

5 Tips for Current or Prospective Law School Students in a Difficult Economy

Applicants should mind their online profiles and apply as early as possible.

The header of Third Tier Reality

states that the blog exposes the "ugly realities" of law school. Paul Campos, a University of Colorado—Boulder Law School

professor, writes a blog called Inside the Law School Scam

, and Above the Law

regularly covers topics such as law school "admissions fraud" and unemployment rates among young J.D.'s.

Whether a result or a symptom of the disparaging views of legal education and the job market, recent data

from the Law School Admissions Council suggest that the number of law school applications dropped 11 percent this fall. Despite this trend and the competitive job market, some experts still advise people to apply to law school. Here are five ways applicants and law students can maximize their opportunities:

1. Get experience early:

"[I]f there is one tip I can give to someone considering law school, it is to get a real life experience of working for a law office," says Daryl Binkley, who runs a law office in Palm Desert, Calif. "If it was up to me, I would make this a requirement for applying to law schools."

Binkley says real-world experience, such as working as a paralegal, helps would-be applicants ensure they truly want to be lawyers before investing in a J.D. "So many people either apply to law school right after college or after working in nonlegal careers and then attend law school only to later discover that they really don't like the law profession," he says.

Mark Sigala, an attorney at the San Jose, Calif.-based firm Corsiglia McMahon & Allard

, says if students lack legal experience as applicants, they can get it in law school. "If you're not in the law field, get in it while you're going to school," he says. "Be a paralegal, a copy person. Volunteer as a law clerk. Get the experience and a foot in the door."

2. Avoid procrastinating on your application:

"Timing is critical in applying to law school," says Kathryn Espiritu, director of admissions at Fordham University Law School

. "Law schools read files on a rolling basis ... [so] it is always best to apply as early as possible."

Anna Ivey, a former admissions dean at University of Chicago Law School

and an admissions consultant, agrees. Ideally, law school applicants should submit their completed applications by the end of November, she says, and definitely by the end of December.

3. Mind your online reputation:

Experts disagree on how, if at all, prospective J.D.'s should use social media in the application process. Todd William, founder and CEO of the "online reputation management" company Reputation Rhino

, says law schools hire his firm to vet applicants' social media handles. William says a recent Kaplan study

, which revealed that 37 percent of law schools check applicants' online profiles, was an "eye opener." But "a well-written profile highlighting personal and professional achievements and accomplishments can help a candidate stand out from the crowd," he says.

Miami-based trial attorney Justin Leto says Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter didn't exist when he was in law school, but he acknowledged that things have changed a lot. "Employers do look at your online presence to see what kind of person you are, so prospective students need to be cognizant of what they post online," he says.

Jonathan Rosenfeld, a Chicago-based lawyer, advises aspiring J.D.'s to blog and Tweet. "Creating a broad base of contacts is vital to finding a job in any field, and social media and networking are becoming increasingly important in finding a legal job as well," he says.

4. Know your school's focus—and your own:

Mandee Adler, president of International College Counselors, advises applicants to visit schools' websites and to talk to current students and faculty to determine a school's specialties. "When applying, students should ... speak to the differentiating factors of the school itself, rather than just send a generic 'Why I want to go to law school' application to each," she says.

Lisa Marie Windsor, who practices military law in Washington, D.C., at the firm Tully Rinckey, says law students should focus their studies rather than "dabble." Come graduation time, "the people that had focused on one specialization ... [have] an easier time getting hired," she says.

But not everyone agrees. Jay Shively, assistant dean of admissions and financial aid at Wake Forest University School of Law

, says he tells applicants to ignore law schools' self-declared specializations, because many students change their minds about what kind of law they want to practice after graduation.

5. Negotiate the financial aid package:

Afam Onyema, chief operating officer of the Chicago-based nonprofit GEANCO Foundation, says Stanford University Law School

initially offered him \$2,000 in aid for his first year. He talked the school up to \$20,000 by leveraging better aid packages from other schools.

"Applicants might feel like they are powerless, especially when dealing with elite law schools," he says. "However, I was actually able use the offers I received from other top schools to my advantage."

But Onyema cautions applicants not to lie or bluff, because schools will ask for proof of competitive offers. "As a future lawyer, get used to relying on evidence to back up your words," he says.