



ADMISSIONS INSIGHTS FROM CHRISTINA CHONG

Former Admissions Officer
at Harvard Law School and
NYU School of Law

ADMISSIONS INSIGHTS FROM CHRISTINA CHONG

Former Admissions Officer at Harvard Law School
and NYU School of Law



Christina Chong worked as an Admissions Reader at Harvard Law School, as the Assistant Director of JD admissions at New York University Law School, as an admissions officer at NYU School of Dentistry, and as an admissions specialist at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice. For our FAO interview series, Christina talks to us about the differences between the three divisions she's worked in for admissions, what her different roles looked like, and what she believes makes a compelling law school application.

How did you begin working in admissions? Was it something you always wanted to do?

I actually first started with admissions when I was in college at Amherst. I applied for a summer intern position. They take students every summer to help give tours, be present at information sessions, to assist admissions folks. It was something that started a long time ago and I really enjoyed the work. I continued to work there after I had the summer internship for a few hours a week for the rest of my time in college.

When I graduated, I thought about admissions, but I ended up teaching and working at a law firm. I then returned to admissions many years later after I went to graduate school at Harvard. While I was at Harvard, I had an internship at Harvard Law's JD admissions program, and I really missed the world of admissions. So I subsequently worked in admissions for seven years after that.

How was your role as the Assistant Director of JD admissions at NYU different from an Admissions Reader role?

Each admissions office has different phrasing on how they structure their office. I think generally, an admissions reader is seasonal. They are not necessarily a permanent employee; they're hired on a temporary basis. They're only working in admissions for a few months a year, and they help read applications and give reviews. So that's essentially their experience.

When you go on to work as an admissions officer, again the titles can really change depending on the office, because in some programs I've been part of some admissions officers do a lot, whereas some admissions officers do not as much. For example, I was an Admissions Specialist at Penn which is similar to an admissions officer and I had a ton of responsibility. But when I was at the NYU College of Dentistry, admissions officers had much less responsibilities attached. It was a much bigger office. The work could be better spread across different people.

Generally, in an assistant director role you're going to have a bunch of responsibilities and you're going to be overseeing certain areas. When I was the Assistant Director at NYU, we were planning the admitted students events every year. They were quite in-depth. We had three major events lasting two days each involving several hundred accepted students, along with dozens of faculty, special alumni, and current students. It was a huge, huge undertaking. Another part of my role was traveling a lot to represent NYU Law, as well as reading 1,500-2,000 applications per cycle and overseeing the transfer process. There was a very robust transfer program - about 50 students would join us there for the second year of law school, so much of the summer was spent reading their applications and enrolling that group of students.

You've worked at a bunch of schools in a variety of capacities, from law school to dental school, what have been some similarities between them? What about differences?

I think a lot of it is unique to the school and the field you're working in. A lot of my experience has been at the graduate level. I think similarities are obviously you're reviewing applications, and you're traveling to represent the school.

I think the major differences are in the type of fields people are going for. For example, dentistry involves a lot of prerequisites. You need years and years of studying science, you need dental-related experiences.

I also did a program at Penn that involves social work. There was a very wide range of student ages. Some of them were straight from undergrad and had a Bachelor's in social work and others were career changers in their 40s or 50s or even older. We also wanted people who were familiar with the field. Law, dentistry, and social work all involve subsequent professional certification. I think there was a lot of attention to if the student would

be a good fit for the field and if they were aware of what the field entailed because each of them had to pass a licensing exam or the board or the bar exam. And you also had to pass any sort of ethics requirements so there was definitely more attention to that than in undergrad.

I think similarities are that you clearly need a strong essay, a resumé, you need to proofread. I do think it's very, very, very competitive to get into dental school. There are way more people applying than there are spots. Law school is a little different - most people can get into law school, but there's a lot of attention to the law school and the top 14 law schools to get the best jobs that have the most prestige. Whereas in social work, it doesn't matter as much where you go to school - most people want to practice in their local area.

What for you makes an engaging law school personal statement?

I think the beauty of law school personal statements is that you can write about honestly anything. Generally, they are 2-3 pages long and I am looking to get a window on who the person is. Often, a lot of these schools don't interview before the JD program - some of them do, some of them don't. It's usually my one chance to get to know the student, see what makes them tick. A lot of the other stuff you read is very formal.

