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- **Law School Admissions, 1985 to 1995
Assessing the Effect of Application Volume**

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Executive Summary

Two trends in application volume to American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools were evidenced between the years 1985 and 1995. The first part of the decade saw a steady rise in applications; the latter part was marked by yearly declines. Institutional rates of acceptance are inversely related to application volume. Thus, for most schools, as the number of applications rises, admission becomes more selective; as interest in obtaining a legal education falls, rates of acceptance rise. Also affected are two generally recognized measures of academic preparedness. As application volume climbs, the undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) and Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score medians of entering classes rise. When the number of candidacies recedes, GPA and LSAT score medians also decline. These findings hold whether the law school is a public or private institution.

Abstract

This paper examines the volume of applications filed for full-time admission to American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools between 1985 and 1995. We find there are two periods of application flow, one of increase (1985 to 1992) and one of decline (1992 to 1995). Using descriptive statistics, we find institutional rates of acceptance as well as the median grade-point average (GPA) and Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score for entering classes appear to parallel shifts in the number of applications received. Little significant difference is found with respect to the experience of public and private law schools.

Introduction

While the practice of law is well established in America, the mid-1980s marked the onset of renewed interest in the profession (Abel, 1989). Indeed, a record number of applications for admission to law school were submitted in 1992. Since that time there has been a steady decline in application volume, and legal educators are unsure when or whether the falloff will halt. It seems reasonable to assume that changes in application volume are not without consequence for the operation of law schools. For example, a modified admission profile could trigger institutional responses affecting student (or staff) recruitment and retention, curricular reform, even physical plant operation and maintenance.

This paper examines variations in law school applications for full-time study at American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools between the years 1985 to 1995. In particular, we seek to assess the implications of volume change for law school admission, focusing specifically on rates of acceptance and the academic credentials of entering full-time students. Our analysis focuses on two distinct periods: a cycle of application increase from 1985 to 1992, and a cycle of decline from 1992 to 1995. To explore one basic dimension of the diversity that exists among America's law schools, the investigation also differentiates between private and public institutions.

Method

Using simple descriptive statistics we first examine the volume of applications filed for full-time admission to ABA-approved law schools between 1985 and 1995.¹ Our focus is on exploring the amount and direction of nationwide change during the decade. Using grouped frequency distributions, we also look at how that change is spread across ABA-approved law schools, first during a cycle of increased volume (1985 to 1992) and then during a cycle of decreased interest (1992 to 1995). Subsequently, we describe changes in acceptance rates, in undergraduate grade-point averages (GPA), and in Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score medians for first-year classes.

Having detailed changes in application numbers and admission profiles, we then use Pearson product moment coefficients to examine the correlation between change in volume and change in acceptance rates, GPA medians, and LSAT score medians for first-year students. In addition to reporting aggregate results, we subdivide our population into public and private law schools for purposes of comparison. The data used in the study were provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Rick Morgan, data specialist, for his assistance, and to acknowledge the significant contributions made to this study by Patricia Tipton Longley, Ph.D.

¹It should be understood that this study encompasses only applicants seeking admission for full-time study at an American Bar Association-approved law school.

Results

Application Volume: 1985 to 1995

The data presented in Table 1 enable us to make several general statements concerning application volume during the decade under study. Overall, there was more than 50% growth in the number of applications filed between 1985 (232,000) and 1995 (362,000). In the early part of the decade there were some 7.2 applications for every seat in the entering class; by the end of the decade that number had increased to 9.8. The expansion occurred among private and public institutions: applications to private schools rose in excess of 80,000, while applications to public schools recorded a gain of nearly 50,000. Thus, we should not overlook the fact that student interest in legal education was higher in 1995 than it was in 1985.

