

Projections for Law School Enrollment for Fall 2016

By [Jerry Organ](#)

In this blog posting I am doing two things. First, I provide a detailed analysis to estimate the likely total applicant pool we can expect at the end of the current cycle based on trends from March through the end of the cycle in 2013 and 2014 and 2015. Second, given the increase in the strength of the applicant pool, I suggest that law schools in the top 60 or 70 of USNEWS ranking will see more enrollment growth and profile stability in comparison with law schools further down the rankings continuum.

ESTIMATES OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF APPLICANTS

Reviewing the 2013, 2014, and 2015 Cycles to Inform the 2016 Cycle

The table set forth below shows the number of applicants in the admissions cycle as of early March in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 along with the projected total applicant pool (based on percentage of applicants at that point in the cycle in the previous year) and the actual total applicant pool at the end of each cycle (with an estimate of the 2016 total applicant pool).

2013 Current Volume Summary Date	Applicants	% of Cycle in Previous Year on This Date	Applicant Pool
Mar. 8, 2013	46,587	84%	55,460 Projected as of March 8 based on % of Cycle
End of Cycle			59,400 Actual
2014 Current Volume Summary Date	Applicants	% of Cycle in Previous Year on This Date	Applicant Pool
Mar. 7, 2014	42,068	79%	53,250 Projected on March 7 based on % of Cycle
End of Cycle			55,700 Actual
2015 Current Volume Summary Date	Applicants	% of Cycle in Previous Year on This Date	Applicant Pool
Mar. 6, 2015	39,646	76%	52,160 Projected on March 6 based on % of Cycle
End of Cycle			54,500 Actual
2016 Current Volume Summary Date	Applicants	% of Cycle in Previous Year on This Date	Applicant Pool
Mar. 4, 2016	42,981	76%	56,553 Projected on March 4 based on % of Cycle
End of Cycle			57,500 Estimate

In each of the last three years, a modest surge in late applicants meant the final total applicant count exceeded the March projections by more than 2000, with the amount by which the actual total applicant count exceeded the projected total applicant count getting smaller each year (dropping from roughly 4,000 in 2013 to roughly 2,300 in 2015). This “late surge” would suggest that the projection for fall 2016 based on the applicant pool as of March 4, 2016 (for just over 56,500) likely understates the end of cycle total applicant pool. To be somewhat conservative, I am estimating that

the final total applicant pool in 2016 will exceed the early March projection by roughly 1,000, the smallest such increase in the last four years, resulting in an estimated total applicant pool of 57,500 (up about 5.5% from 2015). This would be the first increase in applicants since 2010.

ESTIMATES FOR ADMITTED APPLICANTS AND MATRICULANTS

The chart below shows the number of applicants, admitted applicants and matriculants over the last four years along with an estimate for fall 2016 based on the assumption above that we have a total of 57,500 applicants this cycle. With 3,000 more applicants than in 2014-15, I am assuming 2,400 more admitted applicants (roughly 80% of the additional applicants), and then assuming the number of matriculants will reflect close to the four-year average for the percentage of admitted applicants who matriculate – 87.6%. This would yield a first-year entering class of 39,150, up about 5.6% from 2015. (Using this process [last April](#), I estimated a first-year enrollment of 36,975, 83 less than the actual first-year enrollment of 37,058.)

Estimates of Admitted Students and Matriculants for 2016 Based on Trends in 2012-2015

	Applicants	Admitted Students	Percent of Applicants	Matriculants	Percent of Admitted
2012	67,900	50,600	74.5%	44,481	87.9%
2013	59,400	45,700	76.9%	39,675	86.8%
2014	55,700	43,500	78.1%	37,924	87.2%
2015	54,500	42,300	77.6%	37,058	87.6%
2016 (est.)	57,500	44,700	77.7%	39,150	87.6%

DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT ON ENROLLMENT AND PROFILES ACROSS DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF LAW SCHOOLS

Earlier this year [Ian Ayres](#) noted that lower-ranked law schools have benefited from the rankings concerns of higher-ranked law schools. In the last few years, as higher-ranked law schools admitted fewer applicants in an effort to maintain their LSAT/GPA profiles, they left more applicants for lower-ranked law schools to admit. In this admissions cycle, the strength of the pool of applicants means things likely will swing the other way. Higher-ranked law schools likely will be admitting more students, leaving fewer students for lower-ranked law schools to admit.

INCREASES IN APPLICANTS WITH HIGH LSATs BODE WELL FOR HIGHER RANKED LAW SCHOOLS

For the first time in the last five years, we are seeing a year-over-year increase in the number of applicants with LSATs of 165 or higher. As of the April 15 Current Volume Summary, there were a total of 7,054 applicants with LSATs of 165 or higher, compared with 6,519 on April 17, 2015. Another 130 with LSATs of 165 or higher ended up applying during the balance of the 2014-15 admissions cycle, resulting in a total of 6,649. I am presently assuming there will be another 146 applicants with LSATs of 165 or higher in the balance of the 2015-16 admissions cycle for a total of 7,200. On average, over the past four years, 82.6% of these applicants have matriculated. I think it is going to be slightly higher this year as I think there are a number of top-60 or top-70 law schools dealing with revenue pressures from decreased enrollment in recent years that are going to take advantage of the

stronger quality in this applicant pool to increase their first-year enrollment without seeing too much erosion in their entering class profile. Thus, I think we will see roughly 6,000 matriculants this year with LSATs of 165 or higher, an increase of nearly 500 from fall 2015.

