and before, admission procedure was much different. If an applicant had a 'C' average in college and was interested in the Law School, he was admitted." Today, things are much more complicated.

Admission decisions are now made by the Admissions Committee, composed of professors Gordon Baldwin, John Kidwell, Walter Raushenbush and June Weisberger. There are also two student members who participate in policy decisions but do not review applicant files.

Applications have a deadline of February 1, about seven months prior to the desired enrollment date. According to Gordon Baldwin, "We start looking at the applications as soon as they are complete. It is useful to apply early because at later times there is a deluge of applications that come in."

As applications arrive, they are placed into files containing the application form, a record of residence, copies of college transcripts, and a report of the applicant's LSAT score. The completed files are then turned over to the Admissions Committee that makes an initial decision to accept, reject or hold the applicant.

"When we get a file, we first look at the cover, which has the applicant's name and college. Then we use a formula to predict the applicant's first year law school grades. In-state applicants whose numbers yield a prediction that have an

84 or better are immediately accepted. Non-residents whose numbers say they will receive an 85 or better are accepted immediately. Most of our applicants have a projection of 83 and are placed on hold," said Baldwin.

There is a good reason so many applications are put on hold: today's competition is hard fought. In 1968 the Law School processed 1047 applications. By 1990 that number almost doubled to 2700 applications. For the past two decades, an average 658 applicants were admitted and 984 applicants were rejected annually. The number of applicants rejected reached an all-time high of 1957 last year.

Academic qualifications of the average applicant have also increased in the past few decades. The median college grade point average of an incoming first-year student was 2.87 in 1969. Today, the median G.P.A. has skyrocketed to 3.40. Of those applicants accepted each year, approximately half are residents and half are non-residents. Traditionally, however, only 20 to 30 percent of the students who enroll each year are non-residents.

After a file is initially placed on hold, it is redistributed to another member of the Admissions Committee, and applicants are notified of their status. As soon as all applications have received an initial review, the Admissions Committee members sort through the applications placed on hold. Each member is responsible for reviewing a specific number of these applications. And there is seldom any discussion of the applications between the committee members.

"Each member has a quota," said Baldwin. "They fill that quota with a great deal of discretion. Sometimes there is a small amount of discussion between one or two members of the committee. These are usually hallway discussions or they distribute files between each other through the mailboxes. We just don't have the time [to have formal meetings] with 2700 applications to process."

Files placed on hold are reviewed for



Prof. Gordon Baldwin

both academic and non-academic factors. Several venues of an applicant's career are considered: grades, grade trends, letters of recommendation, graduate study, quality of the undergraduate institution, writing samples, community service, extra curricular activities, minority backgrounds, parents who are alumni, and other pertinent data.

"Extra activity is important, but it's the quality of the activity that we look for. We look at community activity, varsity athletic programs, professional experience and other non-quantifiable factors," said Baldwin.

Baldwin also noted that committee members read every letter of recommendation sent. But some letters have more influence than others. "It depends on the kind of letter. There are some letters which show that the recommender has a pretty good grip on the applicant's ability," he said.

Although the Law School does not conduct personal interviews with applicants, it does require each person to submit a personal statement on their applica-

UW Law School—Ten Year Admission Summary

	1990	1989	1988	1987	1986	1985	1984	1983	1982	1981
Total number of applications received:	2675	2482	1983	1448	1385	1407	1506	1838	1926	1735
Acceptances:	656	573	706	702	674	667	624	590	570	587
Total first year law students who registered:	287	284	318	685	286	285	286	284	284	302
Resident:	212	216	215	200	223	222	232	229	238	231
Non-Resident:	75	68	103	85	63	63	54	55	46	71
Number of women in the first year class:	137	126	131	120	131	129	123	118	121	126
Number of students who enrolled part-time:	20	17	12	16	18	24	17	26	29	16
Number of newly admitted transfer students enrolled:	5	10	8	11	16	23	19	20	13	15
Median GPA:	3.40	3.44	3.36	3.35	3.33	3.31	3.35	3.36	3.40	3.43
Median LSAT:	40	38	37	37	37	37	38	38	667	659

tion form. Two types stand out in Baldwin's mind. The unusual and the poorly written statements. "Personal statements that are ungrammatical and have serious spelling or proofreading mistakes can hurt a candidate," he said. "I suppose the mistake that amuses me the most is the letter that concludes, '... and therefore I hope very much that The University of Chicago will accept me for Law School.' We get a lot of those," Baldwin added.

For applicants who think that having a parent who graduated from of the Law School guarantees their admission, think again. Although it does carry some weight, it is only one of many factors considered. "There is no question that it is a relevant factor. We always consider if the applicant has a Wisconsin connection. It makes you look twice or three times before turning someone down, but again it's one of the non-quantifiable aspects."

Having connections to the Law School is particularly important for out-of-state applicants. "Most of the non-residents are applying to 5-6 other law schools. It's useful to have something in a file indicat-

ing a serious interest in Wisconsin," Baldwin admitted.

Even alumni who contribute heavily to the Law School may find that their children are not accepted. "When I look at an application, I am blind. Sometimes I don't know if the applicant is male or female. Besides, I don't know who contributes a lot of money. That information is not available to me. You can't buy your way in," Baldwin commented.

Another trend is the number of minority and women that are applying and being admitted. This is largely a result of the Legal Education Opportunities program that gives special admission consideration to those applicants who come from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds. These applications are processed first by the Legal Education Opportunities Committee and then by the Admissions Committee.

The number of L.E.O. applicants has grown from 24 in 1968 to 189 in 1990. The number of students accepted has also grown from 20 in 1969 to 60 this year. In the fall of 1990, 46 percent of the accepted applicants enrolled. Female enrollment is also on the rise. The num-

ber of women at the law school has grown from 22 in 1969 to 137 this year. "The next class will be about 50 percent men and 50 percent women," said Baldwin.

Baldwin acknowledges that the although the admission procedure is efficient, it isn't perfect. "We need more staff members," he said. "We are processing twice as many applicants as there were three years ago. But we do have Mary Duckwitz and Marilyn Johnson, and they are as competent as any staff in the country."

Baldwin has simple advice for people who want to secure admission to the Law School. "Get good grades in college and do well on your tests. This is a hard school to get into. We disappoint more people than we please," Baldwin commented.

Don't despair. It's not impossible to get into law school in this competitive day and age. "If you have the money, you can go somewhere. Some Law School will take you, but not a school as good or as selective as Wisconsin." Baldwin said.