Hi, I’m Nicole Lefton, and I’m an assistant professor, and Director of Academic Success and Bar Exam Preparation at the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University.

In this podcast, I’m going to give you some important tips to consider as you begin – or begin to begin – your bar exam preparation.

This podcast isn’t going to give you information on how to actually prepare for the exam. You’ll get that information in your commercial bar prep course. Nor am I going to give you specific information on how to apply for a particular state bar exam. My rule of thumb here is that it’s always a good idea to check your state board of bar examiner’s website for specific information, such as deadlines.

Instead, I’m going to cover some critical information that you should consider before you begin bar prep that’s meant to help you navigate the process more smoothly.

The goal of this podcast – or, in law school-speak the “learning objective” – is simple: I want to make sure you know how to approach bar prep in the most efficient and effective way possible.

In this podcast, I’m going to cover exam tips on the following:

Deciding which bar exam to take;

Applying for the bar exam;

Preparing before you begin your bar exam preparation;

Maintaining efficiency throughout the bar prep process; and

Managing the costs of taking the bar exam.

First off, when considering which bar exam to take, you have two decisions to make:

First, which state bar will you take; and

Second, when will you take the bar exam?

The answer to the first question will depend on you – that is, where do you plan to practice law? This decision used to be trickier, particularly for students who took the bar exam before securing a post-law-school job. However, now the Uniform Bar Exam (also called the UBE) offers a great deal of flexibility. You can take the bar exam in one UBE jurisdiction and, if you do well enough, you can port that score over to another jurisdiction. Note that you’ll still have to complete all the other Character and Fitness requirements (and possibly a state-specific exam, too) for the second jurisdiction. But you will not have to take that second jurisdiction’s bar exam!

The second question – when to take the exam – seems like a no-brainer. You’ll want to take the exam in the next administration when you are eligible to take it. For most of you, that would be the July administration. Most May graduates take the bar exam in July. It’s certainly fine to plan to do this, but I offer one piece of advice here: Don’t be afraid to change your plan if life gets in the way. A short derailment in your study plan (such as strep throat that causes you to miss a day or two of studying) can be overcome. But if you have a life event that really impacts your ability to prepare – and this impact lasts for more than a few days – you may want to consider postponing until the following exam. Bar prep is grueling enough, and requires full concentration. One good way to measure whether you’re on track is to monitor how much of the assigned bar prep work you’ve completed. If you’ve completed no less than 80 percent of the work assigned to date at any point, you’re in good shape. But if your completion rate falls below 80 percent, your risk of failing the bar exam increases dramatically. If you find yourself unable to devote the kind of attention you need, reach out to your academic support professional to discuss what you should do. There may be a way to get back on track, or you may need to make the hard decision and postpone until the following exam.

Okay, we discussed how to decide which bar exam to take. Next, let’s cover some helpful tips to consider when thinking about how and when to apply for the bar exam.

It’s critical that you check your board of bar examiner’s website to see when you need to register for the bar exam. Most states have a window of time in which you can register. Once the window closes, you will need to wait until the next exam. Some states allow you to register late, provided you pay a “late fee.” Some states have a tight window with no opportunity to register late for an additional fee. For example, New York requires applicants for the July exam to register between April 1st and April 30th. So if you realize on May 1st you didn’t register, you will not be able to take the July exam. The moral of the story here is to make sure that you know when you need to register, and put it on your calendar.

Depending on the state, you may have certain tasks you will need to accomplish before you can register for the bar. Make sure you have a good understanding of what these tasks are, and when you need to complete them.

For example, some states require certain Character and Fitness tasks (such as submitting references) before you can sit for the exam, while others let you complete these tasks after you’ve taken (or even passed) the exam.

Some states require that you pass other test requirements, such as the Multistate Professional Responsibility Exam (also known as the MPRE), before you can sit for the bar, while other states merely say that you must pass the MPRE before you can be admitted – but you can take it after the exam. The key is to educate yourself. You want to know exactly what else you need to complete and pass before you can be admitted, and you want to know what the deadlines are for all these tasks. You should be able to get all this information from your state board of bar examiner’s website. Or call them if you still have questions.

Once you have all this info, make a schedule of when you will need to get these tasks done. For example, figure out which MPRE you’ll take, and start reaching out to previous employers early in the process so you can start getting all your Character and Fitness paperwork together.