You have the recommendations and resumé, but hearing the applicant's own voice is really key for me. I've seen so many different topics covered during my time doing

admissions. I've seen everything, I really have. I've seen important stories, I've seen traumatic experiences, I've seen why I want to be a lawyer essays. I could honestly say that no two stories are exactly the same. Having been a history major, I really do love hearing the stories. I think it's important for the applicant to have other people take a look and see if it sounds like them, if it's a true window to who they are as a person. I generally tell applicants, "If you only had 10 minutes to talk to me in person and you never met me before, what would you talk about?"

If a college student is interested in going to law school, how should they plan out their courses and activities? Is there a typical law applicant?

It's almost like choosing your own adventure when it comes to law school. I had a person I worked with before and they were joking that law school is one of the few things you can apply to at the graduate level without knowing anything about. And that's sort of true. You don't really have to have any training to have gone to law school, except a Bachelor's degree. The prerequisites are so different from something like dentistry or social work. They generally want to see that you've taken a course load with a lot of reading and writing intensive classes. They don't really care about the major. In terms of activities it's again choose your own adventure and what interests you. I've seen everything from people who are really into food justice to someone into international law.

I think the main thing is that you're telling a story to the committee so it's very important that the story be accurate and also makes sense based on your profile. If you said you want to be a politician one day - some people do go to law school not to really practice law but to do other things because it is a versatile degree - I'll want to see evidence that you've had internships with political representatives or things like that. I think the main thing is to make sure it makes sense. We do want to see some leadership, we do want to see that you're involved in something. There's not the craziness there is with undergrad in terms of having ten activities or winning five awards or anything like that. But I do like to tell my students to show that they're involved in some way on their resumé.



Did you have a particular it factor you looked for when reading applications?

It really differs depending on the school and the industry. In dental school, there's a huge amount of attention to the Dental Admissions Test and the grades. The truth is, you probably don't want a dentist that failed organic chemistry. So there's a lot of attention to that. But the more human element is, does this student really want to be a dentist? Unfortunately, it would come up that people were doing it for financial reasons or they wanted the good life. Don't we all, right? But it's a weird thing - in admissions, you shouldn't write about wanting financial success. You want it to sound like it's for the love of doing it. You're helping people. So I look for general reasons like, are you going to be a good dentist? Do you have good manners or the technical skills?

For social work, it's understanding what the industry is about. Sometimes people don't really know what

it is, and there wasn't much attention to test scores. Definitely grades, and having a real understanding of what you're going to do with your degree is most important there.

With law, again it can be a little versatile in this respect. There's a lot of law school applicants or law schools out there. Of course, LSAT and GPA matter but there's also human stories. I've definitely worked with applicants who've had the low 3.0 GPAs but they had something compelling about their stories. I think law is, of course, concerned about social justice and helping others. And I think all these are - social work and dentistry as well. But with law, writing is a key skill to have as an attorney. I think the storytelling was important in the essay. It was essential for what you're about and what you can bring to the table to come across.

What was your favorite part of working in admissions?

There's a lot of good things about the field. One of them was traveling - sometimes you get to go to cool places. It was nice to have friends in many different cities that I could see, whether it was San Diego or Ann Arbor, Michigan. But also, the personal stories were really important to me. I loved hearing about others' lives and helping them get there. I think one great thing about InGenius now is that I can give good advice. When working in admissions you can't really be honest with an

applicant. You can't say anything like, "You're probably not going to get in" because they didn't have the test scores or I'd read an essay and I'd see that this story really didn't work very well. Although the story had good content, maybe the way it was framed could have been better. I appreciate that now, how I can give true advice like "I don't think this essay topic is going to appeal to people. Can we change the way you're talking about it?"

Do you have any funny or memorable anecdotes from your time in the admissions office?

Definitely there are tons of good anecdotes. I can't comment exactly on who I read applications for but occasionally you do get famous people that are applying. It's fascinating to see a window into their lives.

There are stories you read in the admissions office are so interesting. If they sound like a really cool person, meeting them in person is amazing after reading the

application and after they decide to show up on campus and enroll there. You're interacting with thousands and thousands of applicants and it's not always possible to meet all of them.

Now I enjoy working with a student over a period of time, getting to know what their goals are and how to get them there.