

LSAT Profiles Of Matriculants And Law Schools, 2010-2021

By Jerry Organ

This blog post describes the changes in first-year enrollment and LSAT profile since 2010. This 12-year period was marked by a declining number of applicants and declines in first-year enrollment from fall 2011 through fall 2014, a relatively steady number of applicants and first-year enrollment from fall 2014 through fall 2017, and then a gradually increasing number of applicants from fall 2018 through fall 2021 with a particular jump in applicants in fall 2021. As applicants began to increase in fall 2018, first-year enrollment bumped a little and then held steady in 2019 and 2020 before jumping significantly in fall 2021.

The LSAT composition of the entering class of first-year law students followed a similar pattern, with declining LSAT profiles from fall 2011 through fall 2014, relatively steady LSAT profiles from fall 2014 through fall 2017, and then increasing LSAT profiles from fall 2018 through fall 2021, with a particular jump in fall 2021.

The blog will conclude with some reflections on possible reasons for the jump in enrollment and LSAT profile in fall 2021 and some thoughts on the decline in applicants for this fall (and what that might mean for enrollment).

1. Applicants and Matriculants

Chart 1 shows the trend lines for the applicant pool and first-year matriculants from 2010 to 2021 based on data maintained by the ABA and LSAC. The 2010 cycle represents the peak in terms of applicants and matriculants over the last 18 years (since 2004). The applicant pool started at 87,900 for fall 2010 and bottomed with 54,400 for fall 2015. Since then, it increased gradually to 63,400 in 2020, before jumping to 71,000 in fall 2021. The number of first-year matriculants fell from a high of 51,100 in 2010 to a low of 37,000 in 2015 and 2016 and then 37,100 in 2017. As applicants increased to over 60,000 in 2018, first-year matriculants increased to slightly more than 38,000, but then stayed there in fall 2019 and fall 2020. With the dramatic increase in applicants during the fall 2021 cycle we saw a significant jump in first-year enrollment, to 41,700, the first time first-year enrollment has been above 40,000 since fall 2012, but still nearly 20% below the peak in 2010.

Chart 1 -- Numbers of Applicants and Matriculants to ABA-Accredited Law Schools from 2010-2021

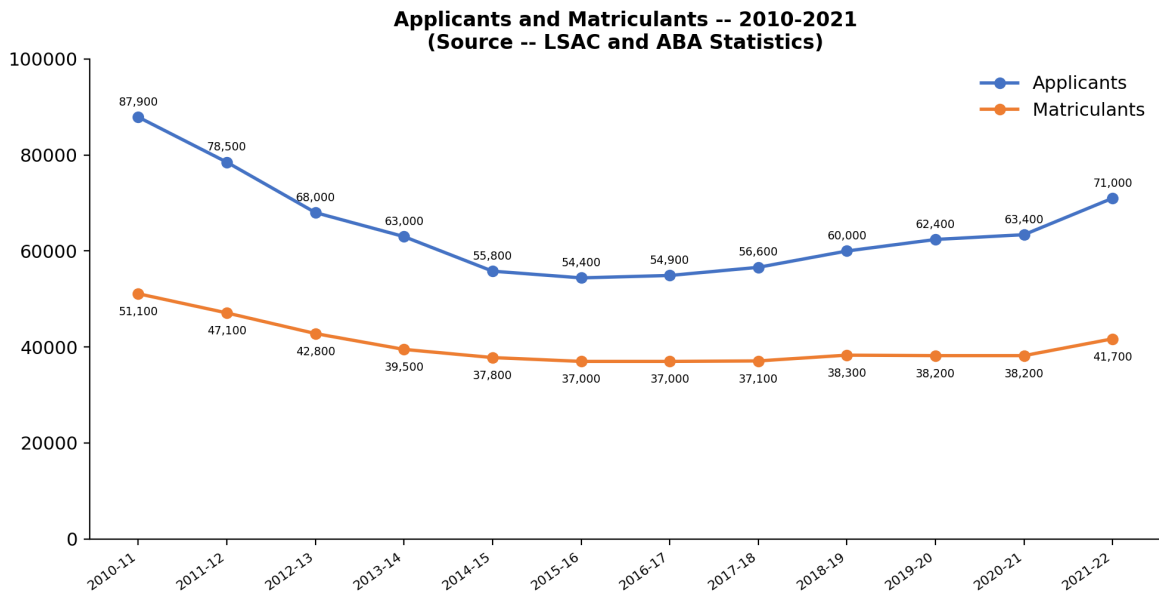


Chart recreated from the data labels in the source chart; every value matches the figures cited in the text.