Five-Year Trend in Applicants and Matriculants with LSATs of 165+ and Estimates for 2015

	Applicants with LSATs of 165+	Matriculants with LSATs of 165+	Percent of Applicants Matriculating
2010	12,177	9,477	77.8%
2011	11,190	8,952	80%
2012	9,196	7,571	82.3%
2013	7,496	6,154	82.1%
2014	7,477	6,189	82.8%
2015	6,649	5,505	82.8%
2016 (est.)	7,200	6,000	83.3%

In addition, the number of applicants with LSATs of 160-164 also has increased in this cycle, from roughly 6,500 at this point in 2014-15 to over 6,800 in 2015-16. This likely means that at the end of the cycle there will be at least 300 more applicants with LSATs of 160-164, which likely will generate an additional 240 matriculants (roughly 80% or the 300 more applicants) in this range than in the 2014-15 admissions cycle. Combining these categories, when this admissions cycle ends, there likely will be 740 more matriculants with LSATs of 160 or higher in the 2015-16 applicant pool than in the 2014-15 applicant pool – from roughly 11,200 to nearly 12,000.

This increase in quality in the applicant pool means law schools ranked in the top 60 or top 70 or so (those with median LSATs near or above 160), collectively could be able to welcome more than 1,200 more matriculants than last year without meaningfully impacting their profile. (If the top 70 law schools garner 600 of the 740 additional applicants with LSATs of 160 or higher, they also could admit almost as many additional applicants with LSATs below their median without impacting their profile. For top-70 law schools focused on profile AND revenue, every additional matriculant with an LSAT above 160 who helps the law school maintain its median LSAT allows the law school to add a matriculant with an LSAT of less than 160.) (Of course, not all law schools are going to have the financial strength to continue to use scholarship resources to attract top applicants, so there likely will be some variability among top 70 schools in terms of enrollment growth/decline and in terms of profile retention/erosion.)

Continuing But Slowing Declines in Applicants with LSATs Between 150-159 Likely Will Present Challenges for Some Law Schools with Median LSATs Between 150-159

Year	LSAT of 140-144	LSAT of 145-149	LSAT of 150-154	LSAT of 155-159
2013	6114	9439	11430	10920
2014	5893	8428	10587	9919
2015	6214	8665	10518	9681
2016 (est.)	6500	9000	10400	9600

Based on the numbers of applicants with LSATs between 150-159 as of the April 15 Current Volume Summary, the pool of applicants in this range is likely to remain flat or continue to show a modest decline as reflected in the table above. If law schools in the top-60 or top-70 do take advantage of the increase in applicants with LSATs of 160 or higher to increase their enrollment, then fewer of these 20,000 applicants with LSATs between 150-159 will be available to law schools with median LSATs in those ranges. This will put pressure on law schools with median LSATs of 150-159 to admit fewer applicants or to dip deeper into the applicant pool to fill their classes. (Note that while the pool of applicants with LSATs between 150-159 is flat to slightly down, the pool of applicants with LSATs between 140-149 appears to be increasing again this year, for the second year in a row.) Once again, enrollment results and profile results are likely to vary somewhat widely across law schools depending upon their relative financial strength and their ability to continue to use scholarship assistance to compete for qualified applicants.

CONCLUSION

If the estimates regarding applicants and matriculants above are accurate we will see roughly 2,100 more matriculants in the 2015-16 cycle. The increased strength of the applicant pool and the anticipated admissions strategies and efforts of top-ranked schools dealing with revenue pressures from reduced enrollment in the last few years likely will mean that most of the increase in matriculants, perhaps as many as 1,200 or more, will be among law schools that are relatively highly ranked – perhaps the top-60 or top-70.

This anticipated increase in enrollment among top law schools likely will decrease the number of applicants in the 150-159 LSAT range available to lower-ranked law schools, particularly given that the number of applicants with LSATs of 150-159 already looks like it could be slightly smaller this year. This likely will leave law schools outside the top-60 or top-70 facing challenging decisions of shrinking enrollment further to hold profile (and dealing with further revenue declines) or accepting declines in profile in exchange for stable or larger enrollments (and the corresponding revenue).

With continued growth in applicants between 140-149 to go along with the projection of a slight decline in the number of applicants with LSATs of 150-159, many law schools ranked outside the top-60 or top-70 may find it difficult to maintain their LSAT profiles as the pool of applicants from which they can draw their matriculants will be weighted more to the lower end of the LSAT distribution.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

First, what might explain the growth in the number of applicants with LSATs of 160 or more for the first time in the last several years? This group had been the “market leaders” in walking away from legal education in recent years. Is this a one-time bounce or is this group going to continue to return to legal education in larger numbers?

Second, why is the middle group – those with LSATs of 150-159 -- not showing an uptick in applicants, when there is growth among those with LSATs of 160 or higher AND growth among those with LSATs of 140-149? The group of applicants with LSATs of 150-159 is more likely to be able to pass the bar exam upon completing law school than the group of applicants with LSATs of 140-149. With bar passage rates falling significantly, particularly from those graduates of law schools with

lower LSAT profiles, one might have expected that fewer people with LSATs of 140-149 would be applying to law school (as they are most at risk of bar passage failure), but this cycle shows continued modest growth in that pool of applicants while the group of applicants with LSATs of 150-159 is flat to down slightly.

Third, will this strengthening of the quality of the applicant pool portend an improvement in bar passage results in July 2019? It is too early to answer this question. Once actual enrollment profiles are available in December, it will be easier to analyze the possible impact on bar passage results.

(I am very grateful for thoughtful comments from Bernie Burk and Scott Norberg on an earlier draft of this blog posting.