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Law School Admissions: More than Numbers

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Law school admissions: more than numbers

Admission of applicants is not difficult; their denial is. Applicants rarely realize how very competitive the selection process is, nor how very similar their individual files seem to all the others.

At this, and most other law schools, the selection of an entering class from the pool of what are, typically, very well-qualified applicants begins with a statistical prediction of the grade point average each applicant would receive during his or her first year in law school. No attempt is made statistically to predict beyond performance in the first year of law school for several reasons. The most obvious is that the first year grades will have a large impact on the final cumulative average, which, in turn, affects success in job placement. The larger reason is that while we know what predicts first year performance, we do not know what predicts performance beyond that. We have no empirical data on the factors that predict success as a lawyer; nor, in fact, do we have a definition of success. Thus, predicting success in a law school applicant's file, is, at this point, impossible.

Needless to say, this uncertainty produces some unease in admissions offices across the country, especially in light of cases like *Griggs* and *DeFunis*. The Law School Admissions Council, which is composed of representatives from most of the law schools in the nation, has undertaken a ten-year study entitled "The Competent Lawyer." By surveying practitioners, judges, legal educators, and various laypersons, the Council hopes to be able to define success and apply the components of the definition in a manner that will allow admissions committees to predict it in the individual applicant. In the meantime, admissions offices are left with what they know predicts performance in law school and what they think adds to that prediction.

First-year predictors

We do know, from studies conducted by the Admissions Council, and from our own analyses, that the LSAT score (Law School Admission Test) and the UGPA (undergraduate cumulative grade point average) taken together are the only verifiable predictors of performance in the first year of law school. Quantifying other factors and using them to predict performance has either proven impossible or the factors used have been shown to have no effect on academic performance.

We also know that the LSAT and UGPA, while they are the only predictors we have, are not perfect. In simplest terms, there is something else which affects performance in law school. Therefore, we look to factors which seem to be reasonably related to the likelihood of success in the law school program when we consider each applicant's file.

We view these other factors in the context of LSAT and

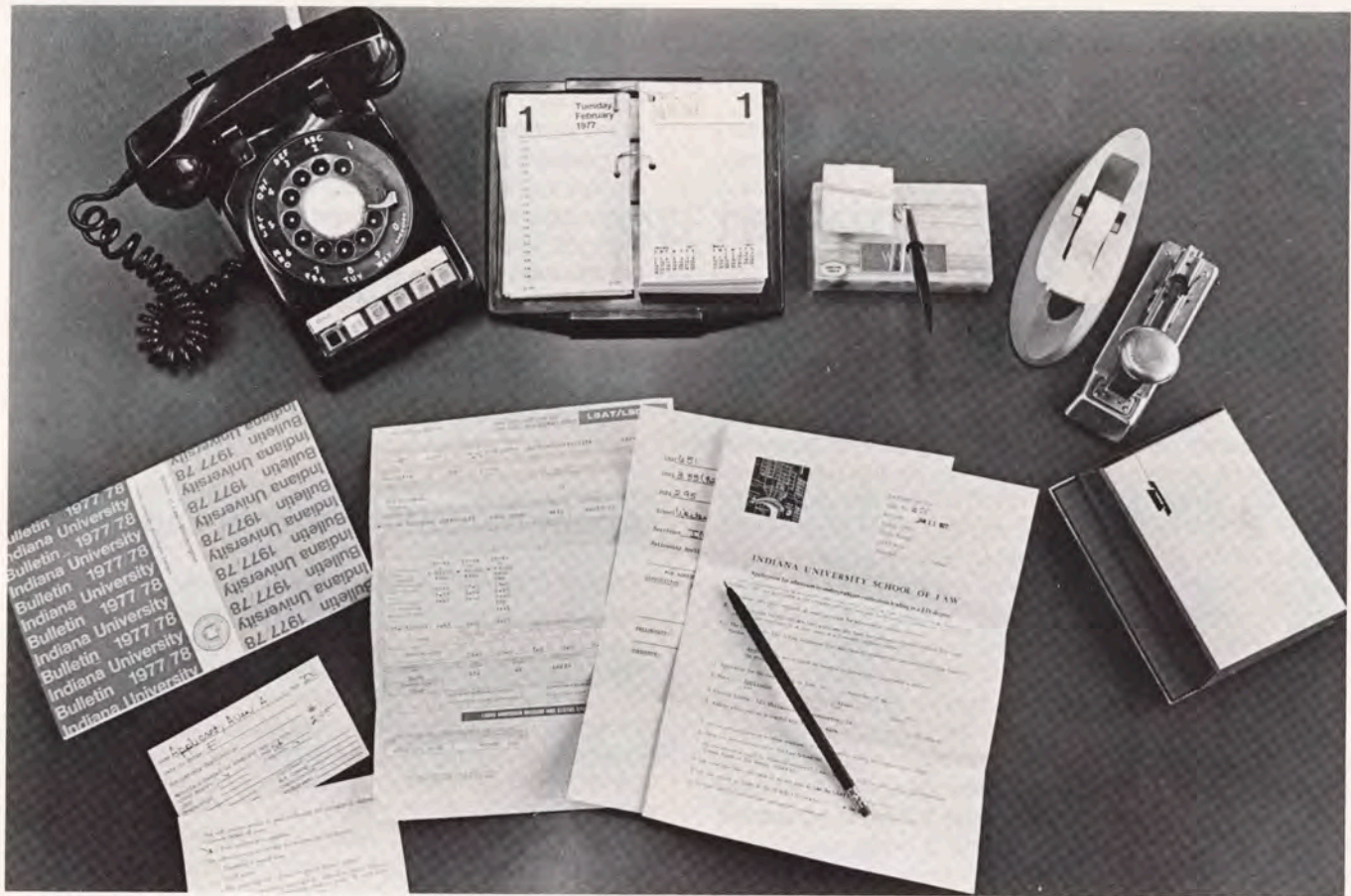
UGPA and begin the process by multiplying LSAT and UGPA by a formula derived from multiple regression analysis. Each law school has its own formula, and the one we use is based on the performance of 477 students of the entering classes of 1973, 1974, and 1975. When applied to an individual applicant's LSAT and UGPA, the formula yields a Predicted First Year Grade Point Average (PGPA), or as the applicants call it, "the index." The PGPA allows the Admissions Committee to rank all applicants. Once they have been ranked, we set two cutoffs, an "admit" line above which all applicants will probably be admitted and a "deny" line below which they will probably be denied. The next step is for me, as the admissions officer, to read the applications that fall within those "automatic" categories to see if there is some reason the numerical predictors should not be followed. About half the class comes from the "automatic admit" category. The other half comes from those whose PGPA's have placed them between the two automatic categories and from those whom I selected from the automatic categories for the Committee's consideration.

