

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of For People of Color, Inc.'s E-mail List Serve

From: Anthony Solana, Jr., President & Chairperson and
Fabián Rentería Director of Administration & Finance

Date: March 16, 2010

Re: Advice Regarding Wait Lists, Denials, and "Failure"

We hope that the first quarter of the year is treating you well. We are writing to provide some advice regarding waitlists and denials. Furthermore, we want to re-emphasize the importance of applying early, for those of you who are contemplating submitting your applications during the upcoming admissions cycle.

Overall, we know that many of you are very concerned about your future in light of the economic struggles our country is facing. For what it is worth, we know that each of you will find a way to persevere, as you have done in the past, and reach your ultimate goal. We hope the following advice provides some much needed guidance.

Moreover, we are glad to report that FPOC is doing very well and successfully presented a series of law school admissions and bar exam workshops throughout California in February. Additionally, we will be presenting two more law school admissions workshops and our first Judicial Clerkship workshop in April. This is a transition year for FPOC. We consciously changed the delivery of our services to the first half of the year in an effort to provide essential information and support regarding the application process to prospective applicants as early as possible. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of submitting applications in October or November especially given that law schools are reporting between a 22% to 50% increase in applications received this year.

It is our hope that we will be able to travel to other regions of the country to hold our popular law school admissions workshop next year. As always, you can learn more about these events by visiting our website.

Furthermore, please feel free to contact us if you require any further advice after reviewing the following article.

Contact Information:

For People of Color, Inc.
6080 Center Drive, 6th Floor
Los Angeles, California 90045
T: 310.499.9500
F: 310.499.9505
administrator@forpeopleofcolor.org

Advice Regarding Wait lists, Denials, and "Failure"

by Anthony Solana, Jr.

I have been hearing from an increasing number of you who have either:

- (a) been wait listed;
- (b) been denied admission; and/or
- (c) believe that you have "failed."

The following is advice regarding these topics. This advice is purely from my perspective and experience. In the end you have to make your own choices. As you all know, in life there are simply no guarantees.

I. Wait listed

If you have been wait listed, you are in a pool of applicants the law school will draw from when applicants who have been admitted decline that admission. In other words, people get pulled from the wait list in order to fill empty spots.

Therefore, the "name of the game" is to get on top of that wait list. Some schools literally rank their wait list from the first student they will pull from that list to the bottom. Other schools will not rank, but pull students who have similar numbers to those that decline admission. Regardless of what method a law school uses, it is imperative that you make it well known that you want to be on the top of that list.

Proposed Steps:

1. Write a letter to the Dean of Admissions informing him or her that you are excited about the opportunity of attending the law school and why you want to attend that specific school (e.g. a specific program, concentration, specialty, etc.). If it is true, inform him or her that the law school is your top school and will attend if you are granted admission.

Also, inform him or her of any recent developments (e.g. any awards or scholarships, any good grades you recently received, any great recent work or community experience, etc.). It is important that you clearly specify any recent developments and why that enhances your original application. This letter should not be a summary of your submitted application.

This letter should be less than one page and should be very simple, clear, and to the point. Overall, exercise good judgment when preparing this letter. More importantly, absolutely no mistakes! Remember, there is no margin of error. Make absolutely sure your materials are perfect.

2. Find an alumnus or alumna who graduated from that particular law school and see if they will write you a letter of support. It is vital that you be able to succinctly communicate your desire and

strengths to this potential supporter. You should be ready to overnight mail or email them your application materials as a pdf so they can get a better sense of your application.

3. Obtain an additional letter of recommendation and submit it. It should focus on your intellectual prowess. In other words a, "this person is brilliant and will do very well at your school" type of letter. This letter can come from a professor, advisor, administrator, employer, or member of the legal community.
4. Contact the student of color organizations at that law school and see if they are willing to support you in your quest to gain admission. Although I abhor colloquialisms, I must state that this step is a bit "iffy" because the responsiveness from these groups varies widely. It does not, however, hurt to ask.

Finally, do all of this as soon as possible. Your letter should be faxed and sent to the school via overnight mail, not emailed, the minute you are informed that you have been placed on the wait list. Time is of the essence.

II. Denied Admission

I must admit that you are in a very difficult place if you are denied admission. Chances are you will not be able to turn this decision around.

In my mind, however, it is best to go down fighting. At worst, you are taking one more shot, which might succeed.

Proposed Steps:

1. Double check your LSDAS report and application to ensure there are no mistakes regarding your grades and LSAT score. You should have done this before submitting your application. However, it may be the case that a mistake was made, thus the reason why you were denied admission. This is extremely rare, but it is worth looking into.
2. Appeal the decision via a letter: Most admissions officials will tell you that there is no "formal" appeals process when they deny someone admission.

