Audio file

Pre-law_Episode_mixdown.mp3

Transcript

00:00:01 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook Podcast, where preparation and hard work come together.

00:00:06 Casey Ellis

This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you format your future.

00:00:10 Casey Ellis

I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

00:00:16 Casey Ellis

Whether you're just starting out, considering a career shift, or just wanting to know more, this episode is your guide to navigating the various educational and professional options available.

00:00:25 Casey Ellis

Today, we're diving into the legal profession, what it means to be an attorney, and what you need to know before applying to law school.

00:00:33 Casey Ellis

Whether you're certain about pursuing law or just exploring your options, this episode will help you stay ahead of the game and give you winning insights into the legal profession.

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So, what does an attorney do?

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At the most basic level, an attorney is someone licensed to advise and represent individuals, businesses, and government agencies in legal matters.

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They're trained to become experts in reading the law and figuring out how specific rulings are applied to individual situations.

00:01:00 Casey Ellis

What many people don't realize is that being a lawyer isn't just about arguing cases in court like you see on TV.

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While some lawyers do that, many never set foot in a courtroom.

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The legal profession is incredibly diverse with attorneys working in nearly every industry and sector of society.

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Even as a college student, attorneys are also working in many ways that you might not realize.

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The University of Georgia is a large university with a complex set of legal needs.

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Attorneys work in the Office of Student Conduct, using their expertise to ensure a fair and just process for those suspected of violations.

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UGA has an Office of Legal Affairs that houses a team of associates who assist the general counsel in ensuring the university complies with state and federal laws.

00:01:42 Casey Ellis

And in 2018, the university athletics department hired a deputy director for legal and regulatory affairs to ensure that the university successfully navigates the ever-changing legal landscape of collegiate athletics.

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There are many primary responsibilities for an attorney.

00:01:58 Casey Ellis

The main responsibility is providing legal advice.

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This means interpreting how the law applies to a client's specific situation and accurately and ethically advising them on their options.

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Next, representing clients, whether that's negotiating agreements on behalf of a party, advocating for them in court, or handling transactions.

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Another big component of being a lawyer is researching and analyzing legal issues.

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That might sound intimidating, but at its core, it's about asking good questions, digging into the rules that already exist, and using that information to help people make informed decisions or build strong arguments.

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Additionally, drafting legal documents, contracts, wills, court filings, memoranda, there's a lot of writing in law, and as an attorney, you will be expected to have sound legal writing skills.

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Don't worry, this is something that you will learn in law school.

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And finally, problem solving.

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At its heart, law is about helping people work through real problems through the legal system, whether that means resolving conflicts, finding practical solutions, or helping someone move forward when things feel complicated.

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Some attorneys will work as litigators.

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They will go to court either for criminal or civil matters.

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You might hear the term trial attorney.

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Not all litigators will go to trial.

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Appellate attorneys, for example, are litigators who give oral arguments in front of a judge or panel of judges at the appeals stage.

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Other attorneys will act more as advisors.

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They are considered transactional attorneys.

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Transactional attorneys make sure their clients are complying with the law.

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One of the great strengths of the legal profession is the wide variety of paths and settings it offers.

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While law school is certainly challenging and the bar exam you'll take after graduation is demanding, many have successfully navigated this path before you.

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The stories you hear about the rigor are real, but knowing what to expect can help you prepare and succeed.

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The result of all this hard work is that you earn a degree which can allow you to work at the intersection of the law and almost anything you can imagine.

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The American Bar Association does a great job of collecting data on employment outcomes in a series of reports published every year around December.

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These reports, called the ABA 509 Disclosure Reports, include a ton of information about where law school graduates ended up working right out of school.

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In order to be licensed to practice law, you are required to pass the bar exam.

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Other positions, called JD advantage jobs, mean a person is not necessarily practicing law, but their legal knowledge is considered valuable.

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For the graduating class of 2023, the overall employment rate 10 months removed from graduation was 92.6% according to the National Association for Law Placement, or NALP.

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And 82.1% had secured bar passage required jobs.

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With over 35,000 participants in this survey, this data isn't just a shot in the dark, it's a slam dunk of probative value.

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So what types of jobs are these 2025 graduates doing, and what type of legal role could you end up in?

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Let's break it down in three ways.

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Sector, employer type, and practice area or specialty.

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Starting with the broadest definition of legal employment, and all employment really, your position will be in the private sector or the public sector.

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Private practice ranges from solo practitioners to massive global law firms that employ hundreds of associate attorneys and partners.

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These can be general practice firms handling various legal matters or highly specialized boutique firms focusing on specific areas of law.

