



Dentistry and Law: Popular Professional Pathways

By Christina Chong, EdM, IECA (NY)

Having formerly worked in the admissions offices of several higher education institutions including Harvard Law School, NYU School of Law, and NYU College of Dentistry, a substantial number of my clients are interested in pursuing careers as dentists or lawyers.

As an independent educational consultant (IEC) since 2017, I am providing context for these two popular areas of professional study—DDS/DMD versus JD—and current factors to consider in these pathways.

Prerequisite Classes

Dentistry has an extensive list of prerequisites that must be completed before entering a program. It is important for students to start planning years ahead to make sure these are mostly or all completed before applying. They include biology, general chemistry, organic chemistry, physics, English; labs are usually needed. It is key to check each dental school's

requirements, which may also include courses such as biochemistry, anatomy, histology, physiology, genetics, embryology, pharmacology, math, or art.

In addition to reviewing applications at NYU's dental school, I advised 26 first-year DDS students. I found that those who had not taken anatomy were at a disadvantage, so I recommend that my clients take it during college.

Law usually requires only a bachelor's degree to be earned before entering, and it is helpful to have many reading and writing-intensive classes, but there is much freedom to choose a course of study in college.

The major usually does not matter for these programs, but STEM applicants are at an advantage in the law school pool, as there is a need for more attorneys with technical skills who will pursue areas such as patents and artificial intelligence.

Testing

For dental school, the Dental Admissions Test (DAT) is the required option. It is given on a computer and offered most days of the year; sections include biology, general chemistry, organic chemistry, perceptual ability, reading comprehension, and quantitative reasoning. Unlike most colleges, which are test optional, a dental school applicant must submit this test score to be considered.

Many US dental schools also accept the Canadian version of the DAT due to the large number of Canadian applicants to their institutions; there are more than 70 US dental schools but only 10 in Canada.

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For law school, test scores are required in most cases for JD programs in the United States. However, in early 2025, the American Bar Association approved 14 law schools to admit a greater share of their class without such a test; previously, only up to 10 percent of the class could be admitted without a score, but now they can request that up to 100 percent of the class have this option. Standard 503 allows for this occurrence; certain law schools, such as Arizona State and Texas A&M, have allowed for more test-optional students.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of law schools require a test score. The LSAT, which has been around for decades, is accepted by all law schools. The test has a positive correlation with first-year law school grades and bar passage rates. It currently tests reading comprehension and logical reasoning and has an essay portion. The logic games section was removed in August 2024. The frequency of offerings has increased to about nine times per year, and it now includes the option to take the exam online at home; in-person test centers are also available, and paper versions are given to certain students with accommodations.

Since 2016, the GRE has been an acceptable substitution at several dozen law schools, including Harvard, Columbia, Georgetown, Stanford, and Yale. It is available online and at test centers. Students should keep in mind that it is not accepted at every law school, and it is typically only a small percentage of the class that enrolls with a GRE score.

JD-Next is a newer option created in 2019 by a team at the University of Arizona. It is an online exam with multiple-choice questions and an essay that tests legal skills after an eight-week course. A number of law schools have approved it as a test option. However, because it currently has little traction, I do not recommend it at this time. Most top law schools will not accept it, but notable exceptions include Boston College, Emory, Fordham, Georgetown, George Washington, Texas A&M, Vanderbilt, and Washington University in St. Louis.

Applicants are usually best served by taking the LSAT, as every law school accepts it and scholarships tend to be based partially on test results. I have found that students who take the GRE are at a disadvantage; it seems to be more of an option for students who are not strong test-takers, nontraditional candidates, or those who already have another graduate degree.

US News Rankings

In dentistry, there are no rankings of schools by *US News & World Report*. In the 1990s, many dental schools boycotted the rankings because they believed the methodology did not fully capture program quality, and the rankings were subsequently canceled.

In law, the *US News* rankings are influential in applicants' perceptions of schools. In 2022–2023, dozens of law schools, led by Yale and Harvard, withdrew from participating in the rankings. They believed there were flaws in the system: incentives that prioritized merit aid

over need-based aid, certain jobs over others, and overemphasis on GPA and test scores over student-body diversity, as well as unequal consideration of public-interest fellowships versus law firm employment.

In response, *US News* overhauled the methodology for law school rankings. The LSAT and GPA no longer count as much in the rankings, although law schools do still care about these factors, contrary to their claims. Meanwhile, bar passage rate and employment rate after graduation have increased in importance.

Many clients aim for the Top 14 (T14) law schools due to their high placement rates in top firms. Although schools can move around in rankings, the top schools generally remain in the same tier.

School Lists

Because only approximately half of applicants are accepted to at least one US dental school, it is important to have a larger list. I typically recommend a list of at least 15 to 20 schools for most applicants, including several private options, which are more expensive, as admission at public schools is very competitive. Clients tend to be more interested in attending a public in-state option to minimize loans.

The vast majority of my clients are able to be accepted to a JD program in the United States due to the large number of programs; there are approximately 200 accredited law

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schools. It is best to have at least a couple of “likely” schools. Clients typically apply to 10 to 20 schools, but those with a nontraditional background might apply to a wider range. Outside the T14, mobility can be limited geographically, so it is important for the applicant to consider the region in which they wish to practice, as well as the school's employment rates. Some clients choose to apply only to schools in their state or region and have a small list.

