Considering the Differences

*With more than 200 different ABA-approved law schools to choose from, how do prospective students meaningfully make sense of all the differences?*

Well, in a sense you can look at the process of determining which schools to apply to as a foreshadowing of your future work as a lawyer. You have to begin with a strong sense of self-identity and then carefully collect data regarding possible law schools to attend. By weighing the information you collect, you will be better able to make an informed decision.

*If law school, like most everything else in life, is largely what a student makes of it, does it really matter where you end up?*

It's true that you can receive an excellent legal education at all of the different ABA-approved law schools. Yet it's still the case that the particulars of the various programs have a direct role in shaping the course of your future as a lawyer: emphasis of course offerings, varying teaching methods, cost of attendance, options for independent study, availability of legal internships, degree of financial assistance, involvement in governmental affairs, access to hands-on clinical programs, and even health insurance offerings – all of which have a direct impact on your quality of life for three years of law school.

*How do you evaluate the reputation of different law schools?*

I recommend consulting the *ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools* to get an idea of the factors comprising law schools' reputations in general and how all the specific schools compare with one another. The traditional components of a law school's reputation are the strength of the curriculum, publication records of the faculty, the ability of your peers, quality of library facilities, the kind of career services offered, and whether the law school is affiliated with a parent university as in the relationship between the Mauer School of Law in Bloomington and Indiana University.

An excellent quick reference can be found at the website of The Law School Admission Council. Here, students can view a variety of detailed information about hundreds of law schools throughout the country. For example, there are statistics for graduates of universities comparing overall bar passage rates, rates for first time takers of the test, and the percentage of graduates who are employed within nine months of graduation. This can be a valuable tool in shaping the reputation a particular law school may carry. You can get a sense of curriculum strength in the extent and frequency of class offerings, the number of classes taught by full-time faculty, and the relative importance of visiting professor lectureship programs.

The backgrounds and interests of faculty members can be investigated in The Association of American Law School’s *Directory of Law Teachers* which in turn provides a sense of the law school’s intellectual climate. The most common method of judging the reputation of law schools is simply comparing the average LSAT and GPA of the entering class of students. This measure gives you a general idea of the ability of one’s co-students. Yet in the end, it’s important to find
an environment in which you can shine while also learning from the questions and insights of your peers.

Also, don’t forget to consider the quality of the library. The facilities and resources available at a library go far beyond simply the number of physical books on the shelves – more important is the quality of their resources, the availability of the most commonly used materials, sufficiency of individual and group workspace, access to electronic databases, participation in interlibrary networks for resource retrieval, employment of enough research librarians, and finally, whether the hours of the library match your schedule. Since you’ll probably end up spending more time in the library than anywhere else, make sure it’s able to meet your needs.

A word about a law school’s parent university: When a law school is directly affiliated with a university it often means that more course options are available, student bodies tend to be more diverse, a greater infrastructure of facilities often exists, access to student housing is more common, and there’s generally more support for job placement activities. Don’t underestimate the importance of career services such as a placement office which helps connect students with internships and recruiters or counseling services which help with job searches and interview strategies. Such resources are invaluable aids.

What’s the difference between national, regional, and local schools?

If you take a look at Thinking about Law School: A Minority Guide, you’ll see that “all ABA-approved law schools are, in effect, national because they are required to teach a more or less standard curriculum, maintain a specific level of library holdings, and employ faculties with reasonably diverse academic and professional experiences.” Hence the descriptions of national, regional, and local are most useful in describing the geographic diversity of a law school’s applicant population. Additionally, national schools tend to focus more on the study of the theory side of law. National schools draw almost indistinguishably from across the nation as a whole and can maximize a student’s hire-ability across the nation and lower some of the initial hurdles job seekers may face. Regional school populations are drawn primarily from the geographic region of its location and often lead to classmates becoming lifelong associates in the practice of law. Local schools are often advantageous for applicants who are rooted locally and want to practice in the area upon graduation. Yet, it’s in no way necessary to go to school where you want to practice. In fact, geographic diversity is one admission criteria that just might tip the balance in your favor if you apply to a school outside of the region in which you studied as an undergraduate. Remember that regardless of choice, all schools will emphasize similar skills emphasizing reading, listening, analysis, and organization. Law school searches can be separated by state, region, and national levels on the LSAC website. This allows students to get an idea of the available law schools in any given area of the country and to compare the results.

What should I look for in a law school’s legal clinic offerings?

First of all, not all legal clinics are the same. Different schools are more committed philosophically and financially to clinical work. One key difference in the commitment level of different schools is evidenced in whether a school has placement-clinics as opposed to in-house clinics. If the law school operates under a placement-clinic model then you need to see how
great of a workload the practicing lawyer in the placement-clinic has and how many students any one attorney is mentoring. In-house clinics often embrace a team-teaching approach. It will be helpful to find out if there is a classroom component before, during, or after the clinic in order to evaluate the actual commitment of time which clinical participation requires. A helpful question to ask in the process of gauging the importance of the clinical program at a law school is whether or not full-time faculty members work in the clinic. This will show you if their tenured faculty have an active interest in the clinic’s work and give some indication of the kind of resources devoted to the clinic’s work. Generally, it’s really helpful to get a behind-the-scenes view of each prospective school’s legal clinics if you know you’re interested in this hands-on lawyering experience.

What’s a MA/JD?

That’s where you complete the degree requirements for two different degrees over the course of generally four years. This can often provide job seekers with certain competitive advantages in the hiring process. In fact, some jobs, like patent lawyers, require master’s work in a scientific field. Seeking an additional degree in conjunction with a JD is both extremely difficult and time consuming. Please be sure to speak with an advisor before deciding if this course is best for you.

What are the differences between the JD/LLM?

The JD program offers a degree that is required to practice law in the United States. The program is generally three-years and full-time and is considered a first degree in law. The Master of Laws Degree (LLM) is an advanced legal program aimed at JD students who desire to study for an advanced legal degree. The LLM requires applicants to have a first degree, such as the JD, to even apply to an LLM program. For a complete list of primary differences between the two programs, please visit this LSAC page.

How helpful are joint degree programs for law school students?

Students who complete joint degree programs generally have more flexibility in the job market, experience greater educational rewards, graduate with more expertise in particular areas of the law, and are often paid more. The JD/MBA combination is the most common and is particularly helpful for those who hope to be in-house counsel for a corporation since the MBA will help the lawyer understand and achieve the goals and objectives of management. A word of caution to remember that joint degrees increase one’s workload and take at least an extra year to complete. Students are also required to take both the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) and the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) and must be admitted separately to both programs. Therefore it’s critical that both programs are evaluated separately for their respective merits. Additionally, make sure to see if both programs are on the same schedule. Most of the time students complete the first year of one of the programs and then the first year of the other program in their second year of studies. After that the remaining years of both are combined.
**What’s considered a favorable faculty-to-student ratio?**

A ratio of 20:1 or less is seen as favorable and 30:1 is considered **unfavorable**. Also, it’s helpful to see if the faculty members graduated largely from the law school itself or if there are many different legal education perspectives represented.

**Do students have time to participate in extracurriculars during law school?**

Finding ways to interact socially is crucial for relieving considerable amounts of stress and for building friendships with your peers. Most schools have numerous student organizations and honors societies such as Order of the Coif. Taking advantage of the different opportunities to socialize is really important because it better equips you to deal with the stress and frustrations of legal study. Discussions with current and former students indicate that some minimum social interaction and activities are helpful to adjusting to a new environment and handling the workload of the first year of law school.