

Dear Applicant, Congratulations: Good Luck Fulfilling a Dream

GRACE SPRAGUE



WRITER'S COMMENT: *This essay aims to spotlight the personal accomplishments of one UC Davis student, while also considering the agony of the graduate school admissions process, particularly for law school. The assignment asked that we capture an essential aspect of one person that sheds light on a phenomenon that appeals to a wider undergraduate audience. In my researching and writing about the law school admissions process, it was important to convey not only the statistics found on the websites for each school, but also the intense emotion that the applicant expressed while his fate rested in the hands of many university admissions committees. The essay was assigned roughly in the middle of this student's application process; after graduating in June 2012, and over six months after submitting applications, the student decided to accept a hefty scholarship to attend UC Davis's King Hall in the fall of 2012. The student's name has been changed for protection of privacy.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In my Advanced Writing (UWP 101) course, we read descriptive accounts of specific individuals that also illuminate the experiences of larger groups. In Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, the story of one group's attempt to cross through the desert into the US represents the motivations, experiences, and tragedies of many undocumented immigrants encountering what Urrea calls "the politics of stupidity" surrounding immigration. Profiles by Susan Orlean and Claire Maldarelli and case studies by Atul Gawande and Oliver Sachs function similarly to engagingly depict larger phenomena through well-described and detailed accounts of individual stories. As a graduating senior with a writing minor, Grace Sprague set out to depict one student's experience trying to get into the best possible law school: the academic and extracurricular work he did to distinguish himself from other applicants throughout his college career and the anxiety of the application process in his senior year. Through the process of researching, drafting and revising, Grace was inspired by these models and used similar techniques to develop an engaging and purposeful profile that simultaneously tells a specific person's story in detail and effectively represents the larger group of students anxiously seeking to attend graduate school.*

—Gary Sue Goodman, University Writing Program

As UC Davis senior Dave Taylor sits courtside at The Pavilion, his bulky headphones drown out the ambient noise. He can't hear the blaring tones of instruments from the Aggie Band-Uh! section. He can't hear the spirited chants from the students in the seats across the court from his station. His headphones muffle the screams and whistles from the swarm of fans behind press row. While he's unaffected by the surrounding noise, nobody but the station's handful of loyal listeners can hear his booming enthusiasm on their radio dials.

With so few people taking any notice, there must be a reason for devoting such energy to UC Davis's KDVS 90.3 FM.

An avid sports fan, Taylor began broadcasting before the end of his junior year. It was the perfect job for him. Besides, if Co-Chairing the Campus Judicial Board wasn't enough already, he calculated, directing the sports department at the campus radio station would make him a shoe-in at all the top law schools in the country.

The most esteemed Harvard law professor and admissions committee member would raise an eyebrow with one glance at Taylor's résumé if he included the title "Director" on it. He would then slap a shiny gold star with certainty on the cover of Taylor's application and place it in the pile he called "Absolute Admits." Taylor would attend Harvard, proudly, graduate at the top of his class, and become the next big attorney at one of Los Angeles's largest sports law firms. He would pass the California bar exam easily on his first try, make partner at his firm, and begin a flourishing career by negotiating the very first trillion-dollar contract for the hottest professional athlete in the world. The firm would throw a lavish party for him and praise him for his intelligence and ingenuity.

Or, upon passing the bar, Taylor would live an equally rewarding life, starting his own educational non-profit organization to help the students of the Los Angeles Unified School District. He would change the lives of children and families by dedicating his time to reforming a major California school system. Either way, his life would be set. He would go on to support a big family and vacation at a new tropical spot each winter.

Isn't everyone chasing a dream?

On Friday, January 6th, about nine weeks after submitting an application to every law school he had ever considered attending, Taylor plodded woefully from his mailbox and up his apartment steps. In his hand, he held an itty-bitty envelope addressed to him from Harvard Law

School. He had wanted the jumbo envelope with the Crimson keychain and the thick brochure that would show him how much he'd love it in Cambridge, Massachusetts. With the thumbs-down, the elite university had rejected everything Taylor had ardently worked for during his undergraduate career. His 3.68 grade point average, which demonstrated a drastic upward trend over his four years at UC Davis, wouldn't cut it. His 95th-percentile Law School Admissions Test score (a 166) wouldn't even be enough either, despite his countless hours of classes and studying. Or his Dean's Honors List awards for six consecutive quarters, his letters of recommendation submitted by his two most impressive professors, his bilingualism he had polished by studying in Argentina as a Spanish Minor. His beefed-up résumé that had not only "Co-Chair" on it, but "Director," too.

