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**HELPING COB STUDENTS USE THEIR BUSINESS DEGREE TO GET INTO
LAW SCHOOL**

by

Jon Jeffery Carlston

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

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Thesis Advisor

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Helping COB Students Use Their Business Degrees to Get Into Law School

Getting into law school these days has become ultra-competitive. GPA's and LSAT scores that worked just a few years ago will not get a law school applicant into the same schools they will today. The economy as well as the attractiveness of a law degree (J.D.) have lead to record increases in the number of students applying for law school. Law schools have been forced to "raise the bar" in order to deal with the demand. Because this is the case, undergraduate students must find ways to distinguish themselves among applicants, stay on top of the application process, and achieve better scores. As an undergraduate student majoring in accounting and applying for law school this fall, the purpose of my thesis is to both attract COB students to the study of law and to serve as a source of information for the often confusing and tedious application process. My motives are to help other USU COB students get into the schools they want to and because I feel the needs of USU's pre-law undergraduate students are underserved – especially in the COB. The information I have gathered and the research I have done should be thought of as opinionated and subjective – I am only trying to pass on what I have learned about the process and as such my recommendations should only be thought of as opinions, or at the very least, items to consider and take into account to insure the student ends up in the right law school for him or her.

Choosing to become a lawyer.

Before deciding to attend law school, it is important to know if being a lawyer is an appropriate career choice. Every lawyer I have ever spoken with on some level of candor cites incredibly long hours, a great deal of stress, and very high expectations as typical hallmarks of the job. Couple that with large amounts of school loans to pay for law school and the competitiveness that exists both during and after law school and some would-be lawyers will fade away or spend their lives somewhat unhappy with their chosen career choice. For example, my sister's good friend Margie Peters graduated from Columbia law school (a top five school), worked in a firm in New York City, and ended up moving to Jackson Hole, WY working for a non-profit. She claimed she grew to detest the emphasis firms place on racking up the most billable hours possible in a week. My uncle Michael Carlston, who is a lawyer in Salt Lake, often goes into work on Sunday afternoons to catch up with the week's work. Caryn Beck-Dudley, Dean of USU's College of Business, remarked that had she remained a lawyer, she probably never would have had the chance to have children – job demands had been taking up all of her time. Dale Siler, an adjunct Business and Tax law professor in the College of Business and practicing lawyer in the city of Logan, remarked that it would not be such a bad idea to be working as a quality and hard-working CPA. Dr. Daines, a lawyer and professor in the Management and Human Resource Department in USU's College of Business, remarked that racking up huge amounts of school loans could force a graduating law student into working in a job that the student dislikes. Although lawyers often have exciting and important jobs, it must be understood that a great deal of stress and pressure accompanies careers in law. It is crucial that a potential law school student

decide if becoming a lawyer is really the right career choice for them before attending law school.

On the other hand, lawyers can do a lot of good when it comes to helping their clients and even society in general. Lawyers develop very intimate relationships with their clients that are built on mutual trust. The specialized knowledge afforded to lawyers at law school and through the practice of law puts them in a position to do a great deal of service for others in achieving a real and lasting impact on a person's life. Lawyers spend a lot of their time teaching, enabling, and explaining complex issues of law to those people who are in need of such useful information. Although society often portrays lawyers as corrupt and money-hungry, lawyers have helped in many ways to shape the society in which we live and they continue to do so.

Being a lawyer also carries with it a certain amount of prestige and disdain. I have seen people share personal information with lawyers they have just met and I have seen people be downright rude when they find out someone is a lawyer. Whatever the case may be, being a lawyer carries with it a certain aura – one that can be both good or bad. Lawyers are expected to be experts in many and diverse fields which leads to an interesting work environment, but also place very high demands on a lawyer's time. Moral issues abound, and lawyers constantly faces pressures from conflicting interests in doing what is best for the public, their clients, and their respective firms. I have enumerated just a few of the issues related to being a lawyer that all potential law students should consider when deciding whether to study law.

Studying law opens up a wide and varied range of career opportunities. The breakdown often begins between the private and public fields. Private practice entails

working in a law firm or industry, while the public field involves working for the government. There are many issues to consider when deciding which field to pursue. The private field generally pays better, but is considered to consist of much more pressure, stress, and competition. The public fields does not pay as well, but offers good working conditions and benefits with a reasonable salary that could involve a position that directly impacts the community. Because the focus of law school is to teach you how to analyze and think, these skills can carry over into many diverse areas not directly related to law. Lawyers are employed by many diverse and distinct employers, from the CIA to the city of Logan. Whatever the chosen path, a law degree will open up many interesting and diverse fields.

Getting into law school.

From what I have gathered, USU students are at somewhat of a disadvantage when it comes to getting into law school. For example, like all law schools, admissions panels at the University of Utah and BYU are looking for diverse student bodies that should include students from different backgrounds which ought to include undergraduate students from USU. It is my understanding that these admissions panels are looking for strong applicants from USU, but according to a BYU professor who does some work with my uncle through his law firm, they sometimes have trouble finding them. Issues such as Utah State's academic reputation relative to other Utah schools leave USU a little behind. USU's reputation for grade inflation can also be a problem, especially when applying out of state. Students should realize that law schools look

carefully at an applicant's Class rank, comparing it with the student's GPA to get an accurate picture of the applicant's true academic effort and ability.

Having touched on why USU applicants are put at a disadvantage, the strong emphasis law schools put on the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) really comes to the forefront. Because the LSAT is a standardized test that every law school applicant must take, most law schools weight this fundamental part of the total application most heavily. It can be estimated that the LSAT counts between 65 to 75 percent of the total application. This ultimately seems more than a little unfair, especially considering that the test takes only about 4 hours to complete compared with the countless hours a student puts into an undergraduate major. Law schools consider the LSAT the best indicator of how an applicant will do in law school and indirectly use it to rank themselves among all law schools. Although the test purports to establish how adept at the study of law an applicant will be, it should be noted that the test has very little to do with an actual law school curriculum. At best, the LSAT should be seen as the most important hoop one has to jump through to attend law school – and a very frustrating one at that.

To better illustrate this point, consider what are generally believed to be the two most heavily weighted parts of the application: GPA and LSAT score. An applicant that scores a 165 on the LSAT, yet has a 3.2 GPA, has a much better chance of getting into better law schools than an applicant that has a LSAT score of 150 and a 4.0 GPA. Law schools are going to consider the former applicant much stronger based on the higher LSAT score. What does this mean when it comes time to decide where to expend time and effort in attempting to raise a GPA or LSAT score? Ultimately raising the LSAT

score should be given the greater emphasis. Here are a few strategies in preparing for the LSAT:

- Make it fun.
- Study at a set time everyday.
- Take as many old tests under “test” conditions as you can.
- Take a prep course – more will be discussed on this topic later.

It is hard to say when to begin preparing for the LSAT. Cramming is particularly hard to do for the LSAT, but becoming burned out preparing for it can be a real problem. It is generally recommended that someone serious about scoring well on the test should leave between 4-6 months to prepare.

A student’s chosen undergraduate major is an item of particular interest these days. As the economy has slowed and the law school admissions process has become so competitive, many undergraduates are seeking majors that distinguish them from other applicants. Traditionally, students have chosen political science, English, economics, and communications as typical pre-law undergraduate majors. In theory, there is not an actual undergraduate pre-law major; students are free to choose their courses of study. Students should choose courses that are intellectually challenging and have strong logic and writing elements. More and more these days, students are choosing other types of degrees that don’t expressly fit into these typical categories. It should also be noted that law schools do not view all majors the same. Law school weight GPA according to the perceived difficulty of the applicant’s degree. For example, a 4.0 in political science probably will be given as much weight as a 3.2 in Physics. Law schools also take into account a student’s class rank relative to their peers. Non-traditional pre-law majors can

also be used to “fall back” on if law school doesn’t work out. For example, by majoring in political science or English, students severely limit their options if law school does not work out. On the other hand, a major such as electrical engineering or accounting can be used to fall back on as well as serve to increase students’ marketability and job opportunities after law school. Students with strong business or engineering backgrounds can even eventually tailor their pre-law undergraduate majors during and after law school in fields such as tax or patent law.

The right school.

When it comes time to choose a law school, many different factors will should be considered. Here are a few guidelines to consider. It is important not to get caught up in the law school rankings published by U.S. News and World Report. It is more important to attend a school that is right for you. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that it does matter which school you attend, both in the short and long term. When it comes time to find a job, employers, particularly private ones (both firms and industry) look closely at where the potential employee attended law school. Some potential employers will only *interview* candidates from certain schools, and even worse, candidates that have graduated above a certain percentile level from their respective schools. This all leads to law school being extremely competitive environment. Class rankings are constantly updated during your study at law school and can be asked for when interviewing for a job. Although rankings, such as those published annually in U.S. News & World Report, are considered to be arbitrary and biased, they should at least serve as a reference point when it comes time to decide which schools to aim for, assuming that the higher *ranked* a

school will put the graduating law student in a better position in the long run. A law school's ranking should be weighted somewhat heavily, but by no means exclusively.

The law school application process should be considered a business. Schools are attempting to attract the best talent to their schools to ensure a diverse and competitive law school experience and to add prestige to the schools based on the accomplishments their future alumni. After attaining an insight into the law school rankings, it is important to consider other factors that go into choosing a law school. Most of the lawyers I have discussed this issue with have suggested that that students ought to go to school where they plan to live and work. It does not make much sense for someone to study law back East and then try and practice back in Utah. This does not mean it cannot be done, but when taking into consideration the amount of school loans that will need to be taken out for tuition and living expenses to study at certain schools, moving back to Utah might not even be a possibility. Most law firms do most of their recruiting at schools in their close proximity for a few reasons. Each law school's curriculum will probably focus on that state or region's law. For example, California's state laws are considered to be much more complex and diverse than Utah's laws. All of this should be taken into account, considering a law school applicant will eventually need to take that state's bar exam to become a practicing attorney. If a potential law school student knows they want to stay close to home, it is wise to apply at schools that are located in the region they plan to work. If a student does plan to attend school in another region, it is important to plan ahead for post-graduation employment in his or her home region by obtaining summer internships and making contacts with potential employers located where the student intends to practice.

The school selection process can be effectively narrowed by deciding early on that you want to study a particular field or program of law. Fields of law include corporate and securities law, criminal law, environmental and natural resources law, family and juvenile law, health law, intellectual law and property law, international law, tax law, and civil rights law, among others. If a student wishes to study tax law, he or she should research schools that offer these types of second and third year courses as well as the school's reputation for the specific field. For example, the University of Texas at Austin and New York University have a great reputation for tax law and for post J.D. degrees such as an LL.M in Tax. The University of Utah is particularly known for its environmental and natural resources law. Many students will be attracted by joint programs such as a combined J.D\M.B.A degree (which requires a fourth year of school). If deciding to pursue a joint degree, a potential applicant will need to apply and be accepted for both programs, which will entail separate application processes.

Law school is generally a three year program taught during the day with the only entry date beginning in the fall. A few schools offer two entry dates each year, and fair number of schools offer night programs. Generally, Law school is a full-time endeavor. The first year of law school deals with broad and fundamental concepts of law and generally considered to be the most stressful. Most students, regardless of the school, will take the same types of classes involving courses in civil procedure, constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, property, torts, and legal research and writing. Students are encouraged not to work outside of law school during the first year. Depending on the student's success in the first year, students can take a variety of classes their second and

third year in what they plan to specialize in – everything from accounting to environmental law.

Money and debt should be at the forefront of any law school decision. Law school tuition ranges from a few thousand dollars to over \$30,000 a year. Add to this the cost of books, housing, transportation, and personal expenses, and over 80% of law school students take out some kind of financial aid. Financial aid comes in the form of loans, grants, and scholarships. Student must factor in how they plan to pay back what they have borrowed. Many law schools attempt to entice applicants with grants, scholarships, or in-state tuition. Offers such as these should weigh heavily on students' decisions on which school to attend. Most schools offer some type of financial aid or incentive to incoming law students.