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For example, a general practice firm may advise clients on contracts, family law disputes, and real estate transactions, while a boutique firm might concentrate exclusively on intellectual property or tax law.

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When you work for a private business, you are considered in-house counsel.

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That company is your sole client.

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You can fulfill a range of tasks from handling their legal affairs to serving as key advisors to business leadership.

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Typically, this is not an entry-level position.

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Government attorneys work at all levels, federal, state, and local, serving as prosecutors, public defenders, agency counsel, and more.

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In these roles, they help keep communities safe, protect people's rights, and make sure laws are applied fairly.

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Prosecutors work to hold individuals accountable for breaking the law, while public defenders stand up for those who can't afford a lawyer.

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Other government lawyers help create and enforce rules that protect consumers, the environment, and public health.

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Together, they play an important role in strengthening communities, supporting fairness, and improving the way governments serve the public.

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Public interest attorneys work for nonprofit organizations, legal aid societies, and advocacy groups, often representing underserved populations or advancing social causes.

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Sometimes, associates at private law firms choose to take on public interest work because they feel personally drawn to it or want to give back through pro bono service.

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Academia is another path, with attorneys teaching at law schools, conducting research, and shaping future legal minds.

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Finally, there are fields of practice or specialties.

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Some popular legal specialties include criminal law, corporate law, family and juvenile law, health law, tax law, constitutional law, immigration law, real estate law, sports and entertainment law, education law, employment and labor law, and environmental law.

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You can imagine where some of these specialties might require litigation, like with criminal law.

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In other fields, you'd work primarily as a transactional attorney, for example, in real estate or tax law.

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In certain areas of law, such as family law, lawyers do not often argue cases in front of a judge in a courtroom.

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Instead, much of their work involves helping people resolve issues outside of trial, such as divorce agreements, child custody arrangements, or support disputes.

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Even though they may not go to trial frequently, these attorneys still need a solid understanding of court rules and legal steps to properly handle paperwork and deadlines.

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They also need strong mediation and communication skills to help both sides reach fair agreements, reduce conflict, and avoid the stress and cost of a trial whenever possible.

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So what does a typical day look like for an attorney?

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The truth is there's no single typical day, and that's exactly what draws many people to the profession.

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If you thrive on variety, enjoy solving problems, and like thinking on your feet, law offers endless opportunities to put those skills to work.

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For litigators, the work is often less about flashy courtroom drama and more about building a strong foundation through preparation.

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Their day usually starts early, staying on top of important updates from clients and colleagues.

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They might spend their morning diving into legal research, uncovering precedents, and crafting creative arguments to support their cases.

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Afternoons could include meeting with clients to help them navigate the legal process and ensure they understand each step.

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They dedicate time to drafting motions, which are carefully worded documents designed to make the strongest possible case while anticipating challenges.

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Litigators also play a key role in depositions, where they gather crucial information through detailed, structured questioning.

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These sessions require focus and strategy, and they lay the groundwork for success in court or settlement.

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Negotiating settlements is another vital skill, as attorneys work with opposing counsel to find solutions that meet their clients' needs while managing expectations with care.

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Court appearances are an important part of the job too.

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These shorter hearings offer the chance to advocate directly for a client.

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Many cases are resolved outside of court.

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A Pew Research study found that at the federal level, about 5% of cases went to trial between July 2021 and June 2022, highlighting the value attorneys bring in finding resolution

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before trial.

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For transactional attorneys, every day brings new challenges and opportunities.

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Their mornings might kick off with calls to international clients, helping to reach agreements across time zones.

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They carefully review contracts and documents, knowing their attention to detail protects clients from risk and ensures smooth transactions.

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When companies merge or buy other companies, they carefully check financial and legal information to identify risk and help clients make well-informed choices.

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Throughout the day, they respond to client questions, tackle regulatory puzzles, and negotiate terms that shape the outcome of complex deals.

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At larger firms, teamwork is key.

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Associates collaborate closely with partners and colleagues, often putting in extra hours during critical deal periods to ensure every detail is just right.

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Public interest attorneys make a meaningful impact every day.

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Their mornings might begin with clients facing urgent situations like eviction, immigration challenges, or domestic violence, giving these individuals the legal support they need.

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They balance court appearances, draft emergency motions, and work on strategies that aim to create broader change, all while staying deeply connected to the communities they serve.

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Across all practice areas, communication and collaboration are essential.

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Attorneys stay connected through emails and calls, and in some fields, responsiveness around the clock has become a key part of client service.

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The profession is demanding, especially during busy periods, when attorneys might work long hours to meet important deadlines.

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But for those who are dedicated and driven, it offers the chance to build expertise, develop problem-solving skills, become part of making a big impact by tackling real-world problems, grow professionally, and make a real difference for clients.

