

The Composition of Graduating Classes of Law Students — 2013-2016 — Part One

By Jerry Organ

PART ONE — Analyzing the LSAT Profile/Composition of Entering First-Years from 2010 to 2013 and 2014

In the fall of 2013, I had a series of blog posts about the changing demographics of law students. In the first, I noted that fewer students were coming to law school from elite colleges and universities. In the second, I noted that between 2010 and 2013 there had been a decline in the number of matriculants with high LSATs and an increase in the number of matriculants with low LSATs such that the "composition" of the class that entered law school in the fall of 2013 was demonstrably less robust (in terms of LSAT profile) than the "composition" of the class that entered law school in the fall of 2010. In describing this phenomenon, I noted that when the entering class in fall 2013 graduates in 2016, it might encounter greater problems with bar passage than previous classes.

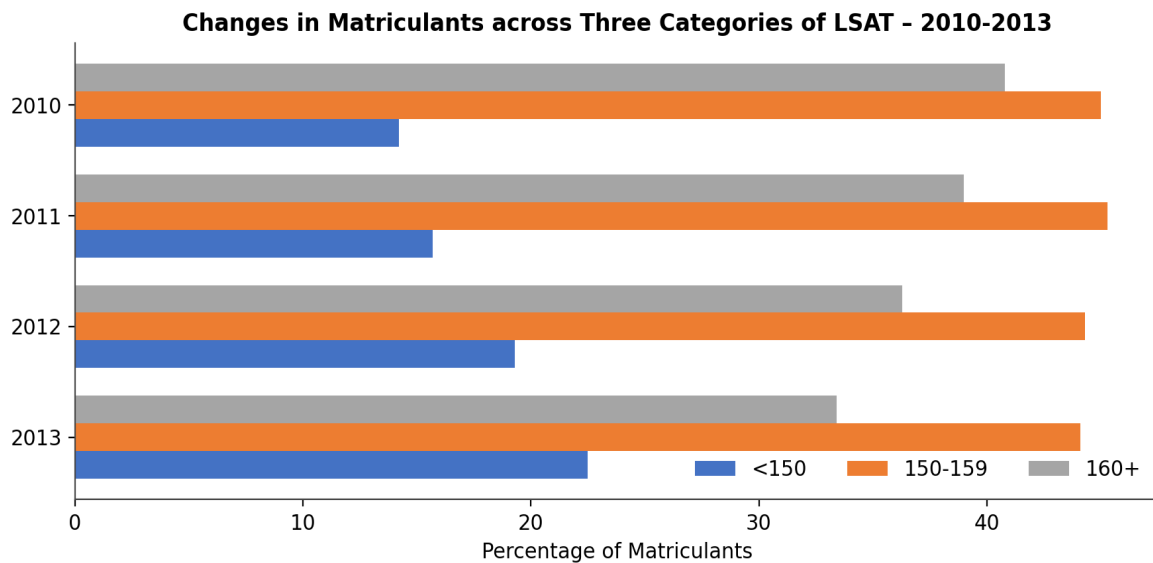
In light of the significant decline in the median MBE scaled score in July, and a significant decline in first-time bar passage rates in many jurisdictions this year, it seems like an appropriate time to look more closely at changing class profiles and the likely impact on bar passage in the next few years.

This is the first of two blog posts regarding the changing composition of entering classes and the changing composition of graduating classes. In Part I, I analyze the distribution of LSAT scores across categories based on the LSAC's National Decision Profiles for the years 2009-2010 through 2012-2013, and then analyze the distribution of law school median LSATs and the 25th percentile LSATs across ranges of LSAT scores. In Part II, I will analyze how attrition trends have changed since 2010 to assess what that might tell us about the composition of graduating classes three years after entering law school as a way of thinking about the likely impact on bar passage over time.

Tracking Changes Based on National Decision Profiles – 2010-2013

The following discussion summarizes data in the LSAC's National Decision Profiles from the 2009-10 admission cycle (fall 2010) through the 2012-13 admission cycle (fall 2013). The National Decision Profile for the 2013-14 admission cycle (fall 2014) has not yet been released.

Let's start with the big picture. If you take the matriculants each year and break them into three LSAT categories – 160+, 150-159, and <150 – the following chart and graph show the changes in percentages of matriculants in each of these categories over the last four years.



