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## Inside the Admissions Process

By John Henry Schlegel

To some, the admissions process for would-be law students is a mystery as unfathomable as anything Agatha Christie ever wrote. But it needn't be that way. At UB Law School, the admissions process is designed to select the most promising and diverse class possible from among a huge group of qualified applicants.

While spouses and children of alumni at times receive special consideration for admission to private law schools, as a public institution we are prohibited from extending such consideration. This does not mean that we are not sensitive to alumni concerns on this subject. Indeed, we empathize with members of our extended UB Law family when they are disappointed with admissions decisions.

Having served for the past two years as chair of the Law School's Admissions Committee, and also as a current member of the Test Development and Research Committee of the Law School Admissions Council (the people who create the Law School Admissions Test, or LSAT), I would like to pass along some observations and advice about the admissions process. When an example is necessary, I will use the procedure here at Buffalo.

The process begins when you take the LSAT. No one claims that the LSAT is unfailingly accurate. It is hardly a magic bullet. But of all the scholastic admissions tests, it is the one that has the strongest correlation to academic success.

Can you study for it? Yes, you can — and I think you should — especially if you have not taken a standardized test recently. How does one prepare? I take no position on the value of commercial

preparation courses, but I do think it wise to secure practice books of published tests.

Research by the Law School Admissions Council suggests that taking one or more published versions of the test under timed conditions is worth, on the average, about three points. Also, don't forget to read carefully the explanation section in the LSAT registration booklet.

After taking the LSAT and reviewing your academic transcript, try to be realistic. Let those numbers guide you to a suitable law school where you will have a good chance of succeeding. At UB, eight applicants compete for every seat. This year, our median LSAT for accepted students was 38 and grade point average (G.P.A.) was 3.3. If you have a 2.8 G.P.A. and an LSAT in the lowest quartile, accept the fact that you are not going to be admitted here. But don't be discouraged. Look for a school where the medians are closer to your own scores.

To figure out where you do belong, pick up a copy of a comprehensive guidebook like the *Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools*, and look at the profiles of a recent class for the law schools that interest you. These profiles, especially the median LSAT scores and median G.P.A.s for a school's accepted applicants, will help you estimate your chances for admission.

When applications arrive, most schools use a formula created by themselves that assigns relative weights to an individual's LSAT scores and G.P.A. For the past few years, our formula has been 10 times the G.P.A., plus 10, plus the LSAT score. The number that results is referred to as the student's index

number. Depending on the number, applications are categorized as automatic acceptances, presumptive rejections, or discretionary admissions.

For 1991-91, we accepted fewer than 600 students to fill 250 first-year seats, although 280 students enrolled. Approximately 45 percent were automatic acceptances. These were students with index numbers of 83 or above — those with exceptionally high LSAT scores or grade points, or more commonly, both.

We rejected most of the students whose index was 73 and below. Even these, however, were read by the Dean of Admissions who selected out the files of applicants who showed even modest promise of doing well in our law school. Files that fell in between were sent to the Admissions Committee. There, each received close scrutiny from a subcommittee of faculty and students who look at the entire file, attempting to treat each applicant as an individual and not as a collection of numbers.

While the numbers vary for different schools, most schools run their admissions process in a similar fashion. Some, however, proceed almost exclusively on numbers and read very few files.

The Special Programs Committee at UB Law was established to review the files of those applicants who consider themselves to be educationally disadvantaged. If you believe you are educationally disadvantaged, you must submit documentation from your undergraduate institution to be considered for admission into the Law School through placement in the Legal Methods Program, an academic support program for first-year students. Disabled students applying to

the Law School should also submit appropriate documentation with their application.

If your index number falls in the automatic admissions range, get an application, fill it out carefully, cross your fingers, and in due course your acceptance will likely roll in. If your numbers look bad, you had best start looking at other law schools.

If, however, your index number falls somewhere in the middle — not automatic acceptance, but not necessarily a reject — then you must work hard to prepare your application. Files are read carefully, at least at UB — and what you say makes a difference. If you want the committee to recognize and appreciate your strengths, you must stop thinking like an applicant and start thinking like an Admissions Committee member.

The problem, of course, is getting noticed. The best way to do that is through your personal statement and recommendations. Your challenge is to convince us that you are someone special. Singular. Different.

How do you do this? Well, it can't hurt if you graduated from an academically challenging program in a well respected undergraduate school. Your index number does not reflect the quality of your undergraduate school and the difficulty of your program. Our Admissions Committee — and any other school's Admissions Committee where they read the files — cannot possibly keep abreast of how difficult each program is at every school in the country. If you graduated from an especially challenging program, call it to the attention of the Committee.

