

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PAN AMERICAN PRE-LAW INFORMATION SHEET

Welcome to UTPA's pre-law program. The goal of the program is quite simple: to facilitate your entrance into law school. To this end, several of the most common questions concerning the law school admissions process are listed below. I have also listed a number of courses that emphasize the academic skills necessary to successfully pursue both the admissions process and law school itself. Some of these courses will be part of your undergraduate major; others may serve as electives.

Admission to law school is extremely competitive. Applicants are selected primarily on the basis of the following factors: the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) score, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), the personal statement, letters of recommendation, and such additional factors as extra-curricular activities and work experiences.

Virtually all law schools begin with the numbers: the LSAT and the GPA. If you make a perfect score (180) on the LSAT and have a 4.0 GPA, then unless you're an ax murderer, you will be admitted to a law school. On the other hand, if you make 130 on the LSAT and have a 1.5 GPA, then, unless your folks own a law school, you don't want to give up your day job. Most of us fall somewhere in between, at which point the law school admissions committees pay closer attention to the other factors (particularly the personal statement) mentioned above.

UTPA's pre-law program includes a number of components. Keep in mind there is no such major as pre-law. That is, a pre-law student is a student who intends to go to law school, just as a pre-med student intends to go to medical school. Question #1 below addresses the issue of which major to choose; participants in UTPA's pre-law program come from majors in virtually every college on the campus.

The UTPA pre-law society is an important part of our program. The student organization meets every other week during the fall and spring semesters. Typical programs include guest speakers from the local bar, speakers from different law schools and various films.

Another important component of the pre-law program is the UTPA Law School Preparation Institute (LSPI), a five-week summer institute that offers selected students intensive analytical training as well as LSAT preparation. Admission to the institute is by invitation only and is based primarily on academic ability. The LSPI is a) arguably the most rigorous academic program on campus and b) one of the most successful programs on campus (over 90% of the LSPI students who have applied to law school have been accepted). Enrollment in the LSPI is limited to no more than 20 students.

The newest component of the pre-law program is the Legal Studies minor. This is an 18-hour minor composed of nine advanced courses from which the student chooses six. The list of courses that comprise the minor can be found at the end of this handout or in the university catalogue under the Political Science department.

I have listed below a group of frequently asked questions. The questions are not meant to be exclusive. If you have other questions, please feel free to contact me, or, if you need the questions below clarified, don't hesitate to ask. Most importantly, understand that the application process to law school is highly individualized: one size does not fit all.

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. What should I major in if I want to go to law school?

In general, law school admissions officers don't care what your undergraduate major is. Law school emphasizes reading, writing and thinking, so courses that focus on those skills are important. There is, however, no particular major that prepares you for law school. Consequently, you should major in something you enjoy...for a couple of reasons. First, you may end up changing your mind about pursuing a legal career and you don't want to have spent time majoring in something just to go to law school. Second, if you enjoy what you're studying, you are likely to make better grades, which will help in the admissions process.

That being said, as noted above, practicing law involves a lot of reading, writing and thinking. Therefore, those majors that emphasize these skills are going to give you a solid foundation in preparing for law school. These majors are not limited to any one college in the university.

2. When should I take the LSAT?

The LSAT is administered four times a year: February, June, October (this test sometimes is administered in late September) and December. I recommend taking either the June LSAT in the summer between your junior and senior years or the October test in the fall of your senior year. If you are a full-time student, you usually are less busy in June and October. In addition, if you don't do as well as you hoped, you can retake the test later in the fall. Remember, however, the December test usually comes near the end of the semester when you're preparing for finals, so avoid taking the test at that time.

There also is a February test, but be aware that the February LSAT score is announced after some application deadlines have passed and, consequently, some law schools do not accept the February score for the fall class. If you're not sure when the application deadline for a specific school is, just visit the school's website.

Most law schools use "rolling" and/or early admissions. This means they begin making offers after they receive the October LSAT results. Consequently, if you apply after the December test, you are competing for fewer seats.

