

## EDMONTON AREA BLACK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' INTENTIONS AND VIEWS REGARDING APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL

UBAKA OGBOGU\*

This research note reports an empirical study of Black undergraduate students from the Edmonton Area who are interested in applying to law school regarding timelines for applying to law school, factors motivating choice of law school to attend, and their impressions of the University of Alberta Faculty of Law. The study aims to contribute missing information to efforts aimed at addressing the severe under-representation of Black students in the Faculty's entry-level Juris Doctor program. The study findings suggest that the University of Alberta Faculty of Law is not the preferred choice of law school to apply to for Black undergraduate students in the Edmonton Area and highlight various factors that motivate their choice of law school to apply to. These findings ought to spur and guide further engagement with this category of students, as well as efforts to reverse the under-representation of Black students in the Juris Doctor program.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Black students “are underrepresented in the majority of entry-level programs at law faculties across [Canada],”<sup>1</sup> including in the Faculty of Law at the University of Alberta (U of A Faculty of Law). As of August 2023, the number of self-declared Black students at the U of A Faculty of Law is less than 1 percent of the total student population (only four out of 547 students in the entry-level law program).<sup>2</sup> The proportion of Black students relative to the total number of students in the Faculty's entry-level program (0.73 percent) pales in comparison to the proportion of Black people in Alberta (4.26 percent), and in Edmonton (5.76 percent).<sup>3</sup> Efforts aimed at addressing this under-representation have not included the perspectives of members of the Black community, and especially of Black undergraduate students, the demographic that is most likely to apply to law school. The majority of the incoming entry-level Juris Doctor (JD) program class are typically residents of Alberta (roughly 80 percent in the last admitted cohort), and many among the Alberta cohort are from the Edmonton Area.<sup>4</sup> Given the latter, it is important to understand the intentions of Black undergraduate students in the Edmonton Area regarding pursuing law school. This study addresses this gap through a survey of Black undergraduate students in the Edmonton Area who are planning to apply to law school, focusing on their intentions regarding law school. The survey explores timelines for applying to law school, factors motivating choice of law

---

\* Professor and Associate Dean Research, Faculty of Law, University of Alberta.

<sup>1</sup> Black Law Students' Association of Canada, “Black Law Student Census Report: How Many Black Law Students Are in Canadian Law Schools?” (14 February 2023), online: [perma.cc/7JMP-BHER].

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Lewis et al, *Black Law Student Census Report 2022-2023* (Black Law Students' Association of Canada, 2023) at 39, online: [perma.cc/5KA2-HVJN].

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* at 13, 39.

<sup>4</sup> University of Alberta Faculty of Law Admissions Office, “2024 1Ls: AB Resident Breakdown” (29 August 2024) via e-mail [communicated to author].



school to attend, where the U of A Faculty of Law ranks among their choices of law schools to apply to, and general impressions of the U of A Faculty of Law.

## II. METHODS

The survey instrument is an anonymous paper-based questionnaire that consisted of five multiple-choice, ranked scale, and modified Likert scale questions (see Appendix B for the survey instrument). The survey was designed to elicit quantitative data. The survey respondents are Black undergraduate students from the Edmonton Area.

The survey was distributed and completed questionnaires were collected at a two-day event held in August 2023 at the U of A Faculty of Law under the auspices of the Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program Pathway for Law (EPPL). The EPPL is a partnership with the ELITE Program for Black Youth, an Edmonton Area skills training and community building program that pairs Black high school and undergraduate students with researchers and industry partners for paid summer internships focusing on the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, and the innovation and technology space.<sup>5</sup> The EPPL is designed to help address the under-representation of Black students in the Faculty of Law at the University of Alberta and to build connections between the Faculty and the Black community in Edmonton and beyond. The EPPL event featured information sessions, a career panel, and a networking session, and was specifically targeted to Black undergraduate and high school students in the Edmonton Area.

Eighty Black students registered for the event and 42 attended over the course of the two-day event. High school students in attendance at the event were specifically asked not to complete the survey. The main reasons for excluding high school students were challenges with obtaining consent from them due to their status as minors and because the study seeks to assess the law school intentions of those who are planning to apply to law school in the near term. The University of Alberta Research Ethics Board granted ethics approval for the study and survey instrument.

We received 28 completed survey questionnaires. The survey responses were manually entered into Microsoft Excel and then imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 29 (SPSS 29) for analysis. Chi-square tests were used to identify patterns in the quantitative data. The data analysis was not pre-registered.

The questionnaire tested five variables, as shown in Appendix B. Four relate to respondents' intentions regarding law school and the remainder relates to whether participation in the EPPL event influenced their decision to apply to the U of A Faculty of Law.

---

<sup>5</sup> University of Alberta, "ELITE Program for Black Youth" (June 2024), online: [perma.cc/X66A-HS5T].

### III. RESULTS

#### A. RESPONSE RATE

The response rate represents a 700 percent increase compared to the number of Black JD students in the U of A Faculty of Law and is 5.1 percent compared against the total JD student population. The rate is also proportional to the Black population in Alberta (4.26 percent) and in Edmonton (5.76 percent).