TABLE 1

Annual law school application volume, 1985 to 1995, by school type

| Year | No. of Schools* | All Schools | | Private Schools | | Public Schools | |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| | | No. of Applications | Mean No. of Applications | No. of Applications | Mean No. of Applications | No. of Applications | Mean No. of Applications |
| 1985 | 173 | 231,952 | 1,341 | 149,934 | 1,530 | 82,018 | 1,094 |
| 1986 | 170 | 232,770 | 1,369 | 148,593 | 1,564 | 84,177 | 1,122 |
| 1987 | 172 | 248,033 | 1,442 | 160,042 | 1,650 | 87,991 | 1,173 |
| 1988 | 173 | 292,599 | 1,691 | 190,026 | 1,939 | 102,573 | 1,368 |
| 1989 | 173 | 342,888 | 1,982 | 211,048 | 2,256 | 121,840 | 1,625 |
| 1990 | 179 | 383,269 | 2,215 | 248,437 | 2,535 | 134,832 | 1,798 |
| 1991 | 178 | 419,223 | 2,382 | 269,754 | 2,698 | 149,469 | 1,967 |
| 1992 | 173 | 426,173 | 2,408 | 273,900 | 2,712 | 152,273 | 2,004 |
| 1993 | 176 | 397,686 | 2,260 | 255,864 | 2,559 | 141,822 | 1,867 |
| 1994 | 176 | 392,210 | 2,203 | 252,826 | 2,479 | 139,384 | 1,834 |
| 1995 | 177 | 361,726 | 2,021 | 233,020 | 2,262 | 128,706 | 1,694 |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

* Number of schools reporting application volume data to American Bar Association.

The increase in applications from 1985 to 1995, however, masked two distinct and disparate trends. From 1985 to 1992 the mean number of applications filed with ABA-approved law schools grew each year, while from 1992 to 1995 the mean number of applications declined annually. In the earlier period there was an aggregate application rise of 85%; the latter phase saw a modest decline on the order of 15%. Further, this pattern was evidenced at both private and public schools.

The rate of change was not constant throughout the period. The increase began slowly, accelerated in 1988 and 1989 and then began to taper off in 1990 until growth turned into recession in 1993. But the crucial point is applications to private and public law schools increased in all but one case from 1985 to 1992 and declined every year from 1992 to 1995 without exception. Hence, the former era can be termed an applications *cycle of increase* while the latter span can be termed an applications *cycle of decrease*.²

The national growth and contraction in applications are not distributed evenly across all ABA-approved law schools. Indeed, there is considerable variation in individual patterns of increase and decrease; the data presented in Tables 2 and 3 capture the extent to which application change over a cycle differed across schools.³

From Table 2 it can be seen that all but one school received more applications in 1992 than in 1985. Thus, the rise of interest in legal education was felt throughout the community. While 17% of the programs enjoyed at least modest gains (up to 500 more applicants), some 21% of the population had an increase of at

²In 1986 the aggregate number of applications to private schools declined; however, the number of private schools in our database also declined between 1985 and 1986. As a result, the mean number of applications to private schools increased, thus safely locating 1986 within the cycle of increase.

³There are alternative ways to conceptualize and measure change. We could, for example, average annual change across a cycle. However, since we are interested in the range of change over time, we have chosen to use the first and last years of each cycle to measure aggregate application change. Thus, here, application change = applications t_2 - applications t_1 , where t_2 = last year of cycle and t_1 = first year of cycle.

least 1,500 applications. Consequently, in the span of seven years there was a mean advance of over 1,400 applications per school. Furthermore, there was a difference in the experience of public and private schools. Public law schools did not see as great an increase in application volume as private sector programs; the mean increase for the former was 929 compared with a mean rise of 1,140 for private schools (Mann Whitney $U = 2651$ $Z = -2.95$ $p < .003$).⁴

TABLE 2
Amount of change in application volume, 1985 to 1992, by school type

| Change in Application Volume | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| ≤ 0 | 1 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (1%) |
| 1 to 499 | 29 (17%) | 10 (10%) | 19 (25%) |
| 500 to 999 | 62 (36%) | 35 (36%) | 27 (36%) |
| 1,000 to 1,499 | 43 (25%) | 27 (28%) | 16 (21%) |
| 1,500 to 1,999 | 23 (13%) | 17 (18%) | 6 (8%) |
| ≥ 2,000 | 13 (8%) | 7 (7%) | 6 (8%) |
| Total | 171 (99%) | 96 (99%) | 75 (99%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 3
Amount of change in application volume, 1992 to 1995, by school type

| Change in Application Volume | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| ≤ -1,500, 3 (2%) | 2 (2%) | 1 (1%) | |
| -1,499 to -1,000 | 12 (7%) | 9 (9%) | 3 (4%) |
| -999 to -500 | 42 (24%) | 30 (30%) | 12 (16%) |
| -499 to 0 | 90 (51%) | 41 (41%) | 49 (64%) |
| 1 to 499 | 27 (15%) | 17 (17%) | 10 (13%) |
| ≥ 500 | 2 (1%) | 1 (1%) | 1 (1%) |
| Total | 176 (100%) | 100 (100%) | 76 (99%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