If you plan to apply for accommodations, that presents another challenge you’ll need to prepare for. Make sure you know the timing about when you need to apply. And make sure you have a good idea of the supporting documentation you’ll need to submit.

With regard to Character and Fitness, the process can be a bit intrusive. If you think you may face a character and fitness issue, make sure you address the issue before you submit your paperwork. I’ve seen students wind up in hot water when they thought that an incident that happened in, say, high school would never come up in Character and Fitness. If you are in doubt about whether an incident is an issue, talk with your academic success professional or dean of students. You may even need to seek out legal counsel.

Okay, we’ve covered deciding which bar exam to take and applying for the bar exam. Now let’s discuss a few best practices that should help you start out your bar prep on the right foot.

Everyone says that 9 to 10 weeks of bar prep is never enough time. So here are a few things you can do before bar prep starts to help you hit the ground running when you begin your bar prep course.

Consider a primer on subjects that you either didn’t take or struggled with in law school. You don’t need to do too deep a dive here. But, for example, say you never took Secured Transactions or you did poorly in Real Property. You may want to brush up on these subjects by reading the shorter outlines from your bar prep provider before you start bar prep.

If your school offers a bar readiness class, take it! While nobody’s looking forward to bar prep, particularly during their final year of law school, it’s a great way to jumpstart your bar preparation.

Many schools offer MBE diagnostics to their 2Ls and 3Ls. Make sure you take the diagnostic and carefully review the results. This kind of test helps you identify strengths and weaknesses before you start bar prep – and that can help you ensure that you use your time efficiently.

Another important thing you’ll need to take care of before you graduate is the selection of a commercial bar prep provider. Unfortunately, the bar exam is not the kind of test you can pass without guidance from a bar prep company. Choosing a bar prep provider may seem daunting, but the easiest way to make this choice is to kick the tires and ask at least two providers to demo the course for you.

Pick the course that feels right – the online platform feels most comfortable, or some of the features are more aligned with your needs.

You should definitely check with friends, colleagues and family for advice, but in the end, pick the course that feels right for you. You need to believe in your bar prep provider, and you need to believe that they can get you over the finish line.

Needless to say, price is an important factor to consider when comparing these companies. One important tip here – these prices are negotiable, so don’t be afraid to ask for a lower price.

Don’t start off the bar prep process with too many supplemental products. I’ve seen a lot of students buy flashcards, question banks, and add-on tutoring services from the start. I certainly think that many of these products are incredibly valuable, but I prefer that students wait until they have a better idea of what supplemental items and services they need. If you pile on too much additional work and products, you can overwhelm this already overwhelming process.

Now, let's discuss how to maintain efficiency as you study for the bar. Remember, that the goal of bar prep should be to complete not less than 80 percent of the work assigned in your commercial bar prep course each week. To do this, in a perfect world, with no outside distractions or obligations, you should anticipate spending eight to ten hours a day for the first six weeks and then ramping that amount up during the final three to four weeks. While it’s a marathon, not a sprint – and you need to pace yourself to avoid early burnout – you must put in the time to stay on top of the workload.

You probably had good strategies in place for effective study throughout law school. Some of these strategies will definitely help you as you approach bar prep, but you may want to consider other strategies. As bar prep is an incredibly isolating and time-consuming process, it’s best to plan now for how you can best approach this period. Consider the following.

First, create a schedule. Even if you didn’t keep a schedule in law school, it can be key to success during your bar studies. Most bar prep providers will give you some guidance here – they often have a schedule on the portal that gives you an idea of when to complete each task and the amount of time it will likely take to complete. You can go one step farther here and map out this plan on your calendar. For example, rather than just planning to spend 3 hours on Wednesday morning watching your Torts video, designate 8:00 am to 11:00 am to watch the video. By plugging these assignments into your calendar, it becomes easier to see how you can get all the work done. And if you fall behind, it’s easier to reschedule. For example, if you can only spend 9:00 to 10:00 am on Torts, you know you must find another two hours in the day to remain on schedule. So, perhaps think about working one hour later, or getting up one hour earlier the next day.

Next, choose a place to study that’s comfortable and provides few (or hopefully no) distractions. This may be different from where you studied in law school if, say, you’re planning to move before bar prep begins. Also, remember that “summer hours” at, say your law school library may not work for your study schedule.