#### B. LAW SCHOOL APPLICATION TIMELINE

The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they will apply to law school in one to two years or in more than two years. Of the 28 respondents to the survey, 11 (39 percent) intend to apply to law school in one to two years, while 17 (61 percent) intend to apply in more than two years.

#### C. RANKING OF U OF A FACULTY OF LAW AMONG SCHOOL CHOICES

Respondents were asked to rank the U of A Faculty of Law among law schools that they intend to apply to. The ranking choices provided were “[f]irst,” “[t]op 3 but not first,” and “I am not applying to the Faculty of Law, University of Alberta.”<sup>6</sup> The majority of the respondents (17, or 61 percent) ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as among the top three but not the first choice of law school to apply to, while eight respondents (29 percent) ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as their first choice. Two respondents (7 percent) selected that they will not apply to the U of A Faculty of Law at all, while one respondent (3.5 percent) did not select an option. Among the 11 respondents who indicated that they are applying to law school in one to two years, eight respondents regard the U of A Faculty of Law as a top three but not first choice, two selected the Faculty as first choice, and one respondent indicated they will not apply to the U of A Faculty of Law ( $\chi^2(3, N = 28) = 1.858, p = .602$ ). Among the 17 respondents who indicated that they would apply to law school in more than two years, nine chose the U of A Faculty of Law as a top three but not first choice, six as a first choice, and one respondent each did not select an option or indicated they will not apply to the U of A Faculty of Law for law school ( $\chi^2(3, N = 28) = 1.858, p = .602$ ).

#### D. FACTORS MOTIVATING CHOICE OF LAW SCHOOL TO APPLY TO

The survey asked respondents to select the factors motivating their choice of what law school to apply to, and to rank them from highest to lowest. A list of factors was provided along with an option to specify factors other than those listed (see Appendix B for the list of factors). Only one respondent specified a non-listed factor, namely “[a] program which responds to what I want to work in later.”

---

<sup>6</sup> Appendix B.

Among the listed factors, more respondents (eight, or 29 percent) ranked proximity to home as the highest factor motivating their choice of what law school to apply to for admission. Three of the eight respondents who ranked proximity to home as the highest motivating factor also ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as their first choice of law school to apply to, while four of them ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as top three but not first choice. One respondent in this group did not provide a ranking of the U of A Faculty of Law. The second factor that received the most numbers of highest ranking was “[a] curriculum that clearly includes subjects that reflects issues and experiences that matter to Black people”<sup>7</sup> (four respondents) followed by a “Black-conscious recruitment and admissions process (for example, a holistic process that considers the lived experiences of Black applicants)”<sup>8</sup> (three respondents). No respondents ranked “[f]amily member attended the law school/recommendation from family member or friend”<sup>9</sup> as the highest motivating factor, and one respondent each ranked the rest of the factors as the highest motivating factor, including low cost, diverse population of Black students, professors and other staff/Law school seems welcoming to Black people, and scholarships, bursaries and LSAT programs specifically targeted at Black students. A full list of the rankings per factor is included in Tables 1–7 in Appendix A.

#### **E. IMPRESSIONS OF THE U OF A FACULTY OF LAW**

Respondents were asked whether their impressions of the U of A Faculty of Law were positive, negative, or neutral. Of the 28 respondents, 21 (75 percent) reported a positive impression of the U of A Faculty of Law, while seven (25 percent) reported a neutral impression. None reported a negative impression of the law school. Among the 21 respondents that reported a positive impression, 14 ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as top three but not first choice law school to apply to, six ranked the law school as first choice, and one reported that they will not apply to the U of A Faculty of Law ( $X^2(3, N = 28) = 4.157, p = .245$ ). Among those who reported a neutral impression, three ranked the U of A Faculty of Law as top three but not first choice, two ranked the Faculty as first, and one each did not select an option or reported that they will not apply to the Faculty ( $X^2(3, N = 28) = 4.157, p = .245$ ).

#### **F. DID PARTICIPATION IN THE EPPL EVENT INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION TO APPLY TO THE U OF A FACULTY OF LAW?**

Twenty-two respondents reported that participation in the EPPL event would influence their decision to apply to the U of A Faculty of Law. Two respondents reported that participation would not influence their decision to apply. One respondent did not answer the question, and one other respondent selected that the question did not apply to them. Among the 22 respondents who reported that participation in the EPPL event would influence their decision to apply, 13 also selected the U of A Faculty of Law as top three but not first choice to apply to, six selected the U of A Faculty of Law as first choice to apply to, two will not

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

apply to the U of A Faculty of Law at all, and one did not make a selection ( $\chi^2(9, N = 28) = 1.781, p = .994$ ).

