

Harvard Law Expands Deferral Program, Pushing Students to Gain Work Experience

By [ELIZABETH OLSON](#)

MAY 3, 2017

Photo

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The Harvard Law School library. A new program at the school will allow college graduates to broaden their experience while knowing they have a secure law school berth, a school official said. Credit Charlie Mahoney for The New York Times

Harvard Law School, expanding a pilot program for Harvard undergraduates, said Wednesday that it would allow juniors accepted from any college to defer admission as long as they finish college and spend at least two years working, studying or pursuing research or fellowships.

The expanded program will be open to students applying starting this fall. The existing pilot program, for Harvard juniors, was started in 2014 to encourage students to gain work experience before entering law school and to encourage those studying science, technology, engineering or math to pursue the legal profession.

In March, Harvard Law School took a separate step to shake up the traditions of law school admissions by agreeing to allow applicants to be accepted on the strength of their scores on the [graduate record examination](#), or GRE, beginning with students entering in fall 2018. Only one other law school, the University of Arizona's James E. Rogers College of Law, had [made a similar move](#).

Law schools around the country, most of which are facing lower enrollment, have debated how to attract a more diverse applicant pool. As legal employment has wobbled, many potential students have shied away from law school and the six-figure debt it typically requires.

Harvard Law's latest step allows college graduates to broaden their experience while knowing they have a secure law school berth, said Jessica L. Soban, the school's associate dean for admissions and strategic initiatives.

"This allows students to go and do something they love, and not to feel they have to build their résumé," Ms. Soban said. "One of the students, for example, has a martial arts background and now is working in Hollywood as a stunt double. She supports herself working as a paralegal, but this program gives her flexibility to pursue something she loves."

So far, Ms. Soban said, other students accepted under the pilot program have been working in voting rights initiatives, think tanks and start-ups. The admissions deferral generally lasts two years but can be extended on a case-by-case basis, she said.

In recent years, Harvard Law has emphasized work experience when it accepts students. The percentage of students enrolling directly from undergraduate programs has dropped to 20 percent, from 40 percent eight years ago.

“By offering admission to the most promising college juniors, we can encourage them to pursue important and fulfilling experiences without concerns about effects on a later application to law school,” Martha Minow, the law school’s dean, said in a statement.