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Janice L. Austin

Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid the Dickinson School of Law, The Pennsylvania State University, Carlisle, PA

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Keeping Your Hands on the Plow- The Challenges of One African-American Law School Admissions Professional

Abstract

Presentation Description: By highlighting the trends and revealing the mystique of a rarefied process, the presenter outlines the difficulties and achievements encountered during twenty years of enrolling law schools students, especially students of color.

Janice L. Austin

Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid The Dickinson School of Law, The Pennsylvania State University, Carlisle. PA

Over the last twenty years the benefits of a professional graduate degree, such as law, business or medicine, have consistently been identified as a method to achieve the "American Dream". Students, often encouraged and aided by their parents and families, have employed a wide array of strategies and mechanisms to ensure their participation in this high stakes end game. However, like everything else in life there will be the haves and the have mores.

Demographic changes and the fluctuations in our economy continue to intersect and influence the most benign professional graduate enrollment management strategies. A "legal education" with the access to power and potential wealth associated with it, is precisely why law schools are often in the crosshairs in the quest for the American Dream. In fact, law schools' have seemingly borne the brunt of the havoc created by unique internal and external forces impacting higher education. These forces steadily find their way into the lexicon and choices considered by most, if not all potential law school students. Periodical rankings and perceived inappropriate use of race-based affirmative action have secured a place in the minds of most in the legal educational community. The influence of one magazine issue and the role of II race in admissions would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

No doubt the J.D. degree represents a "powerful tool" that may serve and advance our society while providing individual satisfaction and comfort. Therefore, it's not odd that there are more individuals that seek entrance into the nation's law schools than any other professional graduate degree program. For over one hundred years the students who graduated from American law schools represented the best, brightest, and often the most privileged faces in America. It was only during and immediately following the Civil Rights Era that any significant number of minorities, primarily, African-Americans entered law schools. These numbers again rose rapidly prior to and following the Bakke decision. Shortly, thereafter, increasingly numbers of women enrolled in the nation's law schools too. So in light of what has transpired over the last generation how do the numbers look today?

Today, a relatively small number of people of color are enrolling, and graduating from law schools. Regardless of any perceived or real benefits from affirmative action, minority students like their white counterparts display demonstrated academic and personal achievements. Their accomplishments and the likelihood for future success make them attractive to law schools. Whether an applicant selects to complete their admissions file electronically or using a paper process, whose responsibility is it to identify and select from the sea of applications those candidates that will enter law school every fall. We know what the applicants look like but what's the face on the other side of the process look like?

Unbeknownst to all but a small community of insiders there has been a long history of people of color serving as the chief admissions officers at wide range of the nation's law schools. In a very pragmatic way, it has and continues to be these individuals, the "gate keepers" who with the stroke of a pen chart the destiny of the individuals who have and will comprise our judiciary, legislative, corporate, public arenas and even serve as the future law professors. As gate keepers, they acknowledge and predict the life accomplishments of someone who might have a future impact on all the nation's inhabitants. Does anyone ever stop to think about the individual that read the application, noted the word "accept" on the file and signed the letter? How have they been able to lie so far beneath the radar screen?

Providing a thorough overview of the national applicant trends by race, gender, educational attainment the presenter outlines the challenges facing all law schools who attempt to enroll a class that reflects our society. The challenge of enrolling a law school class is tough for the most seasoned admissions professional veteran but becoming a social engineer can often be more exhilarating and agonizing when the person charged with the task is a person of color. Only a handful of the nation's law schools can be considered as having been at one time historically black college. Legal educational environments are and will probably always be predominately white. Do law school admissions professional, particularly, African-American have different challenges or advantages? Do they define and/or approach the task any differently than their white counterparts? Do they have different institutional experiences in the culture they oversee? An African-American woman who has served as the chief admissions officer at three different law schools, in addition to serving as an admissions officer at an additional law school and one MBA programs shares twenty-six years worth of gate keeping.

Presenter

Janice L. Austin is the Assistant Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Penn State University Dickinson School of Law. She received her B.A. degree from Columbia University in 1983. From 1994 to 2002, Dean Austin was the Assistant Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law. She also served as the Director of Admissions at the University of California Hastings College of Law from 1990-1994, the Assistant Director of Admissions at the Columbia University Business School 1988-1990 and as an Admissions Officer at Columbia University School of Law from 1980-1988.

Currently Dean Austin serves on the 2003-2005 term of the Board of Trustees for the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC); additionally she is the chair, of the Minority Affairs Committee. She also served as a Trustee from 1998-2001, and a trustee liaison to the Finance and Legal Affairs Committee. Among her numerous service to LSAC, Dean Austin has served as a board appointee to the LSAC Strategic Planning Work Group, the New Building Committee, a committee member on Services and Programs, the Alternative Decision-Making Models Work Group, the Annual Meeting Planning Work Group, and a member of the Gay and Lesbian work Group.

During her experiences in higher education administration, Dean Austin has served as the advisor to student organizations, such as the Black Law Students Association, OutLaw (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered Law Students Association), and other multicultural organizations. She has made presentations on topics as affirmative action, disabilities issues, financial aid, and diversity and on being out in the workplace.

Her writings appear in Journal of Legal Education, the Kaplan/Newsweek Law School Admissions Adviser, How to Get into the Top Law Schools, Law School Confidential: A Complete Guide to the Law School Experience, and Our Place on Campus.