This is what you need to do: Write a letter informing the Dean of Admissions that you regret the fact that they have denied you admission. But, also inform them that you want them to re-review your file for admission. Then point out the strongest points of your application (academic accomplishments, intelligence, work experience, community service, awards, grades - especially if you started doing really well in the end of your academic career). This is akin to an appellate brief. Again, this letter needs to be "perfect," well thought out, and to the point.

2. Do all the other steps under the wait list category.

Overall lesson:

As I like to state during my workshops, you need to be your own best advocate here. If you want to become an effective attorney, then you need to learn how to zealously represent your

clients. This learning process, however, starts with your ability to represent and advocate for yourself.

Do not be timid and do not take no for an answer. Obviously, this does not give you license to be rude or annoying. Again, I cannot overemphasize the importance of always exercising good judgment. Being aggressive, yet cordial and pleasant are not mutually exclusive characteristics.

Most importantly, know that being placed on a wait list or denied admission is not an indication that you have failed and have nothing to contribute to our society. Put in the starkest terms, you are not "stupid."

Unfortunately, law schools are placing an ever-increasing emphasis on the numbers (GPA and LSAT). Therefore, it is up to you to contextualize these numbers in order to demonstrate that these scores are not an accurate reflection of your academic potential.

III. Concept of "Failure"

In life, there are times when one is faced with "failure." Being a person of color, you have most likely faced multiple instances in your life when you have felt that you have "failed" at achieving a goal. I would argue, however, that there are forces completely out of your control that increase the likelihood of you "failing." These forces, among others, are misguided privilege which manifests itself in an unjust system of power, vices within our own communities, and personal insecurities and self-doubt.

Although books have literally been written on each of these forces, I would just like to remind you that you are not alone. All of us have to face forces (external and internal) that are purposefully designed to hold us back. Therefore, your challenge is not to let these forces get in your way. Although this is easier said than done, I would like to remind you that you have already accomplished this task.

For many of you, the position you currently find yourself in was simply unimaginable even a few years ago. Chances are you are the first in your family (some from rather large families) to ever attain a college degree or even be close to doing so. In fact, some of you are probably the first person in your family to graduate from high school.

Relish the fact that you have been incredibly successful. In my mind, being the "first" at anything is worth much more than grades, standardized test scores, et cetera. Please remember that attaining a goal in life is merely the product of the lessons one acquires during the journey. Attaining a goal is only the fruit of struggle.

IV. Law School Applications

In the context of law school applications, it is difficult to reconcile what I wrote above given that law schools are absolutely fixated with conventional notions of success (i.e. GPA and standardized test scores.) Thus, although I believe you are all incredibly intelligent, determined, and wonderful people, those attributes, in and of themselves might not be enough to gain admission to a law school. A conflict exists that would lead one to believe that this system is just simply unfair and wholly impossible to navigate.

For all the ten years that I have been doing this work, I have faced this constant tension myself. Although I highly advocate explicitly using your experiences to contextualize your scores, it has always been absolutely clear that the scores are the most important factor in law school admissions. In that light, I offer the following advice.

A. Written Materials

You have to make certain that all of your written materials are absolutely perfect. And by perfect, I mean literally mean absolute perfection in spelling, grammar, syntax, and all other rules of writing. This is especially true if you have low scores. If you have low scores, admissions officials are assuming that you are not an intelligent person. Now, I know that is simply not true. You, however, make it much easier for them to rest on this false assumption if your written materials are replete with spelling and grammatical errors.

Therefore, please go back and review your materials. Are any mistakes present? If so, believe it or not, that may have been enough to deny you admission. I know this sounds absolutely draconian, but there is simply no room for error in this process. This is especially true if you are a person of color with low scores. In the past, I have found very basic mistakes in materials provided to me from people denied admission who “swear” that they “worked hard” to submit stellar materials. Please remember that submitting poorly-written applications will only serve to completely disempower your potential allies on the admissions committees.

Now, I completely understand that it is difficult to achieve “perfection.” There are likely a couple of “typos” in this e-mail, but thankfully it is not being submitted to an admissions official. Unfortunately, however, this process is very unforgiving and you will need to meet, if not exceed, this exacting standard.

B. Grades

If you are still in school, please make sure to get as many "As" on your transcript as possible. To be blunt, admissions officials want to see As. Thus, do everything within your power to get the highest scores possible and strengthen your academic profile. If you are afraid of taking honors courses or of embarking on a senior thesis, leave that fear “at the door.” Aside from the benefits of a rigorous course selection, you will develop relationships with faculty that will enhance your academic profile and make you a better student.

I know life is hard and personal and family "drama" always comes at the worst possible moment. The best I can offer is to suggest to you that you need to place strong boundaries around that "drama."

Please implement a "Drama Reduction Program." To be completely frank, I have generally found that in life one will interact with types of persons: (a) people who want us to get ahead; and (b) people who want to hold us back because of their own insecurities and self-doubt. The first step to implementing this program is to identify where people fall. Is that other person really your best interests in mind or are they trying to hold you back? I would suggest to you that you try to surround yourself with people who fall in the former category, not the latter.