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In big law firms, expectations are high and attorneys take pride in delivering precision and excellence while managing significant responsibilities.

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Billable hour targets help measure client-focused work, while attorneys also invest time in mentoring, learning, and contributing to their firm's success.

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It's true that attorneys often work beyond just their billable hours.

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hours, with many aiming for 1,800 to 2,200 billed hours annually while balancing a range of other professional commitments.

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As for work-life balance, it can vary depending on your chosen path.

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Early in your career, you'll likely put in extra time to build skills and experience, but many attorneys find ways to align their practice with their personal goals over time.

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The financial rewards can be significant in many areas, and the profession continues to evolve with growing awareness around supporting attorney well-being and building

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sustainable careers.

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Now you have a better understanding of what the legal profession entails.

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Hopefully, you will do your own research.

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Try to shadow an attorney who works in the private sector and the public sector.

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Take informational meetings with current law school students and legal professionals.

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It's like a tryout, not mandatory, but it gives you a real feel for whether this is your league.

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So how does law school work?

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If you decide that being an attorney is a good path for you, will apply to a Juris Doctorate program.

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This program lasts three years.

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There are no majors or specific courses of study in law school.

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You'll take the core curriculum in the first year of your 1L.

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Be prepared to take courses in property law, constitutional law, criminal law, torts law, legal writing, legal research, and other areas that are fundamental to your ability to pass a state bar exam.

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In the second and third year, you have a little more control over the courses you take.

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You can even get hands-on experience by enrolling in a legal clinic.

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A legal clinic allows you to practice law as a law school student under the supervision of an attorney.

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The purpose of law school is to prepare you to pass a bar exam in the jurisdiction where you want to practice law.

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You will likely take a bar exam in July after you graduate from law school.

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There are costs involved, typically over $1,000 to register for the exam, along with additional expenses for bar preparation.

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Many students are able to offset these costs through scholarships, school-sponsored bar grants, fee waivers, or employer support.

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Law schools and bar organizations often provide financial assistance and resources to help graduates focus on preparing for the exam without added stress.

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Law school will give you the knowledge to pass the bar, but you may still need additional resources as the exam is extensive.

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Make sure you bring your A game.

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The bar isn't just a test, it's the championship match of your legal training.

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Candidates who pass the bar exam, whether on their first attempt or later, can typically expect to be licensed to practice law by October or November following the exam.

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In summary, becoming a licensed attorney requires earning a Juris Doctor and passing the bar exam in the state where you plan to practice or have secured employment.

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As a result, choosing a law school involves more than just looking at rankings.

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Prospective students should consider where they want to live and work, since many schools have strong regional ties and job placement networks.

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The strength of a school's career services office is also critical as it supports students in finding internships, clerkships, and full-time positions.

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Reviewing employment outcomes, bar passage rates, alumni networks, and recruiting employers can help students identify a law school that best fits their career goals, location preferences, and support needs.

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So how do you get into law school?

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You will need a bachelor's degree to attend law school.

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While most students complete a traditional four-year degree before beginning law school, there is also an accelerated option at UGA known as the 3+3 pathway.

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The 3+3 pathway is an admissions process to the University of Georgia School of Law that is open to qualified students in Franklin, SPIA, Terry, Grady, Odom, and select CAES majors during the spring of their third year.

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To be eligible,

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Students must complete all university and major requirements by the end of their third year and still have elective hours remaining that can be fulfilled during the first year of law school.

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If admitted through this process, you will begin law school before officially receiving your bachelor's degree.

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After completing your assigned first-year law courses, those credits count back towards your undergraduate degree, allowing you to graduate with your bachelor's degree while continuing law school.

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This pathway requires careful planning.

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You should consult with your academic advisor early to make sure you meet all criteria.

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And if you are able to graduate in three years without using the 3 + 3 structure, this option is not designed for you.

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To apply through 3 + 3, you must take a standardized test, either the LSAT or the GRE, and apply during the regular law school application cycle alongside other applicants.

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Applying early in the spring is strongly encouraged.

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Admission is competitive and not guaranteed, so students should contact the UGA School of Law directly with specific questions about the process.

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You can also apply to law school during your senior year through the traditional route, but you must have a clear path to graduate before law school classes begin.

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There are no required majors or prerequisite courses for law school.

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You will submit transcripts from every college-level institution attended, including dual enrollment and the Law School Admissions Council or LSAC will calculate an official LSAC GPA using all grades that appear on those transcripts.

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In most cases, your LSAC GPA will be close to your overall GPA.

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However, surprises can occur, so just be aware every grade will be factored in as it appears on the original transcript.