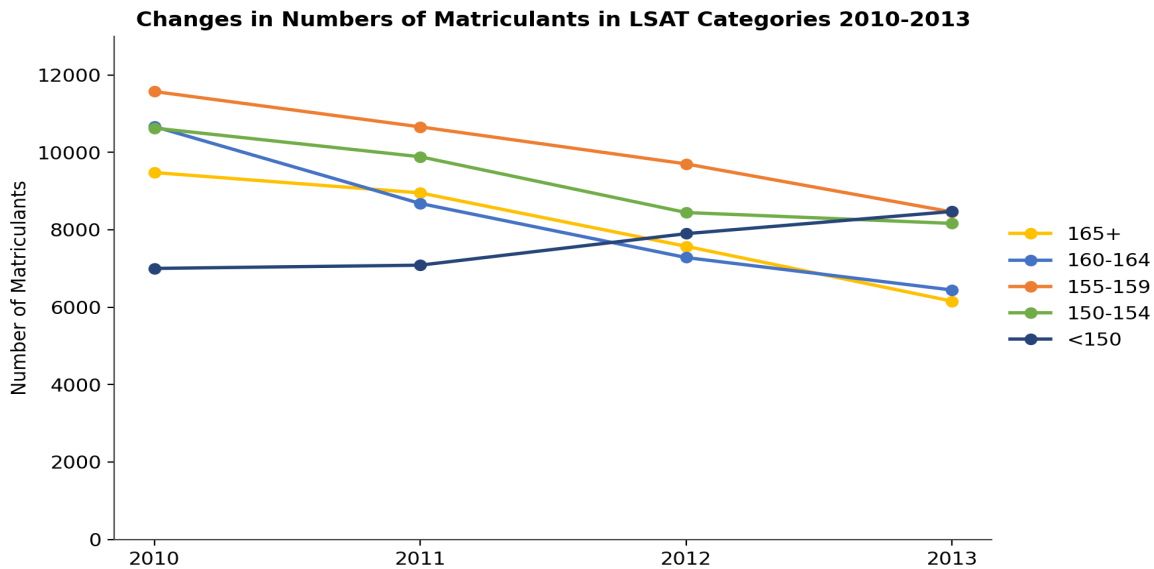
Notably, this chart and graph show almost no change in the "middle" category (150-159) with most of the change at the top (160+, decreasing from 40.8% to 33.4%) and bottom (<150, increasing from 14.2% to 22.5%). This chart and graph also show only a modest change between 2010 and 2011 with more significant changes in 2012 and again in 2013 – when the percentage of students with LSATs of 160+ declines more substantially and the percentage of students with LSATs of <150 grows more substantially.

While I think this tells the story pretty clearly, for those interested in more detail, the following charts provide a more granular analysis.

Changes in LSAT Distributions of Matriculants – 2010-2013

	2010	2011	2012	2013	Chg in Number	% Chg
170+	3635	3330	2788	2072	-1563	-43%
165-169	5842	5622	4783	4082	-1760	-30%
160-164	10666	8678	7281	6442	-4224	-39.6%
155-159	11570	10657	9700	8459	-3111	-26.9%
150-154	10626	9885	8444	8163	-2463	-23.2%
145-149	5131	5196	5334	5541	410	8%
<145	1869	1888	2564	2930	1061	56.8%
Total	49339	45256	40894	37689		

Note that in terms of percentage change in the number of matriculants in each LSAT category, the five highest LSAT categories are all down at least 20%, with 160-164 down nearly 40% and 170+ down over 40%, while the two lowest LSAT categories are up, with <145 being up over 50%.



Note that in the line graph above, the top two categories have been combined into 165+ while the bottom two categories have been combined into <150. Perhaps most significantly, in 2010, the <150 group, with 7,000 students, was over 2,400 students smaller than the next smallest category (165+ with 9,477) and more than 4,500 students smaller than the largest category (155-159 with 11,570). By 2013, however, the <150 category had become the largest category, with 8,471, just surpassing the 155-159 category, with 8,459, and now 2,300 larger than the smallest category, 165+ with only 6,154.