Comparative academic performance

In making these decisions we give careful consideration to a number of factors. One of these is the quality of the undergraduate institution attended by the applicant. From a variety of resources, and in some cases, personal knowledge, we can make an assessment. We know the median LSAT score of applicants from most undergraduate schools. We can also learn the median SAT's of most institutions' students, how many of their graduates go on to graduate and professional schools, how many win national honors, whether there is a Phi Beta Kappa chapter on campus, etc. While most of the schools which send applicants to us are of fairly equal quality, there are disparities which are worth knowing about.

A second factor to which we must give consideration is the quality of a student's performance as an undergraduate. Chiefly this means careful evaluation of his/her undergraduate grade point average. UGPA's can be misleading, especially in a period of grade inflation. A 3.00 (B average) today often places a student at the middle or slightly below the middle of the class at many institutions. At others, however, that student may be at the top of the class. In most instances we can determine the applicant's percentile rank among those taking the LSAT from a particular school.

In considering the quality of a student's performance, we also look at the level and type of course he/she has taken. A student who has earned a high UGPA on the basis of largely introductory courses may not fare as well as one who has a lower UGPA, but who has taken more upper-level courses. Similarly, students who have taken more than 20 percent of



Standardized forms provide uniform information on law school applicants.

their courses on a pass/fail basis will find that this and most other law schools place more emphasis on LSAT than on UGPA. Consideration is given to special programs, such as honors work. We also require that the applicant have 90 hours of "theory" work; that is, the courses must not be of a vocational or practice-skills nature.

Letters of recommendation

A factor to which we give somewhat less attention is undergraduate major, because studies have shown that no particular major is better preparation for law school than any other. Some majors are given more careful scrutiny when we are unfamiliar with them, when they appear not to be very rigorous, or when they appear not to have demanded much of the student in the way of writing and research.

In recent years, the Committee has placed more weight on letters of recommendation than in the past, in part because the numerical credentials of the applicant pool have risen so. Letters, particularly those from faculty members, can be useful additions to an application. We are trying to predict an applicant's abilities as a law student; often faculty members who are familiar with a student's academic capabilities can give us insights that transcripts do not reveal. Sometimes employers can also be helpful. However, since we are most interested in the applicant's academic strengths and weaknesses, it is rare that family or friends of the applicant can give us the same kind of information.

Many applicants have taken time away from academics to

work or to engage in extra-curricular activities. The applicant who has worked 20 hours a week while an undergraduate is no longer atypical. The Committee will consider employment in conjunction with the UGPA. Time spent in extra-curricular activities also represents time away from studies, although not generally as a matter of necessity. Such activities often represent commitments of time and energy that add to the "well-rounded" person, and as such they are desirable, although not if undertaken to the extent that they have a substantial adverse impact on academic performance.

Discrepant predictors

The Committee also considers the applicant with "discrepant predictors." These are applicants with high LSAT's and low UGPA's or the reverse. Sometimes the low predictor can be explained by illness, need to work as an undergraduate, etc., but often that is not the case. Most applicants with discrepant predictors would like the Admissions Committee to disregard the lower one. It is argued, for example, that an applicant with a low UGPA, say 2.80, but a high LSAT, say 725, has an ability that will come to full flower in law school. Conversely, applicants with low LSAT's, say 525, and high UGPA, say 3.60, argue that the test, representing less than 4 hours' work, should be disregarded in favor of 4 years of academic work. Both arguments make a great deal of sense; neither has any backing statistically. Repeated analyses have shown that the applicant with discrepant predictors will do no better than the applicant with mediocre predictors, all other things

being equal. Therefore, the admission of such applicants cannot be done solely on the basis of the high predictor; they must have strong letters of recommendation, work experience, and so on.

We also take into account graduate work, work after undergraduate school, and many of the less common factors present in individual files. And as a state school, we impose a ceiling on non-resident enrollment.

Motivation

Probably no single factor is stressed to admissions committees by applicants and their backers as frequently or as vociferously as the need for the student to be motivated. There is certainly no reluctance on the part of the committees to take motivation into account. We recognize that no matter how bright a student is, he/she will not do well unless motivated. But, we also know motivation will not compensate for lack of ability. The committee's problem is the absence of a reliable way to determine motivation other than by looking at past performance. Testing done by the Admissions Council, using scores on motivational tests, showed no correlation between motivation and scores and law school performance.

One can try to get at motivation through required interviews. Although interviews play a large role in other professional schools' admissions, they do not in law school. Perhaps lawyers feel they lack the expertise to make such judgments in a short period of time; perhaps they recognize that those interested in law school often possess the same persuasive

abilities they themselves have. Certainly, one factor is the unfairness to those who cannot come to the school for an interview. One law school did attempt to determine whether interviewing increased its ability to predict performance, but found no correlation between ranking of applicants by their interviewers and performance in law school. Whatever the reason, the result is that we use the interview to give the applicant an opportunity to see the school, to get an idea of his/her chances here and the process here, and to discuss anything he/she feels warrants explanation.

The result of the Committee's work is a class of 200 with median LSAT's of about 640 and median UGPA's of 3.50. This class is culled from nearly 1,500 applicants. Few of these 200 will withdraw, almost none will flunk out, and approximately 95 percent of them will be employed in law-related jobs within six months of graduation.

About the author: Karen Cutright

Karen Cutright, assistant dean, has been at Indiana University's School of Law in Bloomington since 1973. She is a graduate of Vassar College and she received a JD degree from Washington University in 1969. She was co-author of an article, "Course Selection, Student Characteristics, and Bar Examination Performance: the Indiana University Law School Experience," in the *Journal of Legal Education* in 1975. Ms. Cutright is a member of the bars of Massachusetts and Indiana.

Bankruptcy Court at law school

The Honorable Gene E. Brooks, LLB '58, bankruptcy judge from Evansville, held a session in Bankruptcy Court in Bloomington in October. The Court session included first meetings of creditors, a hearing to determine the dischargeability of a debt, a request by a bankrupt for permission to withdraw a voluntary Petition, and a hearing on a Trustee's objections to claims.

Judge Brooks came to the School of Law the day before and spoke to Professor Douglass Boshkoff's Creditors' Rights class to discuss the operation of the Bankruptcy Court and the proposed revision of the Bankruptcy Act. Class members and many other students attended the Court sessions on Friday.

Judge Brooks was the prosecuting attorney of Posey County from Jan. 1, 1959, to March 1, 1968, when he was appointed bankruptcy judge. He lives in Mt. Vernon, with his wife, Mary Jane, and two children, Gregory, 16, and Penny, 13. His older son, Marc, is a freshman at the law school in Indianapolis.

Judge Brooks is a vice-president of the National Conference of Bankruptcy Judges and is a faculty member of the bankruptcy division of the Judicial Center, which conducts all educational programs for all Bankruptcy Judges.

Judge Brooks stated that he was very pleased with the court session at the law school, and he felt strongly that such sessions are worthwhile. He said, "It is one thing to read about bankruptcy and quite another to see it operate. I think it gives the students a new insight and dimension about the subject that is impossible to get in the classroom. The attorneys who were present, representing creditors and bankrupts, shared the court's view."

He said, "It was a wonderful experience for me to be able to once again see old friends like Miss LeBus and others. Of course, I have always been proud of the law school and I am glad I could make a small contribution to its total educational program."