The period covered by the cycle of decrease is portrayed in Table 3. It may surprise some to note that almost a sixth of the schools (29) actually bucked the ebb tide and reported a larger number of applications in 1995 than in 1992. However, most programs (about 85%) saw their application pools diminish. Indeed, some 57 schools (33%) lost 500 or more applicants. There was a mean decline of 369 applications with private institutions experiencing a greater decrease than public; the means are -310 and -414 for public and private programs respectively (Mann Whitney $U = 3055$ $Z = -2.22$ $p .026$).

Thus, during the period 1985-1995, it is evident that the nation's ABA-approved law schools, *sui generis*, experienced wide swings in admission interest. Private institutions were particularly affected, rising more during the period of expansion and declining more during the period of contraction. Of course, focusing on the absolute difference in application volume is problematic. For schools accustomed to dealing with large volumes, the addition of a few hundred more applications can be integrated into standard operating procedures. For a smaller program, with limited staff, the same upsurge can result in gridlock. Thus, given the range of institutional resources (and review procedures), it may be more appropriate to use a *relative* measure of application variation to standardize the meaning of change. In other words, it may be more

⁴In cases where there is a notable departure from normality in the distribution of data, the Mann Whitney test is used to determine the significance of the difference between public and private schools. Where distributions are normal, the more powerful t test is used.

informative to conceptualize application variation as percentage shifts; that is, application change = (applications t_2 - applications t_1)/applications t_1 , where t_2 = last year of cycle and t_1 = first year of cycle.

The data in Tables 4 and 5 enable us to view the relative changes that occurred between 1985 and 1995. In Table 4, which encompasses the period of expansion, we observe that growth did not take place at the same rate for all schools. While 32 (19%) of the 171 programs expanded their application pool by less than 50%, most schools experienced growth rates of between 50% and 100%. Seventy-four (40%) law schools saw their pools at least double. Thus, if a school processed 2,000 applications in 1985, that same admission office was faced with processing at least 4,000 applications in 1992. Astoundingly, 12 (7%) law schools had to contend with a pool that exploded threefold. Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference between the patterns for public and private programs; the former grew on average 107% while the latter rose by an average of 98% (Mann Whitney $U = 3308$ $Z = -.90$ p ns). Thus, while first-year classes at private schools expanded more in absolute numbers, relative to their original size, they increased no more than those at public schools.

TABLE 4
Relative change in application volume, 1985 to 1992, by school type

| Relative Change in Application Volume | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| < 50.0% | 32 (19%) | 21 (22%) | 11 (15%) |
| 50.0 to 99.9% | 65 (38%) | 33 (34%) | 32 (43%) |
| 100.0 to 149.9% | 44 (26%) | 28 (29%) | 16 (21%) |
| 150.0 to 199.9% | 18 (11%) | 6 (6%) | 12 (16%) |
| ≥ 200.0% | 12 (7%) | 8 (8%) | 4 (5%) |
| Total | 171 (101%) | 96 (99%) | 75 (99%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 5
Relative change in application volume, 1992 to 1995, by school type

| Relative Change in Application Volume | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| > 0% | 29 (17%) | 18 (18%) | 11 (15%) |
| 0 to -9.9% | 31 (18%) | 17 (17%) | 14 (18%) |
| -10 to -19.9% | 39 (22%) | 19 (19%) | 20 (26%) |
| -20 to -29.9% | 54 (31%) | 35 (35%) | 19 (25%) |
| ≤ -30.0% | 23 (13%) | 11 (11%) | 12 (16%) |
| Total | 176 (101%) | 96 (100%) | 76 (101%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Table 5 focuses on the period of application decline, and indicates the number of schools that experienced various levels of application change. Once again, it bears mentioning that not all schools confronted a similar deterioration in volume; indeed, 29 (17%) schools actually grew between 1992 and 1995. Thirty-one (18%) schools either incurred no decline or suffered a dip of less than 10%, while 116 (66%) programs confronted diminished volume ranging upwards from the 10% mark. Thus, for the vast majority of ABA-approved law schools, the years 1992 through 1995 were a substantial reversal of the conditions enjoyed during the 1985 to 1992 cycle of increase.⁵ As was the case during the era of growth, there is no significant difference between public and private schools in their rates of relative application volume change; both averaged about a 14% decline (Mann Whitney $U = 3766$ $Z = -.10$ p ns).