It probably helps still more if you can do one or more things intensely well. If you come across "well rounded" like everyone else — a 3.25 in political science with a 36 LSAT, club officer, intramurals, Greek, legislative intern and two references who say, "the kid comes to class regularly and tests well" — chances are, you won't be noticed. Too many similar applications cross our

threshold and that of most law schools.

Admissions Committees quickly tire of seeing applications from people who have done a little of everything reasonably well. They vastly prefer people who have done one thing seriously. To get noticed, try to present yourself as a living, feeling, thinking, caring human being and not just a collection of merit

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*If you cannot demonstrate that you know at least one thing well, try to demonstrate that you got something out of taking courses from all the interesting teachers.*

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badges or a list of achievements.

Also, do not think that always having wanted to go to law school, respecting the legal profession, or being able to do the work is enough to get you admitted, either. Most applicants "always" wanted to be a lawyer and "respect" the profession. It is important to remember that any applicant whose file goes to a Committee can do the work. Your job is not to convince the Committee that you can make it through, but that you stand above that large group of qualified applicants.

For recent graduates, the outstanding "thing or things" is usually academic. I remember one fine application by a student who started with a work study job in a psychology lab, then chose to major in the field, became a lab assistant, noticed an anomaly in some research results, started a research project of her

own and ended up publishing a joint paper with her professor. In the process she decided that while this psychology business was great fun, it really was not what she wanted to do.

Another I remember was of a student who had taken a course (outside his major) in the sociology of homelessness, became fascinated and so added courses in mental health policy and the economics of housing, volunteered in a soup kitchen, did some field work, wrote a short story based on that field work (the only work done on the subject in his major) and then spent a year as a staff member in a shelter. He wrote knowledgeably about the problems of keeping some people from being homeless.

Each had shown that he or she could do one serious thing in detail over a period of time. Each presented not just a collection of courses, or even a major, but a person who was mature enough to make something out of their student years largely on their own.

For individuals out of school several years, an academic "thing" is not always possible. But life experiences and employment provide many opportunities, from volunteer work pursued while raising children, to building a career through several seemingly diverse jobs, to learning a job and expanding on that job until realizing the legal underpinnings were really what was interesting. I have seen that pattern with such disparate jobs as special education teachers, urban designers and surgical nurses.

The basic question is usually the same: What did the applicant do with that experience? What was learned?

Other factors that are worth highlighting are a disadvantage that has been overcome — whether it is physical, emotional or financial. A person who can offer diversity or a different perspective may also be of special value to a law school.

Keeping all this in mind, you should pay particular attention to the following three things.

First: Carefully read the catalog and

application of any school you apply to and answer the questions we ask on the application — not some other questions. I am amazed at the number of individuals who submit generic personal statements that show no knowledge of our program and who by inaction loudly proclaim that he or she is not interested enough in our school to customize the application.

Second: Current or recent college students must remember that academics do matter. After five years they do not matter as much and after 15 years they matter even less. An unusually bad year or semester or a turn-around after a slow start requires an explanation.

You must also remember that there is more to life than numbers. It is here that you must try to demonstrate your ability to analyze and synthesize (learn the difference), and do research. If you cannot demonstrate that you know at least one thing well, try to demonstrate that you got something out of taking

courses from all the interesting teachers. References are helpful, especially if the faculty member has taught you in more than one course and knows if you can do research and write.

Third: Remember that LSAT scores count. If your LSAT score is very high — 45 to 48 — and your G.P.A. is low, then you must explain that discrepancy in your personal statement. If your LSAT score is mediocre or worse — lower than, say, 32 — you must explain why. Is it because you perform poorly on standardized tests? If so, do not just assert the fact, demonstrate it. Were your SATs low, too? Provide documentation. If you are learning disabled, provide documentation also.

If you cannot prove a problem with test taking skills, then you must emphasize what you do have to offer beyond a high G.P.A. (by itself a mediocre predictor of law school success). What makes you likely to do well in law

school, be interesting, and contribute to the distinctive academic mission of the law school to which you are applying? What facet of your background will contribute to the education of your classmates?

This is a problem in advocacy, and advocacy is an essential skill in the legal profession. Begin by making a strong case for yourself. Present persuasive arguments. Show the Admissions Committee who you are — and what you can be. ■

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*John Henry Schlegel is Associate Dean of the Law School and head of the Admissions Committee. This article has been adapted from a speech he presented at the annual Raichle Scholars Dinner at Canisius College. Thanks is due to Canisius Professor Peter Galie and Ralph Halpern '53 for inviting the author to speak at this event.*

*Chris Chin '91,  
Assistant Dean  
Aundra Newell and  
Associate Dean  
John H. Schlegel  
review admissions  
files.*