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If you have gaps in your transcripts or grades to explain, you can include an academic attachment to each law school application to provide more context.

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In most cases, your LSAC GPA will be similar to your overall undergraduate GPA.

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However, differences can occur because LSAC calculates grades exactly as they appear on your original transcript, including repeated courses, withdrawals, or grades from all institutions attended.

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You will likely need a standardized test to apply to law schools.

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Every law school accepts the Law School Admission Test or LSAT.

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A growing list of law schools will accept the GRE and in some cases the GMAT.

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Most of you will take the LSAT.

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The LSAT is currently offered 8 times a year.

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You should begin to prepare for the LSAT at least nine months before you plan to apply.

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You'll want to plan for two letters of recommendation from professors and one from a supervisor or other professional source.

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Most law schools require at least two letters and will often accept up to three.

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It's best to stick with quality over quantity.

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When asking someone to write a letter of recommendation, it's a good idea to check that they feel comfortable writing you a strong letter of support.

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For law school applications, character references aren't typically appropriate and shouldn't be included in the general application process.

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Your academic letters can come from anyone who taught you during college, so consider choosing recommenders who can speak to different strengths or experiences.

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If you've been out of college for some time, professional references are perfectly acceptable.

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You will also submit a resume or list your work experience and extracurriculars in the application form.

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Beyond grades and the LSAT, law schools place a lot of weight on what you do outside the classroom because your outside activities and work experience help tell the story of who you are and why law makes sense for you.

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At UGA, students should focus on getting involved in a few meaningful organizations or jobs rather than trying to do everything at once.

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That can include pre-law organizations like mock trials,

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Model UN, criminal justice society, student government, and more, but it can also be research, community service, or part-time work that builds skills like writing, critical thinking, and communication.

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Work experience, whether it's an internship with a law firm, a nonprofit, a government office, or even a non-legal job, shows professionalism and responsibility and often helps students clarify what types of work they actually enjoy.

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These experiences also give you real exposure to different legal environments, which is incredibly helpful when you're trying to figure out what area of law might interest you.

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Finally, you will write a personal statement and perhaps some other short essays.

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These will let the law schools get to know you beyond what is obvious in your transcript.

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Ideally, they should focus on some recent events and address why you're going to law school at this time.

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You don't have to know what type of law you want to practice.

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You can figure that out in law school.

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If you have a strong idea about the type of law you want to practice, you will oftentimes have an opportunity to expand on this in an optional essay if it doesn't fit in your personal statement.

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For the application process, law schools play significant weight on your undergraduate GPA and standardized test score.

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This cannot be denied.

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However, law schools use a holistic approach to review applications and the rest of the application components will help get you admitted to a law school.

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As for cost, this is important to consider.

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Law school tuition ranges from $20,000 to $80,000 per year, not including living expenses.

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Law schools often award merit scholarships, usually in the form of a tuition discount.

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You should anticipate some out-of-pocket expenses, no matter how large of a tuition scholarship you receive.

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In A 2020 study done by the American Bar Association, the median debt among those surveyed was $160,000.

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Another survey administered by the ABA in April and May of 2021 focused on ABA members aged 36 or younger and who graduated law school or were licensed within the last 10 years.

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About 90% of the survey's respondents said they took out student loans to finance their undergraduate or legal education, with an average law school debt of around $108,000 and a total amount of debt of $130,000.

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What about job prospects and salary?

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The legal profession is generally stable, though it does experience fluctuations with economic cycles.

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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of lawyers is projected to grow about 8% through the early 2030s, which is right in line with the national average for all careers.

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Like most fields, law can experience shifts during economic downturns, especially at the largest firms.

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But the legal profession is broad and adaptable, with rewarding opportunities in areas like government, public service, compliance, and emerging fields that continue to grow, offering many paths for those passionate about making a difference.

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Salary varies dramatically based on practice area, location, and setting.

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The median annual wage for lawyers was 151K in May of 2024.

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Entry-level salaries are the highest in big law.

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A recent survey showed a median salary of $215,000 at the largest law firms.

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On the other hand, in 2023, the median salary for entry-level public defenders was around $60,000.

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You can see then that there is a wide range of pay.

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This is something that anyone interested in becoming an attorney should be aware of going in.

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To wrap up, mastering the playbook and the rulebook is key to succeeding both in law school and beyond.

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The legal profession offers tremendous variety in terms of practice areas and work settings.

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Those from all different types of academic backgrounds will attend law school.

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It can be intellectually challenging, financially rewarding, and provides opportunities to make meaningful impacts on individuals and society.

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Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with your teammates and colleagues.

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Catch you next time on the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast.