

Essential Questions Forum

# The LSAT: Good—But Not *That* Good

The Law School Admission Test has received substantial attention during the current debate over Affirmative Action. On the one extreme, a federal judge has very nearly equated LSAT scores to "merit" in evaluating applicants for admission to law school. On the other extreme, some prominent advocates of Affirmative Action have declared the LSAT virtually worthless as a predictor of academic performance. The truth lies somewhere in between.

Neither the Law School Admission Council nor the major testing organizations, ETS and ACT, with which LSAC has contracted to produce the test for the past 50 years, have ever asserted the LSAT should be the sole or primary factor in the admission-decision process. The LSAT is a measure of a limited set of acquired skills deemed relevant to a person's ability to perform well in the first year of law school. The presumption is that persons who perform better on the LSAT have acquired these skills better than those who perform less well, and will perform better when those skills are measured by law professors. The presumptions are evaluated every year by correlating LSAT scores with first-year law school grades for nearly all schools that use the LSAT in the admission process.

Undergraduate grade averages are also evaluated annually by LSAC after they have been "standardized" pursuant to policies adopted by legal educators over the last 25 years. Grade averages do not correlate as well as LSAT scores in most cases, but in nearly every case a combination of LSAT and undergraduate grade average produces a higher correlation than either the LSAT or UGPA alone.

The results of these correlation or validity studies have consistently produced a statistically significant correlation between these objective criteria and performance in the first year of law school, but they have never come close to accounting for all the factors that contribute to an individual student's performance.

While the LSAT is a test of a person's acquired skills on a particular day under circumstances as comparable as possible to those of everyone else taking the test, its primary use is to predict or forecast academic performance in the first year of law school. Whenever an event in the past, like a student's performance on the LSAT, is used to predict a future event, like first-year law school grades, we are dealing with probabilities. The LSAT is used to address two, separate probability issues: (1) the probability that a student will be academically successful in law school; and (2) the probability that one student will do better than another in the first year of law school.

The first of these issues is by far the most important and the most difficult to assess. Academic attrition has been relatively modest in most law schools for the last 25 years and for some even longer. Without a sufficient number of students who actually fail in law school, it is

impossible to devise a statistically sound "cutoff" on the LSAT (or any other variable) to allow a school to say, "below this point, your chances of success are sufficiently low that neither we nor you should take the risk." Moreover, while the academic experience from one law school to another appears to be similar, any "cutoff" that might be derived from adequate data would differ from school to school, and no single "national cutoff" score would be appropriate. The LSAC does not attach a probability of ultimate success to LSAT scores for any school, but leaves that judgment to the discretion of the faculty and administrators who use the scores and provides useful data in its annual Correlation Study Report to assist in arriving at that judgment.

The second probability issue is easier to illustrate. For example, assume a law school with 200 students all having identical grade averages, and 100 students with LSAT scores of 160, and 100 students with LSAT scores of 150. Further assume the school has a correlation coefficient for its LSAT/UGPA index of 0.5 (roughly the median for all law schools). How many of the students with a 150 LSAT will be in the top half of the class at the end of the first year? The statisticians say 39. Thus, with test-score variances slightly greater than one standard deviation, the LSAT provides odds of 3 to 2 that a student with a 160 will end up in the top half of such a class. The following chart shows how this class would perform in quartiles.

Expected Number of Students in Each Quartile of the First-Year Class

Correlation between LSAT and FYA	LSAT Score	Quartile				Total
		Bottom	2nd	Top	Total	
.5	150	34	27	23	16	100
	160	18	23	27	34	100

The chart shows that of the 39 students with a 150 LSAT who would end up in the top half of the class, 16 of them would be among the 50 in the top quarter. Likewise, 16 with the 160 LSAT score would end up in the bottom quarter.

(see *The LSAT*, page 3)

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This example offers an opportunity to understand the impact of the correlation coefficient. The following chart shows how these 200 students would be distributed with correlations of 0.4 and 0.6. Keep in mind that a correlation of 1.0 would result in the 100 students with 160 LSATs all performing better than any student with a 150 LSAT. On the flip side, a correlation of 0.0 would produce absolutely random results that would result in 25 students with each score in each quartile.

Correlation between LSAT and FYA	LSAT Score	Quartile				Total
		Bottom	3rd	2nd	Top	
.4	150	32				
	160	18				
.6	150					
	160					

A more realistic hypothetical is a law school with 200 students, 40 each having 140, 145, 150, 155, and 160 LSAT scores. Again, the UGPA is not a variable and the correlation coefficient is .5. Here is how these students would perform.

Correlation between LSAT and FYA	LSAT Score	Quartile				Total
		Bottom	3rd	2nd	Top	
.5	140					
	145					
	150					
	155					
	160					

This school will find four students with LSAT scores of 140 who perform better than at least 22 of the students with LSAT scores of 160.

To test the numbers produced by the statistical model reflected in the charts above, LSAC research scientists examined 288 randomly selected sets of individual students at the same law school who had 145, 150, 155, and 160 LSAT scores. The chart below shows how the statistical model predicted they would do in relation to each other.

Lower LSAT Score	Higher LSAT Score		
	150	155	160
145			
150			
155			

What follows are the actual results of the real cases examined by the research scientists.

Lower LSAT Score	Higher LSAT Score		
	150	155	160
145	40	27	18
150		35	29
155			35

The model projections and actual results do not match perfectly, but the numbers are close enough to make the point that the LSAT is a good predictor, but nowhere near a perfect predictor.

The challenge is to devise better ways to use statistical prediction as a part of the admission process without having it totally dominate that process. As we consider the significance of the probabilities set out above, we must engage in conversations about what qualities individuals bring to the law school classroom that we should value in the admission process. We might believe some of those qualities are related directly to academic potential, but many others are personal qualities that will enhance the learning environment in our law schools, as well as the character of the law school itself. We may never have an adequate statistical base to show they either relate to an individual's academic performance or the quality of life within the institution, but that's why the admission decision must remain an academic judgment and not the product of a computer program.

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