Thus far we have explored changes in application volume submitted to ABA-approved law schools in the years 1985 through 1995. We have noted the existence of two distinct periods: growth from 1985 to 1992 and

⁵This may be particularly the case for private institutions. In 1987, the earliest year in this study for which data are available, private law schools had a mean entering class size of 212. In 1995 the class size was calculated to be 229. For public programs the comparable figures are 184 and 183. Thus, private schools were doubly affected: fewer applications and larger entering class.

decline from 1992 to 1995. Further, we have noted that the increases and decreases in application volume were not distributed equally across all programs. While many programs reflected the national trend, some experienced more than their share of increase or decrease, and a few schools encountered patterns that were at odds with the national tendency. Few differences were found to exist between private and public schools. Private schools did expand more than public schools in the period of increased applications and did contract more in the cycle of decline. However, that volatility existed only in absolute numbers; private institutions experienced no more relative growth or decline than public institutions.

Changes in Rates of Acceptance, GPA, and LSAT Score

In Table 6 we report the average rate of acceptances tendered by ABA-approved law schools for the 1985 to 1995 period. The parallel between volume of applications and rate of acceptance is stark. As volume increases, admission becomes more selective; as volume decreases, admission becomes less competitive. For all schools, the average rate of acceptance in 1985 was 54%; seven years later this figure was nearly halved to 28%. Then, as volume eroded, admission rates tended to creep upwards (from 28% in 1992 to 39% in 1995), but they do not return to the levels recorded in 1985. The same pattern persists for both private and public schools, although there are different starting points.

TABLE 6
Mean rate of acceptance, 1985 to 1995, by school type

| School Type | Year | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 |
| All Schools | 0.54 | 0.53 | 0.49 | 0.42 | 0.36 | 0.31 | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.31 | 0.37 | 0.37 |
| Private Schools | 0.58 | 0.56 | 0.52 | 0.44 | 0.37 | 0.32 | 0.29 | 0.30 | 0.33 | 0.37 | 0.41 |
| Public Schools | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.46 | 0.41 | 0.35 | 0.30 | 0.26 | 0.25 | 0.28 | 0.30 | 0.32 |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

We noted earlier in discussing change in application volume that aggregate data could obscure intrapopulation variation. The same observation can be made with regard to acceptance rate modification. In Tables 7 and 8, we consider changes in rate of acceptance for the two time periods previously identified, again controlling for school type.

Table 7 examines acceptance rate change during the period of application expansion. In contrast to Table 6, however, these findings are grouped in order to examine the variation that occurred within the aggregate population. As can be seen, 21 (13%) schools decreased their acceptance rate by less than 10 percentage points, 34 (20%) accepted from 10 to 20% fewer applicants in 1992 than in 1985, and so on. What is forcefully revealed, however, is that about two-thirds of all schools became at least 20 percentage points more selective; and almost a fifth of the programs lowered their rate of acceptance by an astonishing 40 percentage points or more! Public and private institutions behaved similarly; among public schools the average acceptance rate decrease was about 25% and for private schools the average drop was about 28% ($t = 1.45$ p ns).