3. What happens if I retake the LSAT?

The ABA allows the schools to use your highest score. Although there is no penalty for retaking the test, you should prepare for the test with the intent of taking it one time only.

4. What is the personal statement?

Virtually every law school will ask you to submit a personal statement as part of your application. Following your LSAT score and GPA, the personal statement is the most important component of the application process.

The personal statement takes the place of an interview. Essentially, this is where you tell the admissions committee why they should admit you rather than someone else with similar LSAT and GPA numbers. Here you emphasize characteristics and experiences that separate you from the rest of the applicant pool. For example, these include such factors as being bilingual or the first in one's family to graduate from college. The personal statement also is where you explain anything unusual about your transcript (e. g., why your grades one semester are so much lower-or higher-than those of the other semesters).

Some schools also have separate "addendums" where you explain any "disadvantages" you have overcome.

Some schools may ask for something more creative (e.g., an essay on the most unusual person you have ever met or the most unusual experience you have had). Your personal statement should not repeat information you already have provided in your resume.

The personal statement is a very important part of the applicant process, and you should give it a lot of attention. Remember, it is a personal statement. I recommend you show me a draft if you have time.

5. Should I take a commercial preparation course for the LSAT?

To paraphrase an old Country and Western song, "if you've got the money, they've got the time." Commercial prep courses are not going to harm you, and some will enhance your ability to take the LSAT. But none do anything for you that you can't do yourself. There are no secrets to taking the LSAT; pick up any commercial prep book at virtually any college bookstore and you'll see the same recommendations. The prep courses, of course, are much more detailed and usually involve several sessions. They are, however, very expensive. Law Services, the group that develops the LSAT, provides inexpensive preparation materials, and there are other helpful guides around.

What is most important is that you realize that no prep course is going to develop your analytical skills in three or four weeks. That is, prep courses can teach you how to enhance the reading, writing, and reasoning skills tested by the LSAT, but no prep course can develop those skills for you. Therefore, do not avoid courses that emphasize reading and

writing in the anticipation that a four-week prep course will make up for three years of weak undergraduate education.

6. Who should I ask to write letters of recommendation?

Law schools primarily want to know if you can handle the intellectual rigors of a legal education, so rely on your professors for the letters. If you are applying to a law school with a religious affiliation, character references from your minister, rabbi or priest may be helpful. A letter from an employer attesting to your being a responsible employee also will not harm you, but fundamentally, what the admissions committee is looking for is evidence they will not be giving a seat to someone who is brain dead. Avoid letters from public officials; admissions officers know elected politicians are not going to write negative letters so they discount them.

When you get to this stage, pick up the handout from my office outlining what the letters of recommendation should address. Make a copy of the handout and give to the person writing on your behalf.

7. How many law schools should I apply to?

I recommend applying to several schools. One rule of thumb would be to apply to two schools where you have an outside chance of being admitted, two where you believe you will be competitive, and two “safe” schools where you might prefer not to go if you have a choice.

Keep in mind that each application involves money, so this may limit your choices. Application fees may be waived; you must request this waiver from each law school.

8. Which are the best law schools?

This is impossible to answer without more information. Obviously, some schools have better reputations than others, but that doesn't mean they are the best school for you. Some students prefer small classes and this can influence your decision. Some law schools spend more time on courtroom training (this is called advocacy training in law school) so if this is, or is not, your interest, you may choose a law school on this basis. Others may offer more courses in particular areas, e. g., tax law, environmental law, immigration law, and again, this may be a consideration. Private schools cost more than state schools, and this may be an important factor in your choice.

Consequently, be careful not to fall prey to all those lists purporting to rank the law schools. Rather, examine a school's curriculum, size, location, etc. when deciding where you would like to go. You're going to get a decent education as long as you go to an ABA-approved law school.

9. How expensive is law school, and how can I pay for it?

Legal education is not cheap. State schools are less expensive than private schools. Every school will have a financial aid office to help you explore your options. Most law students borrow money to go to school; there are several loan programs. Although money generally is tight, it is still true that, assuming you have a good credit rating, you will be able to obtain a loan if you are admitted to an ABA-approved law school. Again, each school has a financial aid office to help you, and Law Services also has a publication concerning financing your legal education.