Changes in Percentage of Matriculants in LSAT Ranges – 2010-2013

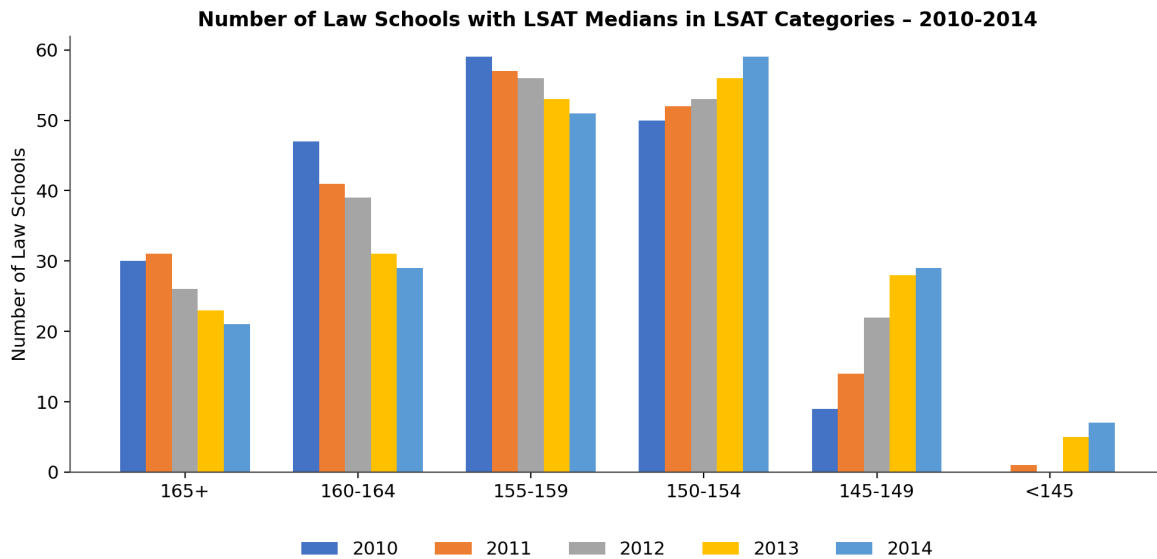
	2010	2011	2012	2013	% Chg in %
>169	0.074	0.074	0.068	0.055	-25.7%
165-169	0.118	0.124	0.117	0.108	-8.5%
160-164	0.216	0.192	0.178	0.171	-20.8%
155-159	0.235	0.235	0.237	0.224	-4.7%
150-154	0.215	0.218	0.206	0.217	0.9%
145-149	0.104	0.115	0.13	0.147	41.3%
<145	0.038	0.042	0.063	0.078	105.3%

In terms of the "composition" of the class, the percentage of matriculants in each LSAT category, as noted above, little has changed in the "middle" – 155-159 and 150-154, but significant changes have occurred at the top and bottom, with declines of 20% or more at 160-164 and 170+ and with increases of 40% at 145-149 and over 100% at <145.

Tracking Changes in Law School Median LSATs by LSAT Category

A different way of looking at this involves LSAT profiles among law schools over this period. Based on the data law schools reported in their Standard 509 Reports, from 2010 to 2014, the chart below lists the numbers of law schools reporting median LSATs within certain LSAT ranges. (This chart excludes law schools in Puerto Rico and provisionally-approved law schools.)

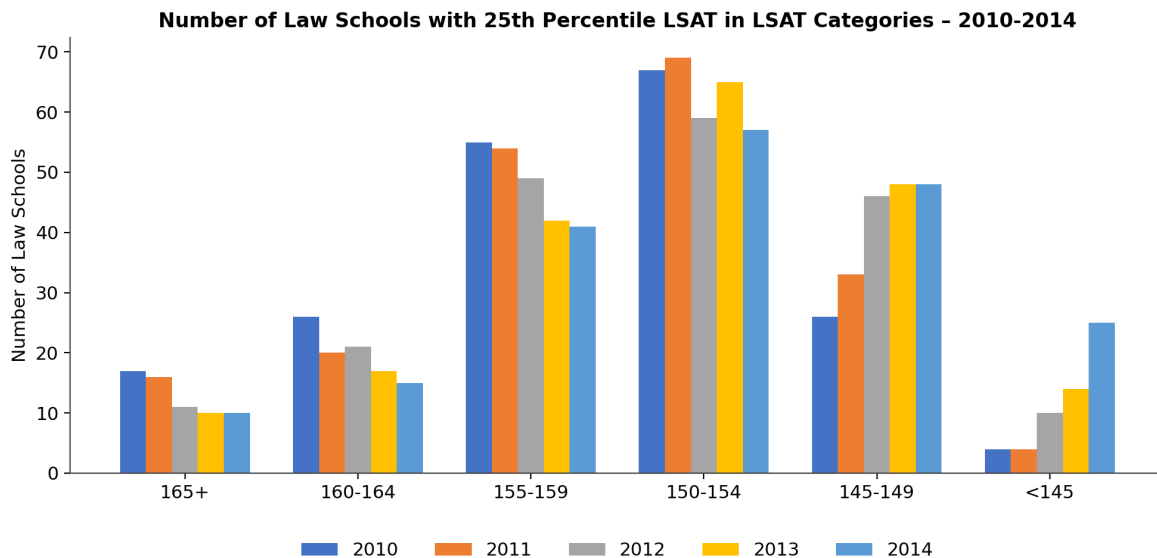
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
165+	30	31	26	23	21
160-164	47	41	39	31	29
155-159	59	57	56	53	51
150-154	50	52	53	56	59
145-149	9	14	22	28	29
<145	0	1	0	5	7



The chart above pretty clearly demonstrates the changes that have taken place since 2010, with declines in the number of law schools with median LSATs in higher LSAT categories and increases in the number of law schools with median LSATs in the lower LSAT categories. The number of law schools with median LSATs of 160 or higher has declined from 77 to 50. By contrast, the number of law schools with median LSATs of <150 has quadrupled, from 9 to 36. Moreover, the "mode" in 2010 was in the 155-159 category, with nearly 60 law schools, but as of 2014, the "mode" had shifted to the 150-154 category with nearly 60 law schools.