TABLE 7
Change in rate of acceptance, 1985 to 1992, by school type

| Acceptance Rate Change | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| < -10.0% | 21 (13%) | 15 (16%) | 6 (8%) |
| -10 to -19.9% | 34 (20%) | 13 (14%) | 21 (28%) |
| -20 to -29.9% | 40 (23%) | 20 (22%) | 20 (27%) |
| -30 to -39.9% | 43 (26%) | 26 (28%) | 17 (23%) |
| ≥ -40.0% | 29 (17%) | 19 (21%) | 10 (14%) |
| Total | 167 (99%) | 93 (101%) | 74 (100%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 8
Change in rate of acceptance, 1992 to 1995, by school type

| Acceptance Rate Change | All Schools | Private Schools | Public Schools |
|------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| < 0.0% | 18 (10%) | 7 (7%) | 11 (15%) |
| 0.0 to 9.99% | 79 (45%) | 42 (42%) | 37 (49%) |
| 10.0 to 19.9% | 68 (39%) | 42 (42%) | 26 (34%) |
| ≥ 20.0% | 10 (6%) | 8 (8%) | 2 (3%) |
| Total | 175 (100%) | 99 (99%) | 76 (101%) |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Table 8 reveals what happens across the period of reduced application volume. Ten percent of the schools tightened their rate of acceptance. Most schools, however, reacted to the diminished volume by offering admission to a larger share of their pool. For the greatest number of schools (79, 45%) this shift is on the order of less than 10 percentage points. Some 68 (39%) programs, though, added 10 to 20 points to their rate and the jump in admission rates reached or exceeded 20 percentage points for 10 schools. There was a significant difference between the public and private reaction to the downturn. Private schools increased their rate of admission by an average in excess of 10% while public schools increased by a mean of less than 8% ($t = -2.53$ $p < .05$).⁶

Having established that change in rates of acceptance appears to coincide with changes in application quantity, it is appropriate to ask if there are additional implications associated with change in volume. It seems reasonable, surely, to expect that the academic credentials of entering classes could be affected by the sheer volume of candidacies. We might expect, for example, that undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores would rise coincidentally with selectivity and, *ceteris paribus*, decline when applications fall off. To explore these linkages, we turn now to the data in Table 9.

For all schools there is a meager and generally positive upward trend that results in a 0.1 gain in the mean GPA across the years being examined. The 3.17 mean for 1985 thus, became a mean of 3.26 in 1995. During the increased volume cycle, the 3.17 mean of 1985 became a mean of 3.25 in 1992. However, in the years of volume decline after 1992, the mean GPA for the entering class remained essentially stagnant, varying between a 3.25 and a 3.26. Apparently those responsible for admission were able to maintain their GPA standards regardless of the drop in applications. Indeed, the mean GPA for public schools actually increased between 1992 and 1995 from 3.28 to 3.31.

⁶A comparison of rates of acceptance in benchmark years is instructive. In 1985, for example, only four schools offered admission to less than 20% of their pool. By 1992 this rate of acceptance occurred among 26 programs, only to drop to 10 in 1995. Similarly, in 1985 over 60% of the schools for which data are available offered admission to at least half of their applicants. By 1992 this rate of admits occurred at only one institution. But, with the downturn in applications, about one-sixth of the programs were at the 50% mark. Notwithstanding the turmoil in law school admissions that occurred between 1985 and 1995, some may be surprised to learn that admission was in fact more competitive in 1995 than in 1985.

Acceptance rates for ABA-approved law schools: 1985, 1992, and 1995, by school type

| Year | Number of Schools | Rate of Acceptance | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| | | 0 to 9.99% | 10 to 19.9% | 20 to 29.9% | 30 to 39.9% | 40 to 49.9% | 50 to 59.9% | 60 to 69.9% | ≥ 70% |
| 1985 | | | | | | | | | |
| All Schools | 171 | 0 | 4 | 11 | 21 | 26 | 36 | 36 | 34 |
| Private Schools | 75 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 10 | 20 | 21 | 12 | 6 |
| Public Schools | 96 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 11 | 6 | 15 | 24 | 28 |
| 1992 | | | | | | | | | |
| All Schools | 177 | 2 | 24 | 82 | 53 | 15 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Private Schools | 75 | 0 | 17 | 41 | 16 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Public Schools | 102 | 2 | 7 | 41 | 37 | 14 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 1995 | | | | | | | | | |
| All Schools | 178 | 1 | 10 | 43 | 45 | 51 | 27 | 2 | 0 |
| Private Schools | 74 | 0 | 7 | 28 | 22 | 13 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Public Schools | 104 | 1 | 3 | 15 | 23 | 38 | 23 | 2 | 0 |

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