2. Changes in Matriculants in Three LSAT Categories

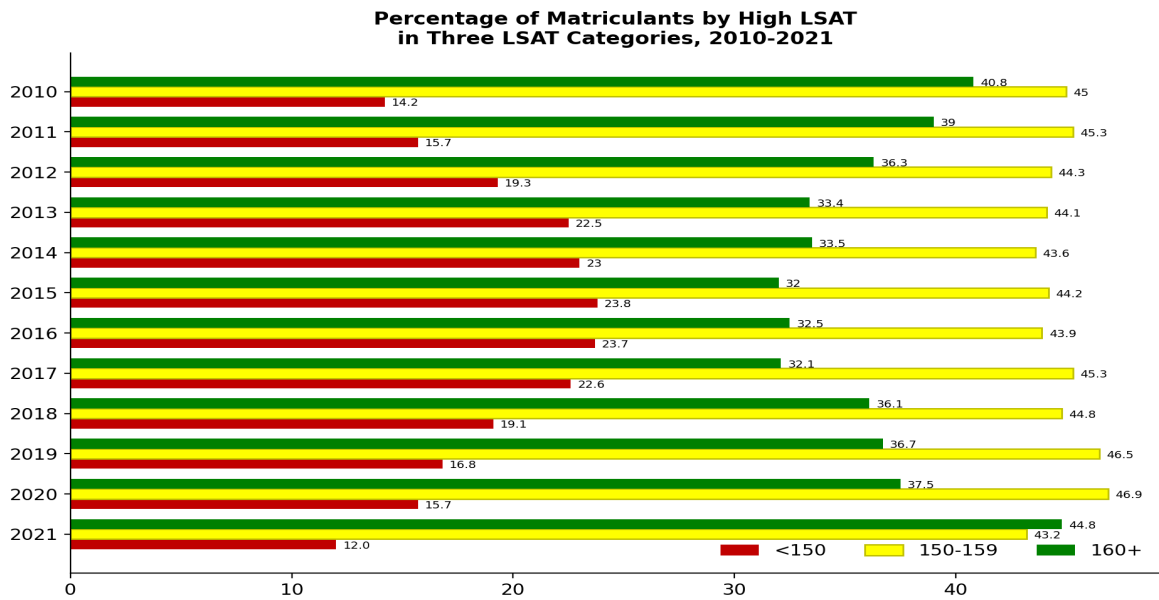
While the applicant pool and the cohort of matriculants shrank in size between fall 2010 and fall 2016, the applicant pool and cohort of matriculants also saw a general weakening in terms of LSAT profile from fall 2010 to fall 2016; but has since seen a strengthening over the last five years.

Chart 2 highlights the composition of the matriculants on a percentage basis segregated into three LSAT categories -- 160+, 150-159 and <150 -- between fall 2010 at the top and fall 2021 at the bottom. The 160+ category drops from 40.8 percent of the class in fall 2010 to 32 percent of the class in fall 2015, while the <150 category increases from 14.2 percent of the class in fall 2010 to 23.8 percent of the class in fall 2015. By fall 2020, however, the percentage at 160+ had increased back to 37.5 percent, while the percentage at <150 had declined back to 15.7 percent, close to where they had been in fall 2011.

Interestingly, the percentage of matriculants with high LSAT scores between 150 and 159 remained relatively stable throughout this period, dropping from 45.3 percent in fall 2011 to 43.6 percent in fall 2014 and then climbing up to 46.9 percent in fall 2020. Throughout this period the percentage with a high LSAT score between 150 and 159 was within a 3.3 percentage point band, between 43.6 and 46.9.

Then you get to fall 2021. Suddenly, the percentage of matriculants with a high LSAT of 160+ jumped dramatically from 37.5 percent to 44.8 percent, the highest percentage ever by four points, making it the largest category, while the percentage of matriculants with a high LSAT of 150-159 dropped to 43.2, the lowest percentage over the entire period, and the percentage of matriculants with an LSAT of less than 150 dropped to 12 percent, the lowest percentage over the entire period.

Chart 2 -- Percentage of Matriculants in Three LSAT Categories from 2010 to 2021



3. Changes in Matriculants in Five LSAT Categories

When the categories of matriculants are disaggregated further into five LSAT categories, these changes become even more manifest.