#### IV. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The study findings suggest that the U of A Faculty of Law is not the preferred choice of law school to apply to for Black undergraduate students in the Edmonton Area. This finding holds despite overwhelmingly positive impressions of the U of A Faculty of Law, and among respondents who selected proximity to home as the top factor influencing their choice of law school to apply to. Considering that the U of A Faculty of Law is the only law school in the Edmonton Area, and that Black students are severely under-represented in the Faculty's entry-level law program, the findings signal a need for initiatives to increase the appeal of the U of A Faculty of Law to Black undergraduate students seeking to apply to law school. Such initiatives should ideally involve engagement with Black undergraduate students and the Black community in Edmonton and Alberta in order to understand how to increase the appeal of the U of A Faculty of Law to them.

The study findings also highlight a number of factors that drive Black applicants' preferences regarding choice of law school, including proximity to home, a curriculum that clearly includes subjects that reflect issues and experiences that matter to Black people, and Black-conscious recruitment and admissions processes. At a minimum, the U of A Faculty of Law may need to explore, through further engagement with the Black community, the degree to which these factors matter to them and strategies that could be adopted to implement or address them. The need for such engagement is evident from the finding that nearly all the study respondents viewed the EPPL event as influential to their decision regarding whether to apply to the U of A Faculty of Law.

#### V. STUDY FOCUS AND LIMITATIONS

The study captured respondents' intentions at a fixed point in time and did not seek to establish trends. As a result, it should be viewed mainly as a starting point for further research. While the response rate is representative relative to the population of current U of A Faculty of Law JD students and to the population of Black people in Edmonton and Alberta, it is not representative relative to the total number of applications into the JD program typically received by the U of A Faculty of Law. Thus, it may not be representative relative to the number of Black undergraduate students who typically apply to the JD program in the U of A Faculty of Law.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored the views of Black undergraduate students in the Edmonton Area who are seeking to apply to law school regarding their law school intentions and the factors influencing these intentions. The findings underscore the need for law schools seeking to increase diversity of their student population to engage directly with under-represented groups. Such engagement ensures that initiatives aimed at addressing under-representation are informed by the views and needs of affected groups.

**APPENDIX A:  
TABLES**

**TABLE 1:  
PROXIMITY TO HOME**

Ranking	Number of Respondents
1 — Highest	8
2	0
3	2
4	3
5	2
6	0
7 — Lowest	0
Selected this factor but did not rank it	6
Did not select this factor at all	7

**TABLE 2:  
LOW COST**

Ranking	Number of Respondents
1 — Highest	1
2	4
3	2
4	2
5	1
6	0
7 — Lowest	1
Selected this factor but did not rank it	5
Did not select this factor at all	12

**TABLE 3:**  
**FAMILY OR FRIEND CONNECTION OR RECOMMENDATION**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
1 — Highest	0
2	1
3	0
4	1
5	1
6	2
7 — Lowest	3
Selected this factor but did not rank it	2
Did not select this factor at all	18

**TABLE 4:**  
**DIVERSE POPULATION OF BLACK FACULTY,  
 STUDENTS AND STAFF / WELCOMING TO BLACK PEOPLE**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
1 — Highest	1
2	4
3	3
4	0
5	0
6	3
7 — Lowest	0
Selected this factor but did not rank it	5
Did not select this factor at all	12

**TABLE 5:  
BLACK-CONSCIOUS ADMISSIONS PROCESS**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
1 — Highest	3
2	4
3	2
4	3
5	0
6	0
7 — Lowest	2
Selected this factor but did not rank it	4
Did not select this factor at all	10

**TABLE 6:  
FUNDING AND LSAT SUPPORTS**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
1 — Highest	1
2	3
3	3
4	2
5	3
6	0
7 — Lowest	0
Selected this factor but did not rank it	7
Did not select this factor at all	9



**TABLE 7:**  
**BLACK-CONSCIOUS CURRICULUM**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
1 — Highest	4
2	0
3	2
4	1
5	1
6	2
7 — Lowest	0
Selected this factor but did not rank it	5
Did not select this factor at all	13

**APPENDIX B:  
QUESTIONNAIRE**

Law School Intentions Survey

August 16/17, 2023

**1. When do you intend to apply to law school?**

- In 1 to 2 years
- In more than 2 years

**2. Among your choices for law schools to apply to, where would you rank the Faculty of Law, University of Alberta?**

- First
- Top 3 but not first
- I am not applying to the Faculty of Law, University of Alberta

**3. What are the factors motivating your choice of law school? (Choose all that apply and rank them on a scale of 1 for highest and 8 for lowest — mark your ranking beside each option)**

- Proximity to home
- Low cost
- Family member attended the law school / recommendation from family member or friend
- Diverse population of Black students, professors and other staff / Law school seems welcoming to Black people
- Black-conscious recruitment and admissions process (e.g., a holistic process that considers the lived experiences of Black applicants)
- Scholarships, bursaries and LSAT programs specifically targeted at Black students
- A curriculum that clearly includes subjects that reflects issues and experiences that matter to Black people
- Other (please specify)

**4. What is your general impression of the Faculty of Law, University of Alberta?**

- Positive     Negative     Neutral

**5. Did participation in the Elite Program Pathway for Law influence your decision to apply to the Faculty of Law, University of Alberta?**

- Yes         No         Not applicable to me