Admissions Process: Essays, Extracurriculars, Letters

In addition to the DAT, it is important that an applicant meet all required coursework, get experience shadowing dentists, and take part in relevant activities. Recommendation letters often include those from two science-subject professors and a dentist. Committee letters can be important if offered by the student's college, as faculty and administrators present the candidacy of an applicant. These letters can delay the admissions process significantly if they are not ready early in the cycle, so it is up to the applicant and their advisor to assess whether using a committee letter is appropriate.

Students apply through the AADSAS (Associated American Dental Schools Application Service) system, or through TMDSAS (Texas Medical & Dental Application Service) if applying to Texas schools. The dental application process does not require the same level of writing as the law school process, but typically there is one main essay about why the applicant wishes to pursue a career in oral health, as well as supplemental essays related to a specific school or to reapplying. Supplements may be due at the time of application or later if requested. Extracurricular activities are listed in the application, and it is often important to demonstrate community involvement and experience shadowing dentists.

For law, applicants use the LSAC (Law School Admission Council) system to submit applications. Required letters vary greatly, but typically at least one faculty member in a reading- and writing-intensive course is best, and many schools prefer two faculty letters in different subjects. It is also highly recommended to have a work letter from

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an internship or a job. Essay writing is very important; each law school has its own requirements for length and topic. Most are two pages, but some allow three or more. Each school has their own application, but many elements are similar; the greatest variance is shown in the essay topics. They also ask for a résumé and a list of activities.

Timing of Application Cycle

For dentistry, the application opens in May, and it is ideal to apply by July 1 in order to have the best chances of acceptance. Chances diminish significantly after this time, as interview invitations begin in the summer for some schools.

For law, it is best to apply by Thanksgiving. I do not believe that September is necessary, as many schools do not accept students that early. However, November is still early enough to prepare essays adequately, and often the applications are not available until September.

Gap Years

If a client has a strong GPA and DAT score and good experience in leadership and exposure to dentistry, then a gap year may not be necessary. However, many applicants do take a gap year to fulfill all requirements, including shadowing a dentist and perhaps taking additional coursework.

In recent years, gap years have become more important in JD admissions. Although it is certainly possible for a client to be accepted directly from college, they typically have more options if they have worked full-time post-graduation, and they may have more top-ranked schools to choose from. I generally recommend full-time work experience before applying to law school to get a better sense of the type of career desired.

Interviews

Dental schools require an interview for admission. Only a small percentage of the applicant pool is invited to interview. These interviews may be online, but many schools choose to interview in person only, including NYU. In-person visits often include a campus tour, a presentation from admissions, and faculty interactions.

The majority of law schools do not require interviews, especially less competitive ones. Some top law schools require interviews, such as Harvard and Georgetown. Most interviews are virtual. Some use a platform like Kira, in which the applicant records their answers without an interviewer present; others are conducted by admissions staff or occasionally alumni. In rare cases, interviews are in person. For example, NYU Law has several named scholarships that require interviews, sometimes in person, for admitted candidates.

Hiring

Many dentists choose to complete a residency after graduation. New York State requires new dentists to complete at least one year of a general practice residency (GPR) or specialty residency. There are also fellowship options. Many dentists choose to work for another employer at first. However, the vast majority eventually work for themselves and start their own practices; nevertheless, a growing share is choosing to work for corporate entities.

Most law school students choose to work for firms. The law hiring process has moved earlier since the pandemic. Previously, the key timing for securing a big law firm job was during the summer before 2L year. During the last few years, however, law firms have moved this earlier and began recruiting before the end of the first semester of law school. When I worked for the University of Pennsylvania Career Services, the on-campus recruiting process took place in August. During the pandemic,

law firms and law students began contacting each other directly, and cut out the traditional middleman of the law school career services office. I now hear of law firms sometimes asking for LSAT scores because they interview so early that law school grades are not yet available.

From what I understand from speaking to a law firm partner, they are looking for applicants who have researched the firm, understand its offerings, and show passion. For those without full-time work experience, it may be difficult to articulate a particular direction. Timelines vary greatly for those seeking public-interest or government jobs (including clerkships).

Scholarships and Graduate Loans

Recent government changes have put a lifetime cap of \$200,000 on borrowing for professional programs such as the JD and DDS/DMD, with a \$50,000 annual limit. In addition, there is an overall limit of \$257,500 for all federal student loans (excluding Parent PLUS loans), so undergraduate loans count toward this as well. This is a monumental change that will impact many applicants.

In dentistry, most schools do not offer substantial scholarships. It is very expensive to educate dentists; unlike medical schools, which send their students to do rotations at hospitals the last two years, dental schools often need to supervise rotations in house for the last two years, which requires direct supervision, expensive equipment, and faculty expertise. Options for future dentists include the National Health Service Corps Scholarship, which requires service in areas with dental shortages, the Students to Service Loan Repayment Program, in which they serve at least two years after graduation for loan repayment, and the Health Professions Scholarship Program through the Army, Navy, or Air Force, which requires active-duty service for several years.

Law schools typically compete for the best students and offer merit scholarships to entice them, especially to those with high scores and grades. Some need-based scholarships are also available. Many outside organizations offer scholarships, such as the American Bar Association; these awards may not cover full tuition, but they can help. One of my former clients

was awarded the Samvid Scholarship for graduate applicants, which provides up to \$100,000 in funding.

Conclusion

I have found clients are increasingly anxious about the graduate admissions process due to current changes in the economy, including how AI is impacting employment in many industries. Given these developments and the changes in graduate school loans, it is important to help families navigate the process and understand their options. Both dentistry and law require a great investment of time and resources, but they can be satisfying careers for students who are self-aware, certain in what they want for the future, and willing to put in the effort to pursue these professional pathways. 🏠



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