Chart 3 highlights the growth in the number of matriculants with a high LSAT below 150 (from 7,000 in fall 2010 to 8,620 in fall 2016), while the number of matriculants in all other LSAT categories fell from fall 2010 to fall 2015. Indeed, the below 150 LSAT category went from having the smallest number of matriculants in fall 2010 (more than 2000 fewer than the nearest category) to being the largest category in fall 2013, fall 2014, fall 2015, and fall 2016.

Meanwhile, in the top two categories (those with a high LSAT of 160 or higher), the total number of matriculants fell from roughly 20,100 in fall 2010 to roughly 11,200 in fall 2015, nearly a 45% decrease.

Chart 3 -- Matriculants across Five LSAT Categories between Fall 2010 and Fall 2021

**Change in # of Matriculants by High LSAT in
Five LSAT Categories, 2010-2021**
Source -- LSAC National Decision Profiles

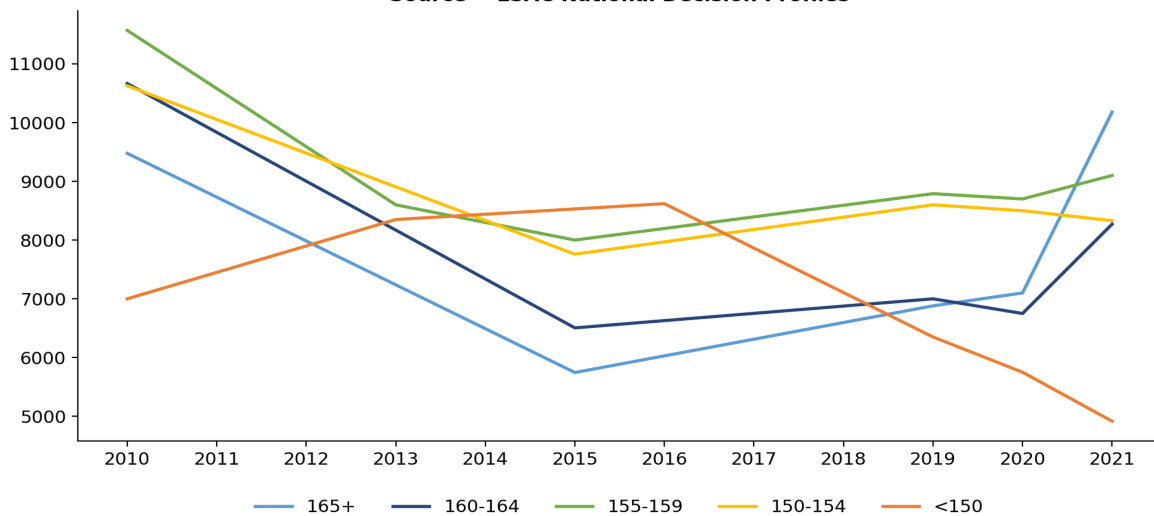


Chart recreated using the 2010 endpoint and the specific figures/percentage changes cited in the text as exact anchors (2013, 2016, 2019, 2020, and 2021); interior years are interpolated to approximate the original chart's shape.

Starting with fall 2016 through fall 2019, all LSAT categories from 150-154 and above saw year over year increases in terms of the number of matriculants (except for a slight decline in the 165+ category in fall 2017), while the number of matriculants with a high LSAT less than 150 fell from 8,620 in fall 2016 to less than 6,400 in fall 2019.

The last two years have been a little choppy. In fall 2020, three categories saw declines in matriculants from 2019. The 150-154 category fell by roughly 200 (-2.3%), while the 160-165 category fell by more than 270 (-3.9%), and the less than 150 category fell by over 400 (-6.7%). Meanwhile, the other two categories saw increases, with the 165+ category increasing by more than 360 (5.4%) and the 155-159 category increasing by nearly 100 (1%).

In fall 2021, the two lowest LSAT categories saw declines, while the three highest LSAT categories saw increases, some significant. The less than 150 category fell by roughly 1,000 (-17.1%) between fall 2020 and fall 2021, while the 150-154 category fell by a little over 240 (-2.8%). But the 155-159 category increased by roughly 400 (4.6%) and the 160-163 category increased by over 1,350 (19.9%).

Perhaps the most startling thing about the fall 2021 data is that for the first time, the 165+ category, which had never been more than the third largest category, became the largest category, increasing from roughly 7,100 in fall 2020 to nearly 10,200 in fall 2021, representing an increase of roughly 44% and representing the largest number in the 165+ category over this entire 12-year period.

One interesting aspect of Chart 3 is the extent to which the two sets of LSAT categories track each other closely throughout most of the period shown in the chart. The 150-154 category and the 155-159 category follow a similar downward trend until 2013 and then from 2013 to 2020 are on virtually an identical track separated by no more than 300 and sometimes 25 or fewer. Then between 2020 and 2021 the gap becomes nearly 1,000, the largest since 2012. Similarly, the 160-164 category and the 165+ category also follow a similar pattern. From 2011 through 2020, the gap between those two categories is generally less than 300, with the 160-164 category having more matriculants in six of the seven years

from 2013 to 2019. But in 2020, the 165+ category is larger by nearly 400 and in 2021 it is larger by slightly more than 2000.

4. The Rise and Fall in the Number of Matriculants with an LSAT of less than 150

From 2010 through 2013, the number of matriculants in the top five LSAT categories declined while the number of matriculants in the less than 150 category grew -- ultimately becoming the largest category for 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 before starting to decline beginning in fall 2017. From fall 2016 through fall 2021, the number of matriculants with an LSAT of less than 150 has declined from 8,620 all the way to 4,916 -- a drop of over 3,700 (more than 40%).

It is not surprising that with the declining applicant pool from 2010 through 2013, law schools reached deeper into the applicant pool and admitted more students with LSATs less than 150. Indeed, most of the growth in those with LSATs less than 150 was among those with LSATs less than 145. In 2010 there were more than 1,800 matriculants with an LSAT of less than 145. By 2013, there were nearly 3,000 matriculants with an LSAT of less than 145 and for the next three years there were slightly more than 3,000 matriculants with an LSAT of less than 145.

One might call this the "great experiment" -- a time when a number of law schools -- without much history of admitting large numbers of matriculants with LSATs of less than 145, suddenly found themselves with 30-50% or more of their matriculants having LSATs of less than 145. (Indeed, in 2012 there were no law schools with a median LSAT of less than 145, but in 2014 and 2015, there were seven law schools with a median LSAT of less than 145 and in 2016 there were eight law schools with a median LSAT of less than 145.) What these law schools discovered is that too many matriculants with LSATs of less than 145 translated into really low bar passage rates three years later when those matriculants were graduating. This started to become clear with the July 2015 bar exam and became even more apparent with the July 2016 and July 2017 bar exam.

At that point, the ABA Section for Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar took its accreditation responsibilities seriously and began investigating and sanctioning law schools that were admitting/matriculating too many students with really low LSAT scores and not providing a sufficiently robust program of legal education to help them successfully pass the bar exam. As this effort began to take hold during the 2017 admissions cycle, the data show a decline in the number of matriculants with an LSAT of less than 150 -- a decline that has continued every year since. This ongoing decline has been driven partly by the closure of some law schools (Charlotte, Arizona Summit and Florida Coastal) while others have relinquished accreditation from the ABA (Thomas Jefferson). (For example, just across these four law schools there were roughly 700 matriculants in fall 2015 with LSATs of less than 145.) Others, either on their own or in response to ABA investigations, have adjusted their admissions efforts, focusing on admitting fewer students overall with a larger percentage having stronger LSAT/GPA profiles. By fall 2020, the number of matriculants with an LSAT less than 145 had declined from its peak of slightly over 3,000 to roughly 1,100.

5. What Happened in Fall 2021?

I think the jump in applicants/matriculants in fall 2021 is due to two factors -- the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the LSAT "Flex".

The Covid-19 Pandemic began two years ago in March 2020, when the fall 2020 admissions cycle was starting to wind down. While the 2020 cycle overall saw a slight increase in applicants compared to the 2019 cycle, the number of matriculants ended up being flat compared to fall 2019. I think that given the financial uncertainties associated with the Covid-19 Pandemic and the uncertainties about whether legal education would be in-person or online, a number of potential applicants decided to wait until the fall 2021 admissions cycle while a number of potential matriculants (those who already had been admitted for fall 2020) likewise made the decision not to enroll in fall 2020 and either defer enrollment until fall 2021 or simply reapply in the fall 2021 cycle.

For example, if we assume that 2,200 potential applicants slid from fall 2020 to fall 2021, and we adjusted numbers to reflect that, then the trend from 2019-2020-2021 would shift as follows:

ACTUAL – (2019) 62,400, (2020) 63,400, (2021) 71,000

ADJUSTED – (2019) 62,400, (2020) 65,600, (2021) 68,900

Thus, while one could have expected a larger applicant pool in fall 2021 compared to fall 2020, the 10% increase in applicants almost certainly was inflated as a result of the subdued increase in applicants/matriculants in fall 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The LSAT "Flex" is not necessarily responsible for any of the increase in applicants in fall 2021, but it is almost certainly significantly responsible for the dramatic increase in matriculants in fall 2021.

What should we make of the fact that for the 2021 admissions cycle, in which the LSAT "Flex" was used for every administration of the LSAT during the cycle, there was a 70% increase in the number of applicants with a high LSAT of 170 or higher (more than 2,400 more in 2021 than in 2020), and a 28% increase in the number of applicants with a high LSAT of 165-169 (more than 1,600 more in 2021 than in 2020). All told, there were over 4,000 more applicants in the 2021 admissions cycle with a high LSAT of 165 or higher. If you add in the 160-164 category, there was an increase of 26% (nearly 2200 more applicants in 2021 than in 2020). That brings you to over 6,200 more applicants with an LSAT of 160 or higher in the 2021 admissions cycle compared to the 2020 admissions cycle.

As noted above, the applicant pool in the 2021 cycle grew by more than 10%, from 63,400 to 71,000, BUT more than 80% of that increase was among those with an LSAT of 160 or higher.

Not surprisingly, with this profoundly aberrational increase in applicants with high LSAT scores, law schools took advantage by increasing the number of matriculants with high LSAT scores, thereby improving their median LSAT profile and frequently also increasing their first-year enrollment (and revenue).

As a result, the fall 2021 first-year entering class grew by nearly 10% and saw a 44% increase in the number of matriculants with a high LSAT of 165 or higher and a 20% increase in the number of matriculants with a high LSAT of 160-164.

I don't think there is any way to understand this, other than that the LSAT "Flex" was not as "challenging" as the LSAT. The LSAT "Flex" involved three sections rather than four sections and was administered remotely, so applicants had the opportunity to take the LSAT "Flex" in the comfort of their homes rather than at a testing center.

LSAC suggests that the improved scores are a function of a stronger pool of applicants who had more time to study due to the constraints resulting from the social restrictions imposed in the face of the Covid-19 Pandemic and were perhaps less anxious because they were taking the test in the comfort of their homes rather than at a testing center. While it may be true that applicants had more time to study and were less anxious taking the test in the comfort of their own home, the "stronger pool" argument is hard to square with the available GPA data. Since fall 2015, the GPA profile of applicants has been improving every year, with a larger percentage of applicants each year with a GPA of 3.5+, but in every year from 2015 through 2020, those with a 170+ LSAT represented roughly 13% of those with a GPA of 3.5+ (a high of 13.3% and a low of 12.2% with an average of 12.9%). In fall 2021, however, those with a 170+ LSAT represented 17.7% of those with a GPA of 3.5+.

Perhaps most instructive is what has happened in the current admissions cycle with the discontinuance of the LSAT "Flex" and the shift to the LSAT-4. Beginning with the introduction of the LSAT-4 in August 2021, my understanding is that the average LSAT score for every administration is lower than the comparable LSAT "Flex" administration in the preceding admissions cycle, even though applicants are still taking the exam in the comfort of their home rather than at a test center.

As a result, in the current admissions cycle, applicants are down over 11% year to date, but with the largest declines among those with LSAT scores of 165 or higher (where the decline is nearly 14%). We appear to be on track for a similar number of applicants as in fall 2020 with a slightly stronger applicant pool. (Even with the declines at the top end of the LSAT distribution, there are still a larger percentage of applicants with LSATs of 165 or higher than in the applicant pool in the 2020 admissions cycle.) (The fact that a significant percentage of applicants in the 2022 admissions cycle took the LSAT "Flex" during the 2021 admissions cycle may mask what might have been an even larger decline among those with LSAT scores of 165 or higher. Indeed, one might anticipate an even more pronounced decline among those with high LSAT scores of 165+ in the next admissions cycle when significantly fewer applicants will be applying with LSAT-"Flex" scores.)

What this means for enrollment in fall 2022 remains to be seen, but with so many law schools having increased their LSAT medians in fall 2021 (165 out of 193), it likely means a modest reduction in first-year enrollment in fall 2022. In our analysis of law schools navigating the decline in applicants from 2010-2016, *Competitive Coping Strategies in the American Legal Academy: An Empirical Study*, my coauthors, Bernie Burk, Emma Rasiel and I found that most law schools preferred to maintain profile over revenue in the midst of a decline in applications. Accordingly, I think fall 2022 enrollment will be down from fall 2021 (41,700) but still above where it was in fall 2020 (38,200), perhaps somewhere right around 40,000.