Textbooks, Tuition and More: Breaking down Lawyer Education Costs

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Whether you're daydreaming about becoming a Supreme Court Justice or studying for the LSAT, chances are lawyer education costs have already crossed your mind. As the saying goes, "you have to spend money to make money," and the road to becoming a lawyer is paved with expenses.

So, how much will you have to shell out for your Juris Doctor? This article will discuss the costs of legal education and other considerations you'll want to make before you commit to becoming a lawyer.

How much does law school cost?

Law school tuition varies wildly depending on where and which school you attend. For a three-year law program, you can expect to pay, on average, anywhere between $84,558 and $147,936 annually—and keep in mind that those numbers don't include your living costs!

Why the gap in the figures quoted above? Remember that attending law school in-state at a public university will cost much less (that's where the $84,558 comes from). If you attend a private university, it will run you, on average, $147,936.

Lawyer education cost: what to consider

Lawyer education costs can look very different depending on several factors. You'll want to consider a few things before starting your law school journey.

Before law school

Before getting into law school, you'll need to get an undergraduate degree. Keep in mind that while an undergraduate degree will likely not cost as much as a law degree, the cost can still be substantial. For more information on undergraduate tuition costs, check out this National Center for Education Statistics post.

Of course, keep in mind that tuition is only one of many costs you'll face when attending school for your undergraduate and law degrees, which leads to our next point...

Cost of attendance

In addition to tuition, you'll need to cover your cost of living. Daily expenses can add up, especially if you're attending school in a high-cost-of-living area. If costs concern you, think critically about your law school's location when factoring in lawyer education costs. For example, when applying to a law school, ask yourself:

- Will I be living in a high or low-cost-of-living area?
- What is the average cost of rent in the area?
- Will I be driving to school or taking public transportation?
- Are there other area-specific purchases I'll need to make? For example, you may need to purchase new clothing if you're moving to a colder climate or a vehicle if public transportation is limited.

Beyond your living costs, you'll also need to purchase textbooks and other school supplies—depending on your circumstances, you may also need to invest in a laptop or tablet for school.

In-state vs out-of-state costs

While it might be tempting to move to a new state for law school, consider the difference in cost between in-state and out-of-state tuition. Students who are permanent residents of the state where they are attending school will typically pay much less than their out-of-state counterparts. While the difference in cost shouldn't deter you from attending the law school of your choice, it might be a deciding factor if you compare an in-state school with a similar out-of-state school.

Compare costs by institution

It's probably become clear by now that your law school tuition costs will vary depending on where you attend. One helpful tool is PublicLegal's list of law school tuition rates, which provides a ranked list of schools by tuition. The ranking also includes rankings for in-state and out-of-state tuition, allowing you to compare options easily.

Grants and scholarships

So far, we've focused a lot on tuition costs—but don't be deterred by the (potentially) high cost of lawyer education! Grants and scholarships are a great way to cut lawyer education costs. For example, LSAC provides a list of law school scholarships and grants, and there are plenty of grants and scholarships available to incoming and current law students. Keep in mind that many grants and scholarships aren't exclusively based on GPA and many options are available specifically for diverse students. Research grants and scholarships as early as possible to ensure you apply before the deadlines.

Financial aid

Depending on your circumstances, you may also apply for financial aid during law school. For more information on financial aid, including application deadlines, visit the Federal Student Aid website.

Conduct interviews

Lawyer education costs are a significant investment, and while the payoff can be well worth it, it's essential to know what you're getting yourself into. Before investing in a legal education, do your research and learn about the realities of being a legal professional. As a starting point, check out our blog posts on what it's really like being a lawyer and working in a law firm. It's also worth reaching out to lawyers–set up coffee dates or telephone calls and get the inside scoop on the practice of law.

In addition, you can book calls with academic advisors at different law schools to learn more about the schools you are interested in applying to before making a big (and costly) commitment.

Make a payment plan

Taking out loans to pay for law school can feel like you're getting "free money", but once school ends they can become a massive financial burden. Understanding your debt, estimating costs, and having a repayment plan is extremely important before committing to loans. Consider the impact that student loans are having on attorneys.

While there's no shame in taking out student loans for law school, be sure you understand the reality of student loans and consider whether they're right for you. For example, some pre-law students choose to work for a few years before attending law school to save

money. Others are comfortable taking on student loans and paying them off down the line. Both options are fine in practice, but in either event, you'll want to think carefully about your finances and have a strategy in place for your lawyer education costs.

Final thoughts on lawyer education costs

Practicing law is an extremely rewarding career path, but can come with serious financial costs. Make sure you understand the costs of law school (which go well beyond tuition), the reality of practicing law, and the financial options available to help you on your journey before submitting your law school applications.

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