Another very important factor is whether to attend a public or private law school. Generally, the top law schools are private and cost much more. There are also a number of excellent public law schools across the country. If attending a public law school not located in a student's resident state, almost all law students will have to pay out-of-state tuition the first year. Many public school law students will then be eligible for in-state tuition their second and third years, but each state will have different residency requirements. Some states never grant residency, others have specific rules to claim it. For example, in Pennsylvania a student must real property. In Virginia, out-of-state law school students are never granted residency. It is very important when researching public law schools that applicants look carefully into the residency requirement. It could save the student literally thousands of dollars. There are a number of things law students can do to gain residency if they are willing to research what needs to be done in order for that to

happen. Whatever may be the case, the cost of attending law school represents a long-term financial commitment that needs to be taken into consideration before attending law school.

During the summer months between years, students are strongly encouraged to clerk for judges and firms. These are very important assignments that could determine where the student ends up working after law school and are excellent sources for networking. After graduation from law school, students become eligible to sit for the bar exam. Each state, or most often a region (a collection of states), will have a slightly different bar exam. It is important to know beforehand which state's bar exam a student would like to sit for and plan ahead of time to be confident in each state's bar exam nuances. The bar exam is a very rigorous test and a sufficient time period of study leading up to the bar exam should be planned for in order to pass and do well on the bar exam, as the result will affect employment opportunities.

The Application Process

The cost of applying for law school is not cheap. Just to take the LSAT costs \$108 for the 2003-2004 test. Law School Data Assembly Services (LSDAS), a not-for-profit organization that all ABA (American Bar Association) schools use to compile data on applicants is practically mandatory and costs \$99. LSDAS compiles an applicant's official transcripts, letters of recommendations, personal statement, and other application materials in a coherent and centralized manner that law schools use to evaluate potential law students. In addition, for each law school applied to, LSDAS charges \$10-12 dollars. The cost of taking the LSAT, registering for LSDAS, and applying to around 5 schools will cost around \$260 dollars. In addition, each school applied to charges an application

fee of between \$20 to \$65 dollars. These fees can be waived if financial need can be demonstrated. Adding in the fees makes the cost of applying to roughly 5 law schools over \$500. This is probably somewhat of a low estimate.

In addition, it is strongly recommended that an applicant either take a LSAT prep course or find a sufficient method of serious preparation for the LSAT. Options are a bit limited in Logan, but a few options do exist. The majority of these options require commuting to Salt Lake at least once a week. Kaplan (\$1,100), Ace LSAT (\$775), and Test Masters (\$1,000), and USU's own Johnson Sherlock course (\$450) are all possible prep courses. There is no trick to studying for the LSAT. Contrary to popular myth, it is a test that you can study and prepare for to raise your score substantially. I would allow between 4-6 months of study time in preparing for the LSAT.

Unfortunately, despite their best intentions, most students do not reach their LSAT potential score for a few different reasons. In order to score well, students must dedicate themselves to studying on a daily basis. Another mistake students make is using a prep course as a crutch that never really pans out. It is very important that students takes it upon themselves to prepare for the test. No amount of luck will get them that good score – only dedicated study. It can not be overemphasized enough that prospective law school students need to score their absolute best in order to get into the law school of their choice. Acquiring a number of old tests and disciplining your mind for the three and a half hour test is very important. Law schools base most of your application on your LSAT score. It is important to try to take the test only once, as most schools average all scores together. The LSAT can be taken 3 times in a 2 year period.

