How to Prepare for the Bar Exam

"Buffalo definitely prepares us for the bar exam," said Mike Mann, 2L at the University at Buffalo Law School. "Last year we had a first-time bar passage rate over 80%, a testament to the law school's recognition that their job is not complete until we are all admitted to the bar and successful."

Mr. Mann said that because, similar to other law schools, his school chose not to teach "black letter" law, that the bar exam might prove to be a challenge. Therefore, Buffalo has gone the extra mile to ensure its students successfully pass the bar. He said one example is his school's coordination of bar review classes with leading bar review prep provider, BAR/BRI in New York City, more than 7 hours away from campus, for those who failed the bar. "Whether it's donuts for the morning of the bar or open-door policies from the dean down to adjunct faculty, everyone here is pulling for you and doing all they can to help you."

For Mann, who will graduate in 2006, the bar is still a while away. But the bar is definitely on his mind. "First it was the SATs, next was the LSATs, then it was first-year final exams, and finally it is the bar exam," said Mann. "I am of the belief, 'knock on wood,' that if you put the time in and prepare, you will pass."

The bar typically consists of a two-day examination. On the first day is the **Multistate Bar Examination (MBE)**, a six-hour exam that consists of a standardized, multiple-choice, 200-question test divided into two parts. Students tackle 100 questions per three-hour session (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). The exam covers constitutional law, contracts, criminal law and procedure, evidence, real property, and torts. The second day of testing generally contains essays from a wider range of subject matter and is crafted according to the jurisdiction. A growing number of states administer nationally developed tests, such as the Multistate Essay Examination (MEE) and the Multistate Performance Test (MPT), according to the American Bar Association.

Put simply, law school alone is not enough to pass the bar exam. To pass it on the first try, most people highly recommend taking bar review courses. "Other than providing a basic level of familiarity with legal terms and concepts, law school did not prepare me for the bar," said Seth Peacock, who graduated from Cornell Law School in 2001. "Most of my law school classes focused on the 'interesting' fuzzy areas of the law. For the bar you need to learn the specific nuts and bolts of an area, most of which is settled and uninteresting."

Of the 9,555 candidates examined in the state of New York in July 2004, 6,448 passed the examination. Of the 7,859 applicants taking the examination for the first time, 6,018 passed. You can bet that most of those who passed were enrolled in some kind of bar exam review course prior to the exam.
Mr. Peacock, who took the BAR/BRI course, said a student could pass the bar without a review course but that it would "be very painful." For students facing the bar exam, he offers a few recommendations. "Take a review course and follow its recommendations. Minimize your distractions and simplify your life as you prepare for and take the exam."

Most students who take the bar enroll in bar review courses offered by such companies as BAR/BRI and PMBR, which can offer on-campus prep courses. Both companies boast high pass rates on the bar because of their carefully tailored services. BAR/BRI, the more popular of the services, offers comprehensive review while PMBR focuses on the MBE and teaches strategies and techniques. Most law school graduates take BAR/BRI, but PMBR is often used as a supplement.

Roger Martin is a December 1997 magna cum laude graduate of the University of San Diego School of Law. Mr. Martin also took the BAR/BRI course and said it was instrumental in his preparation for the examination. Like Mr. Peacock, he passed it on the first try. "Besides the practice examinations and substantive outlines, attending forced me to take the time to meticulously prepare. I believe that although it is possible to pass the bar without such preparation, it is foolish to attempt doing so if you care about passing."

Each state has its own bar exam that reflects its local laws and statutes. Students must pass the bar in a particular state to practice law in that state. Some students opt to take multiple bar exams in more than one state. Bar exams are offered twice a year, in July and February. Test results from the exam are usually not made available until after three months from the exam date.

"Take a bar prep course and treat your preparations as if your career depended on them," advised Mr. Martin. "The California Bar, despite the miserable pass rate, is not a difficult test; it is just an extremely comprehensive test. It is a test of how well you can retain and repeat information. That kind of ability only comes from organized study."

For the July 2004 administration, the mean scaled MBE score in California was 1,433, compared with the national average of 1,412. Of the 8,062 applicants who took the July 2004 General Bar Exam, 68.5 percent were first-time takers. The passing rate for the 5,521 first-time applicants was 62.8 percent overall.

Adam Greene, 3L at the University of Virginia School of Law, soon will be facing the bar exam. He said he has taken some of the topics covered on the bar in coursework and feels somewhat prepared for the exam. Still, Mr. Greene will take a bar review course to prepare for the bar. "I am a little anxious to take it but confident that if I prepare properly, I will do well." Like any major test, preparation indeed counts. The better prepared a person goes into the examination, the more confident, and the higher chances of success.

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