12 Things to Know About Law School

Please take a few moments to consider these brief points. You’ll hear much more about many of these topics in Legal Analysis & Writing.

1. **Law School is Challenging, Intellectually and Emotionally.** For most law students, law school is the most challenging experience of their lives. You may have done well in the past without putting forth maximum effort but, almost certainly, that will not happen in law school. You’ll be learning an analytical way of thinking that doesn’t come naturally to most, and you’ll encounter a significant workload. You’ll be preparing for a licensing exam (the California Bar Exam) that is designed to limit the number of successful takers. To succeed, bring to your studies a strong work ethic, an organized approach, and a healthy mental attitude. Stay on top of your studies—law school GPA is the most significant indicator of likely Bar Exam passage.

   PLEASE NOTE: Unlike other programs you may have attended, students in the J.D. program are only very rarely permitted to remain in the program if, at the end of the academic year, they do not maintain a GPA of 2.0. Further, the opportunity to repeat a course is almost never granted. Because the median grades are in the C+/C range, students must work both smart and hard from the very beginning — don’t play games with yourself to see how little effort you can expend on your studies.

2. **Your Legal Career Starts in Law School.** When you enter law practice, your professors and classmates will become colleagues. Depending on the impressions you have made, these colleagues will bestow on you goodwill, job opportunities, professional courtesies, and client referrals—or not. Your conduct is also subject to disclosure to the State Bar when it investigates your “moral character” as a Bar applicant. We are duty-bound to reveal conduct that reflects on moral character, such as suspected plagiarism, cheating, and the like. So, it is advisable to conduct yourself with courtesy and integrity.

3. **Law School Rewards Self-Direction.** Law school is designed for people who: 1) are self-motivated to understand the rules and how they apply, and 2) plan to explain those things to other people someday (like clients, judges, juries, etc.) In class or out, we won’t insult you by treating you like someone who wants to be spoon-fed by others or dragged around by the nose (think babies, or cows). Because self-direction is a critical attribute for future lawyers, you may find you get less prodding about deadlines and details than you received in college. Consider it professional training — it goes with the territory.

4. **Attendance is Required.** As the Policy Manual explains, attendance is excused only in very limited circumstances (which do not include non-
exigent, non-emergencies such as vacations or anniversary dinners.) We must certify to the State Bar that you have attended a certain number of class hours to qualify you academically for the Bar Exam. More importantly, we know that students who skip class usually cheat themselves on pre-class preparation, and fail to make up missed class time. Students with a pattern of absences often find themselves in academic jeopardy; those with excessive absences face dismissal. Please read the Policy Manual provisions on attendance carefully, and inform your family and friends in advance of the strict requirements.

5. **Preparation is the Name of the Game.** Law students are expected to attend class having read and understood the assigned cases well enough to grasp the facts and basic principles. Armed with such understanding, you'll be able keep up with, and contribute to, class discussions—which are conducted to help you develop strong legal analysis skills. If you come to class unprepared, you may hear what is being said, but you almost certainly won't understand it well. Similarly, we assume that you'll act in your own self-interest by reading and adhering to the Colleges' administrative policies and deadlines. Be sure to read the Policy Manual and promptly review all notices emailed from the Administration Office and posted on TWEN or the Colleges' bulletin boards.

6. **Supplemental Learning Materials Enhance Law Studies.** Law school is fast-paced. Law students typically supplement their coursework with commercial aids—such as flashcards, hornbooks, and workshops—that enhance knowledge and exam-taking skills. To learn which supplements might work for you, invest in a few and use them early! Ask your fellow students and instructors for recommendations, and browse online reviews.

7. **Study Partners Can Boost Your Success.** A well-chosen set of study partners, or even one “study buddy” can make all the difference in law school. Study partners can share supplemental study materials; provide a sounding board for ideas about how to draft briefs, outlines, and practice exams; help each other maintain discipline and motivation; and provide “backup” for class notes in case of illness. By choosing study partners based on temperament, availability, and compatibility, you may well find people who will see you through the “long haul” of law school and the Bar Exam.

8. **Law School Exams are Unlike College Exams.** Preparing for law exams is a marathon, not a sprint. It’s impossible to “cram.” Not only is there too much to remember, but law exams require analysis, not regurgitation. You must begin your exam preparation early, by preparing briefs and outlines as you go along. By about mid-semester, you should begin testing yourself by completing old exams, available on TWEN. By the end of the semester, you and your course outlines should be on very close terms. Sustained attention to detail throughout the semester will pay off at exam time.
9. Seek Help Before It’s Too Late. If you are struggling to understand or meet the expectations of law school, don’t wait until after exam grades are issued to acknowledge your problems and seek help. Personal challenges, such as illness, family crises, unusual work loads, and disabilities for which accommodations have not been requested, may also place a student in serious academic jeopardy if not dealt with appropriately. (If you have been given testing accommodations in the past for an ongoing disability, it would be very unwise to ignore that need in law school.) The Assistant Deans and the Dean are available to counsel you on academic and personal challenges. The Policy Manual outlines options available to students who become ill or experience other emergencies on or near examinations, and other provisions may apply to help you avoid academic jeopardy.

10. It’s Important to Enlist the Support of Your Family and Friends. Because law school is so different from college, or other graduate programs, it is essential that you help your family and friends understand the commitment you have made from the outset. Otherwise, you may find that they sabotage your plans, wittingly or unwittingly. It is simply not possible to attend law school 9 hours a week, and to study the requisite 18 to 27 additional hours, while maintaining the same social and family life you had before law school. By letting your family know in advance what is expected of you—by way of class attendance, and preparation for classes and exams—they will be less likely to try to pressure you into participating in social events that jeopardize your academic progress. Explain that by making a short-term sacrifice of your time and attention now, you are paving the way for longer-term benefits. Above all, don’t skip class for non-emergencies.

11. For Everything, There is a Season. If “location, location, location” is the secret to success in real estate, “timing, timing, timing” is the secret in law school. Try to quickly grasp the basics of case briefing and outlining, so you can craft an excellent outline as you go along. Then, as soon as you can, turn your attention to memorizing black letter principles and writing practice exams. If you wait too long—or fail to plan for the unexpected challenges in your life—you won’t have enough time to prepare for exams. That said, if you have an emergency situation before exams, call your Assistant Dean and discuss your exam schedule. It’s better to address the situation before you take the exam than to try to offer an excuse afterward.

12. Ambiguity Exists, So Embrace It. If the law were always clear, no one would need lawyers. In law school, you’ll spend much of your time feeling uncertain about whether you know “the right answer.” This feeling can develop into disabling anxiety, if unchecked. For lawyers, “ambiguity” is not a circumstance to inspire dread, but an opportunity to pitch a reasonable argument on a client’s behalf. Don’t search frantically for solid ground; instead, learn to feel comfortable with the ground constantly shifting beneath you.