You should realize the amount of money you owe when you leave law school may influence your employment decision. That is, public interest jobs as well as government jobs (e.g., working in a District Attorney's office) pay less than corporate jobs. If you have a very large debt, you may have to plan to practice law in a large firm.

On the bright side, an increasing number of law schools and public interest offices have loan forgiveness programs where they will assist you in retiring your law school debt.

Plan for financing ahead of time by making sure your credit rating is ok.

10. How does the law school curriculum differ from undergraduate school?

There are many differences. You do not "major" in law school. Law school is a three-year program. Your first-year curriculum is the same in virtually every ABA-approved law school in the nation. And, during your first year, you have virtually no choice concerning which courses to take, which teachers to take and which times to take. In other words, the law school determines your first-year schedule. They purposely schedule your classes to make it difficult for you have an outside job while going to law school. You do have some flexibility in your second and third years.

The other major difference most students notice immediately is the lack of tests. For the most part, there is only one examination in each course. That's a lot of pressure at finals time!

11. What is the UTPA Law School Preparation Institute (LSPI)?

UTPA's LSPI is conducted during the second summer session; participation is by invitation only. Applications to the LSPI are emailed to every UTPA undergraduate student with a 3.0 GPA and a minimum of 45 hours. No more than twenty students are selected, on a competitive basis, to participate.

The institute meets from 9-4, five days a week and Saturday mornings. It includes intensive instruction in analytical reasoning, writing skills, the nature of legal education, and LSAT preparation. In addition to the three UTPA professors involved, visiting staff and faculty various law schools also participate.

LSPI arguably is the most successful (and rigorous) undergraduate academic program on campus. Ninety percent of the LSPI students who have applied to law school have been

accepted (the national average is 60%). If you have a chance, check out the LSPI bulletin board next to SBS 208 (the Department of Political Science office) that includes copies of the acceptance letters received by LSPI students.

12. The Legal Studies minor. UTPA offers a Minor in Legal Studies. The minor is located in the Department of Political Science. Students selecting the minor must take 18 hours from the following courses:

BLAW 3337	Business Law I
CRIJ 4356	Law & Society
ENG 4332	Writing for Lawyers
HIST 3355	The History of Law
PHIL 3390	Law & Philosophy
POLS 4320	Constitutional Law: Federalism
POLS 4321	Constitutional Law: Rights & Liberties
POLS 4367	The Judicial Process
PSY 4342	Psychology & Law

13. The Guerra Honors Program

Almost every applicant to law school has a decent GPA. Consequently, I strongly recommend you explore the possibility of joining the UTPA Guerra Honors Program. First, and most importantly, you will receive an excellent education through the program. Secondly, if a law school admissions person is reviewing three or four candidates who have comparable GPAs and LSAT scores, but one of the candidates has taken Honors courses, obviously that will give her/him an advantage.

The UTPA Honors Program is located in SBS 104 (665-3461).

14. Recommended Courses Beyond the Core Curriculum: These courses are in addition to the courses identified above as part of the Legal Studies minor. Some of these courses will count toward your major and minor; the others should be selected as electives.

Acct 2421	Introduction to Financial Accounting
Comm 1303	Presentational Speaking
Comm 1313	Applied Oral Communication
Comm 3314	Persuasive Communication
Comm 3330	Argumentation and Debate
Comm 4307	Social & Political Movements
Crij 1306	Court Systems and Practices
Crij 4361	Comparative Criminal Justice Systems
Eco 2301	Microeconomics
Eco 2302	Macroeconomics
Eng 3338	Advanced Composition
Hist 3301	The History of Ideas
Hist 3341	History of England I

Hist 4375	Absolutism and Enlightenment in Europe
Math 2330	Elementary Statistics (or Statistics 2330)
Phil 1310	Introduction to Philosophy
Phil 1320	Introduction to Logic
Phil 2330	Ethics
Phil 3320	Symbolic Logic
Pols 3333	Classical Political Theory
Psych 3324	Social Psychology (or Soc 4324)