C. LSAT

Please make sure to take a preparation course. If you cannot afford a course, contact the "Category A" people in your life and ask them for a personal loan. If you do this, however, then you owe them an obligation to put every ounce of effort into mastering the LSAT. In my mind, if I am going to borrow money from somebody for an educational purpose, then I owe them and myself complete dedication.

Furthermore, ask the LSAT preparation companies if they offer scholarships. Some of you do not ask these questions because you are "shy." Just remember that being shy is a very expensive proposition and can cost you a large amount of money. In my mind, I have always been too poor to be "shy."

D. Strategy

Avoid Procrastination: Unfortunately, people of color tend to procrastinate when it comes to law school applications. Although this may seem like an unfair, almost borderline racist comment to make, I believe that it is true. Every year, hundreds of law school applicants of color, with low scores, submit their applications at the very last possible moment. They are literally running to the post office or after the UPS truck at the very last possible minute to turn in those applications. Many of the emails we receive from applicants who are on the wait list or are denied admission state that they submitted their application either late-December or mid-January and feel that they submitted their materials "early."

As of today, you literally have months to prepare a wonderful application. In my mind, the true deadline is October 1, 2010. This holds true even if you take the LSAT in October or December. Now, many of you will fight me on this point and make every possible excuse to avoid this reality. Any serious admissions official, however, will quickly inform you that submitting a late application (i.e. applications submitted after November) are at a clear disadvantage. This is especially true given the 20-50% increase in the number of applications discussed above.

Again, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for you to turn in your applications as early as possible, without sacrificing quality, during the admissions cycle. This is especially true if you have low scores. Put simply, admissions officials have much more discretion at the beginning of the process than at the tail end. Also, since most if not all schools have rolling admissions, they are reviewing applications as soon as they are received. Law school applications significantly increased this year due to the economic meltdown and will continue to increase over the next few years.

Question: If you have a very compelling history, but low scores, would it not be better to compete with less people in the beginning of the process, when admissions officials have more discretion? Or should you compete with thousands of applicants at the tail end of the process, when: (1) there are only a few spots available; (2) admissions officials are almost purely fixated on the numbers in order to increase their ranking; (3) there is almost no discretion; and (4) the time available to thoroughly review applications has significantly decreased?

I will leave these questions open for you to answer.

Pool: You absolutely must increase the pool of law schools you are applying to. I insist that you apply to at least twelve to twenty five law schools across the country. If you have low scores, you need to apply to as many schools as possible, especially out of your respective states. Many schools want to become "national" schools and thus place a high value on geographic diversity. Please use that to your advantage. Additionally, do not apply only to the "top" ten to twenty five law schools. Instead, make sure to expand your pool to include schools across the selection range (i.e. "tiers").

Furthermore, apply to schools outside of your state even if you are confident that you will not leave your home state. Doing so might attract handsome financial aid offers that you can, in turn, use to negotiate more generous financial aid packages from the schools in your immediate area. Remember, this may hold true even if the financial aid offer is from a "lower ranked" school.

VI. Conclusion

Finally, I know that many of you did everything within your power to get the best grades and scores possible. Also, that you were absolutely neurotic about making your materials perfect. And, that you applied to every school "under the sun." For those of you in that category, all I can say is congratulations because you made a solid attempt to gain entry. Now, what you have to do is pick yourself up off the floor and reassess your application strategy.

If you have low scores, where did all your letters of recommendation come from? Did they all come from professors who could vouch for your intellectual strengths or did you only get letters from employers? This is an important point. In my humble opinion, if you have low scores, each and every one of your letters must drive home the fact that you are intelligent. Thus, it is preferable that the majority of your letters come from professors. I discuss this more fully in my guide.

I have worked with students where it literally took them two or three cycles to get into school. Please do not give up. If you are really dedicated to becoming an attorney, then being denied once should not hold you back. Although I can truly empathize with your feelings of "failure" and discontent, I would challenge you to re-focus that energy in order to gear up for the next cycle.

In the end, always know that our communities love and respect the position you have placed yourself in. You might not know it, but there are people who greatly admire the fact that you are in school and/or completed your undergraduate degree. Embrace that fact and continue to fight for those who may have sacrificed to provide you the opportunities you enjoy and cherish. There is simply no room on this earth for you to give up on yourself, let alone give up on those who have worked so hard to provide us with these precious opportunities.

As always, I wish each and every one of you the very best. You deserve it.

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All questions regarding this copyright notice may be directed to:

Anthony Solana, Jr., Esq.
President & Chairperson
For People of Color, Inc.
6080 Center Drive, 6th Floor
Los Angeles, California 90045
T: 310.499.9500
F: 310.499.9505
E: administrator@forpeopleofcolor.org