What is it, then, that makes an admissions committee member at a top law school raise his eyebrow? According to the rankings, it's a cutthroat numbers game. The committee at Harvard, for example, is stunned by the girl with a 3.97 GPA, who scored a 176 out of 180 when she sat down to take the LSAT. The guy with a 3.78 GPA and 171 LSAT would be less impressive, if it weren't for the advanced degree he'd received before applying (Harvard). Yale's admissions statistics tell a similar story. Its committee is tickled by the 25-year old that left his undergraduate institution with a 4.17 GPA—nobody cares about his test score at that point (Yale). The most competitive of law schools can afford to turn down the bilingual-Honors-List-"Director"-kid with slightly lower statistics.

School Name	Median LSAT	Median GPA
1. Yale	173	3.91
2. Harvard	Not Available	Not Available
3. Stanford	Not Available	Not Available

The most competitive law schools can afford to turn down extremely competitive applicants. Some can also get away with making admissions statistics unavailable to the public, hiding statistics and furthering the impact of the law school admissions "game" (U.S. News, Harvard, Yale, Stanford Law School).

If that's the case, then should Taylor just quit reaching for the stars?

After receiving his rejection letter from Harvard, Taylor has continued trekking each day to the mailbox, an afternoon activity that persists to this day. But now, by early March, his excitement has turned to anxiety. Perhaps he doesn't have the numbers or skills to be noticed by top law programs. Nearly five months after submitting his final applications, this "Director" hasn't cut it for Columbia, Stanford, or Berkeley. He is encouraged, however, by three universities that have offered him nearly full scholarships to attend their law programs: Pepperdine University, William and Mary, and Loyola Marymount. This changes the law school admissions game. Taylor can now think, *so what if they're not in the top-15. So what if they're not my top choice— these schools want to pay me to attend.* On the whole, his vision of law school admissions has changed: for so many years, he believed that with hard work, dedication, and a passion for everything he did, he could be one of the 200+ students in one of Harvard Law's graduating classes. Now, because of their accessibility and financial practicality, he may have to choose between what he calls *eh* schools that sit lower in the rankings.

With his UC Davis graduation date fast approaching, the waiting game isn't over—Taylor has yet to hear from a handful of other schools, including a new top choice, one where he fits with the general statistics of prospective students: The University of Southern California. Though he still has a chance to be admitted, Taylor says it's the schools that leave you hanging that cause the most agony. The waiting process to hear from USC is like trudging barefoot along Interstate 80, he says, cross-country from Davis to Ocean City, Maryland; every once in a while, he'll spy something appealing on the side of the road that lifts his spirits. But the excitement only lasts so long until he's walking again, waiting for the next big sign to tell him he's almost there. His walk has lasted over 3,000 hours, spanning 127 full days, over 18 weeks, four and a half months. *What are they doing with my application?*

With each acceptance letter he receives, Taylor pictures himself living in that city, state, or part of the country. With each rejection letter, however, he slides back down the rollercoaster as his hope diminishes a little. He'll have to sign a lease on an apartment in some American city at some point, before all the available units are taken. For that, he'll have to budget wisely to guarantee that he can even pay for housing. He has to plan his life around where he'll attend law school, without knowing

where law school will be. And even when he does pick a school, whether it's Loyola Marymount or the University of Southern California, he'll wonder whether his future salary will be enough to cover the loans he'll be saddled with after graduating. Will he be able to realize any of his dreams? Will his law degree make him proud, and will it lead him to a professional career with which he can support a family?

What no statistic or personal statement can show, and what no blend of words in a letter of recommendation can express, is the determination that Taylor has displayed in everything he has accomplished during his undergraduate career. Sure, it's nice to have a spicy résumé. But every title that Taylor can add to his résumé comes from hard work, dedication, and a lot of passion. In a crowd at UC Davis's Pavilion, Taylor may go relatively unnoticed. As one of thousands of law school applicants across the nation, some school is bound to reject him. But if the top law schools paid attention to the strong-willed nature of each applicant, students like Taylor wouldn't need to reevaluate the paths to their dreams. They would be "Absolute Admits" everywhere.

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