One of the most important parts of your law school application is the personal statement. Take into consideration that the personal statement is the only opportunity for law schools to look past the numbers. They already will have a number of scores and grades that will be used to determine admittance, the personal statement must do something that makes an applicant stand out. A good personal statement can dramatically increase your chances of acceptance if your grades and LSAT scores are not where they need to be. It has been said that some law schools consider it as important as your GPA. Granted, any personal statement will not completely make up for a poor LSAT or GPA, but it can mean the difference between acceptance and the wait list. Law schools recognize they are going to be spending three years with their students and they want to know who these people really are. It can be thought of as being married to someone for three years. Law schools want to ensure that they are getting a diverse and interesting group of students in the classroom. There are many ideas and methods for writing your personal statement. A few places to start are websites such as www.admissionstatements.com, or by doing a google search.

Letters of recommendation are another big part of the application process. The best letters come from professors who are familiar with the student's work and can speak with candor and honesty about a student's potential for success in law school. When it comes down to choosing between a recognizable name of some 'senator-type' versus a quality letter from a typical professor, it is always better to get a letter from someone who will truthfully convey to law schools what your strengths and weaknesses are. Law schools consider it poor judgment to presume that a letter of recommendation written by a 'big name' will get someone into law school just because that person has a recognizable

name. Each school handles letters of recommendation slightly differently. Some require 3, but most schools require only 2 quality letters. The letters should generally come from a professor inside the student's major, or one from each major if the student has a double major. The student should create a list of possible professors who would be inclined to write letters for the student. Relationships should be cultivated with these professors by the student over this time period. It is not a good idea to worry about letters of recommendation as a last minute item – these letters need to be strong and thus require a certain amount of time.

When approaching a professor about writing a letter of recommendation, the student should meet with the professor and impress upon them just how important this letter is to the student. The student should talk about which schools he or she is applying to and what is expected of the professor for the letter. A student should provide a professor with a dossier of work completed in the professor's class and items to consider when writing the letter. Students must supply the professor with the necessary paperwork to send to LSDAS as well as provide a timeline to follow. The student can even relay to the professor what schools they are applying for and their GPA and LSAT scores. It is important to make the professor feel part of the process.

Timing and deadlines.

When it comes to getting into law school during these ultra-competitive times, timing is literally everything. The LSAT is administered 4 times a year, in February, June, October, and December. It is *strongly* recommended that students take either the June or October tests, in order to ensure that the student does not put themselves at a

competitive disadvantage by applying later in the application window. As the application deadline draws nearer, law schools become so inundated with applications that they become more selective with those candidates they choose to admit. Students can take the LSAT at the testing center in the basement of the University Inn on these dates. Specific dates and information can be found at www.lsac.org. Generally, it is a good idea to register for the test at least a month in advance, but be aware that the certain testing centers can sell out, thus, forcing you to make an unnecessary and untimely commute to another testing center in Ogden, Salt Lake, or Provo. From what I have gathered, LSAT tries to make the test as stressful as possible. It is imperative that you follow the instructions exactly as the test proctor states. Any kind of impropriety will be viewed as a severe black mark thus hurting your chances of getting into law school.

A student applying for law school should have everything ready to go, from the LSAT score to the letters of recommendation by no later than November 1st of the proceeding year. I know people who have had excellent LSAT scores and applications, but were not accepted into the schools they applied to because they applied too late in the process. This is not to say their applications were late, they just had put themselves at competitive disadvantages by applying late in the application time period. Most schools list as a deadline February 1st of that same year, but will begin accepting applications by November 1st. After speaking with numerous people about the imperativeness of applying early, I am convinced that applying early will do wonders for your applications. If you consider the law school application process as a business, it is in the best interest of any school to lock down qualified applicants as they apply and not leave it to chance

further down the line. Taking this approach will dramatically increase a student's chance of getting into law school.

I've touched on a few of the most important issues to consider when applying to law school. I hope these items will be of benefit to future Utah State University graduates pursuing law degrees. Students must realize how important items such as the LSAT, GPA, Personal Statement, Letters of Recommendation, and school choice are if they are to be considered as viable candidates for law school. Students should have a better than average grasp on the getting into law if they are serious about it. Law school will ultimately decide many important factors and decision in the student's life and great care and discretion should be used to aim for and be admitted to the right law school.