Next, remember that comfort is key. You want to be comfortable – with coffee nearby – but not too comfortable. Studying while lying on your bed or at the beach is not the best use of your time.

When I mentioned earlier about how a lot of law students move from their 3L housing before bar prep, that reminded me of something important – don’t forget to plan your living arrangements early. Don’t wait until May to start looking for a place to live. A distraction like moving during bar prep will cost you valuable study time and increase your stress level.

Many students have a part-time job during law school, and the amount of hours they work tends to increase throughout school. If you plan to work during bar prep, consider whether it’s possible to minimize these hours, particularly during the last 3 weeks leading up to the bar exam. While many students don’t have the luxury of not working, you still might be able to front-load vacation or work out some sort of arrangement with your employer. If you’re working at a law firm, your employer undoubtedly remembers what you’re going through and should be empathetic.

Next, consider outside obligations like picking up a child from daycare, school, or camp, or taking your dog for a walk. You may have easily fit these obligations into your schedule during law school. But they may not be so easy to handle during bar prep. Consider options that might help you lighten your load. For example, consider getting a dog walker to take your pooch out a couple of times a week. And remember to budget for these added expenses.

Also, as you consider how to deal with family obligations, you should expect that unfortunately, not all your friends and family will really understand the kind of commitment bar prep requires. I’ve had many students tell me that parents and friends just don’t understand when they’ve had to explain why they can’t attend, say, Aunt Millie’s 90th birthday party or the bachelorette party weekend. People who didn’t go to law school may think that you’re being hyperbolic when you say that you need to devote all your time to bar prep, but it’s important that you have these conversations and stick to your guns. While you may feel guilty about missing the 90th birthday party, you will feel even worse if you fall behind in your studies and are ultimately unsuccessful on the bar exam.

One last point before I talk about budgeting: when planning for the exam, one item students often miss is planning for travel to and from the exam. The last thing you want to do is have a lengthy commute on the morning of the bar exam. I’ve heard of a student who had to run across the Brooklyn Bridge to get to the exam when the subway broke down. Consider traveling the day before the exam and finding a place that’s close by to stay for the night before Day 1 and between Days 1 and 2. This will take advance planning, as many hotels and motels near the bar sites tend to fill up quickly. Also, make sure you’ve secured a car, train, bus or plane seat to get you to your destination.

You probably had a bit of sticker shock when you learned how expensive bar prep courses are. But it’s important to understand – and prepare for – all the costs associated with the bar exam.

As I just said, there’s the cost of the bar prep course as well as other supplemental products (like flashcards) or services (like tutoring) that you add on.

There are also costs associated with just registering for the exam. Each state bar has an exam registration fee and these fees can vary from state to state. In addition, if you plan to type your essays and multistate performance tests, you will pay an additional fee for this privilege.

Remember also the bar exam is not the only exam needed for admission in most jurisdictions. You’ll need to pass the MPRE before you’re admitted. There’s an additional cost associated with taking that exam. Also, some jurisdictions have additional, state-specific tests and/or courses that one must pass before admission. For example, New York has the New York Law Component, which requires all applicants to complete an online course and pass a multiple-choice exam before admission to the New York Bar. There is an added fee associated with this requirement.

Even after you’ve passed the bar exam and completed all the requirements for bar admission in your jurisdiction, remember that you’ll also need to pay a licensure fee. In many jurisdictions, this annual or biannual fee is required each period for as long as you practice law.

Remember also that you should budget for additional costs (such as increased child care, dog walking) as we discussed earlier, as well as the cost of bar exam transportation (travel and hotel) that you’ll incur.

Finally, when thinking about how much money you’ll spend on the bar exam, remember to consider your lost income if you must cut back on work while you’re studying for the bar.

In the end, the important thing to remember is by thinking all this through earlier in the process, you’ll have more time to prepare and secure financing if necessary. For example, your school may have a bar study stipend you can apply for–make sure you have ample time to explore that and other kinds of financing options.

I hope you’ve found this podcast helpful. Remember, the important thing is to prepare for all of these hurdles. It doesn’t make the process easier, but hopefully it makes it go a bit smoother. Best of luck on the bar exam!

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