Number of Law Schools with 25th Percentile LSAT in LSAT Categories – 2010-2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
165+	17	16	11	10	10
160-164	26	20	21	17	15
155-159	55	54	49	42	41
150-154	67	69	59	65	57
145-149	26	33	46	48	48
<145	4	4	10	14	25



For those who want to focus on the bottom 25th percentile of LSAT profile among law schools, the chart above shows a similar trend when compared with the medians, except that the number of law schools with a 25th percentile LSAT between 150-154 also declined (as opposed to an increase with respect to medians). The number of law schools with 25th percentile LSATs of 160 or higher has declined from 43 to 25. Similarly, the number of law schools with 25th percentile LSATs of 150-159 has declined from 122 to 98. By contrast, the number of law schools with 25th percentile LSATs of 145-149 has nearly doubled from 26 to 48, while the number of law schools with 25th percentile LSATs of <145 has sextupled from 4 to 25.

One other way of looking at this is just to see how the average first-year LSAT profiles have changed over the last four years.

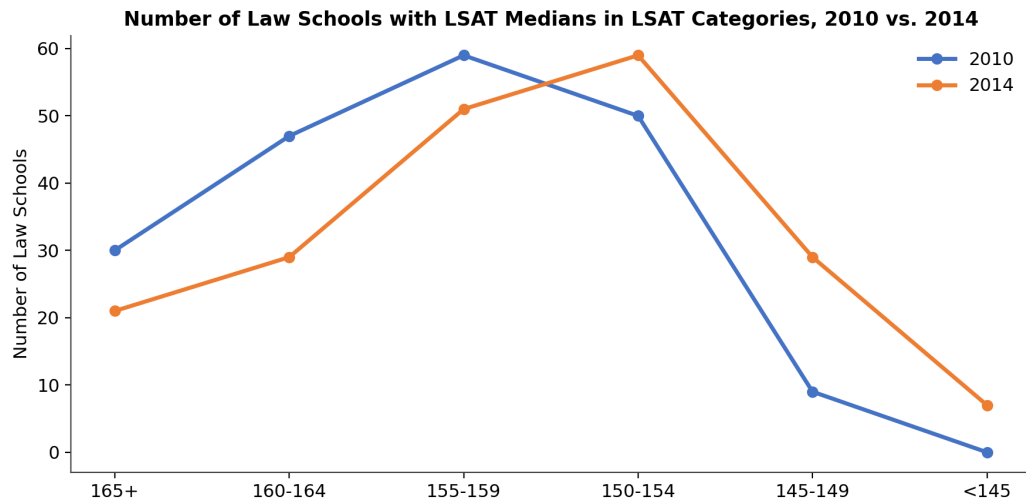
Average LSATs of Matriculants at Fully-Accredited ABA Law Schools

Year	75th Percentile	Median	25th Percentile
2010	160.5	158.1	155.2
2011	160.1	157.8	154.5
2012	159.6	157	153.6
2013	158.7	156	152.6
2014	158.2	155.4	151.8

This shows that between 2010 and 2014, the average 75th percentile LSAT has declined by 2.3 points, the average median LSAT has declined by 2.7 points and that the average 25th percentile LSAT has declined by 3.4 points.

Conclusion

If one focuses on the LSAT score as one measure of "quality" of the entering class of law students each year, then the period from 2010-2014 not only has seen a significant decline in enrollment, it also has seen a significant decline in quality. On an axis with high LSATs to the left and low LSATs to the right, the "composition" of the entering class of law students between 2010 and 2014 has shifted markedly to the right, as shown in the graph below. Moreover, the shape of the curve has changed somewhat, thinning among high LSAT ranges and growing among low LSAT ranges.



This shift in entering class composition suggests that bar passage rates are likely to continue to decline in the coming years. But in terms of bar passage, the entering class profile is less meaningful than the graduating class profile. In part two, I will look at attrition data from 2011 to 2014 to try to quantify the likely "composition" of the graduating classes from 2010 to 2013, which will give us a more refined idea of what to expect in terms of trends in bar passage in 2015 and 2016.

(I am grateful to Bernie Burk and Alice Noble-Allgire for helpful comments on earlier drafts.)