

Updated Analysis of Attrition through the 2014-15 Academic Year

By [Jerry Organ](#)

In October 2015, I posted a blog [discussing attrition rates between 2010 and 2014](#). With the release of the Standard 509 reports in December, I now have compiled attrition data from all of the fully-accredited ABA law schools outside of Puerto Rico for the last five full academic years. I have calculated average attrition rates for the class as a whole and then broken out average attrition rates by law schools in different median LSAT categories – 160+, 155-159, 150-154 and <150.

In a nutshell, overall first-year attrition has increased each of the last four years, going from 5.81% to 7.04% over that period. This overall increase, however, results largely from increases in overall attrition among schools with median LSATs less than 150, as the overall attrition rates for law schools with medians LSATs of 150 or greater have generally decreased over this period. “Academic attrition” rates increase significantly as median LSAT decreases, while “other attrition” presents more of a mixed record.

Average Overall First-Year Attrition Rates Continue to Increase

In calculating attrition rates, I wanted to capture those students who are no longer in law school anywhere. Thus, for these purposes, “attrition” is the sum of “academic attrition” and “other attrition.” “Academic attrition” occurs when a law school asks someone to leave because of inadequate academic performance. As of the 2014-15 academic year, “academic attrition” also includes a student who left voluntarily but who would have been asked to leave because of academic performance had the student not left voluntarily. “Other attrition” occurs when a student departs from the law school volitionally without being at risk of academic dismissal. Both of these categories exclude “transfers.”

The following chart shows that despite the declining “[LSAT profile](#)” of the entering classes between 2010 and 2014, there had not been any meaningful change in the average “academic attrition” rate for first-year students through the 2013-14 academic year, but that academic attrition increased modestly in 2014-15 to over 4%. Some portion of this increase in academic attrition might be attributable to the continued decline in LSAT profile of the entering class of students in 2014. Given that there was a corresponding decline in “other attrition” (for the first time in the four-year period assessed), however, at least some portion of the increase in “academic attrition” would appear to be attributable to the redefinition of “academic attrition” described in the preceding paragraph. Roughly 80% of the increase in overall first-year attrition over this period from 5.81% to 7.04%, is due to a growth in the “academic attrition” category from 3.32% to 4.15%.

Overall First-Year Attrition for Classes Entering in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014

Beg. Enrollment	Academic Attrition	% Academic	Other Attrition	% Other	Total Attrition	% Attrition
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2010-11	50408	1673	3.32	1256	2.49	2929	5.81%
2011-12	46477	1551	3.34	1262	2.72	2813	6.06%
2012-13	42399	1461	3.45	1186	2.8	2647	6.25%
2013-14	38837	1316	3.39	1236	3.18	2552	6.57%
2014-15	37086	1539	4.15	1072	2.89	2611	7.04%

(Calculating attrition rates for 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13, is a little more complicated than one might think. For ABA reporting years of 2011, 2012, and 2013, “academic attrition” was reported separately, but “other attrition” included “transfers out.” Thus, to generate the real “other attrition” number, one needed to “subtract” from “other attrition” the numbers associated with “transfers out.” Because some schools occasionally listed transfers out in “second year” “other attrition,” this analysis should be understood to have a little fuzziness to it for years 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13. For ABA reporting years 2014 and 2015, transfers out were not commingled with “other attrition,” so the calculations were based solely on the sum of “academic attrition” and “other attrition.”)

Academic Attrition Rates Increase as Law School Median LSAT Decreases

Notably, there are different rates of attrition across law schools in different LSAT categories. The following chart breaks down attrition by groups of law schools based on median LSAT for the law school for the entering class each year. For each year, the chart shows the average first-year attrition rates for law schools with median LSATs of 160 or higher, for law schools with median LSATs of 155-159, for law schools with median LSATs of 150-154 and for law schools with median LSATs less than 150. In addition, it breaks out “academic attrition” and “other attrition” as separate categories for each category of law school and for each year and then provides the total overall attrition rate each year along with the five-year average total overall attrition rate.

Average Attrition Rates by Category of Schools Based on Median LSAT																
Median LSAT	2010-11			2011-12			2012-13			2013-14			2014-15			Five- Year Avg.
	Acad	Oth	Total	Acad	Oth	Total	Acad	Oth	Total	Acad	Oth	Total	Acad	Oth	Total	
160+	0.6	1.7	2.3	0.6	1.9	2.5	0.4	2.0	2.4	0.3	1.5	1.8	0.3	1.3	1.6	2.1
155- 159	2.9	2.6	5.5	2.2	2.8	5.1	2.1	2.9	5.1	1.7	3.2	4.9	2.0	2.6	4.6	5.0
150- 154	6.3	3.8	10.1	6.2	3.4	9.6	6.0	3.7	9.7	4.2	4.3	8.5	4.7	4.0	8.7	9.3
<150	10.1	2.4	12.5	9.4	3.8	13.2	9.1	3.0	12.2	9.7	4.7	14.4	12.7	4.4	17.1	13.9

When looking at this data, some things are worth noting.

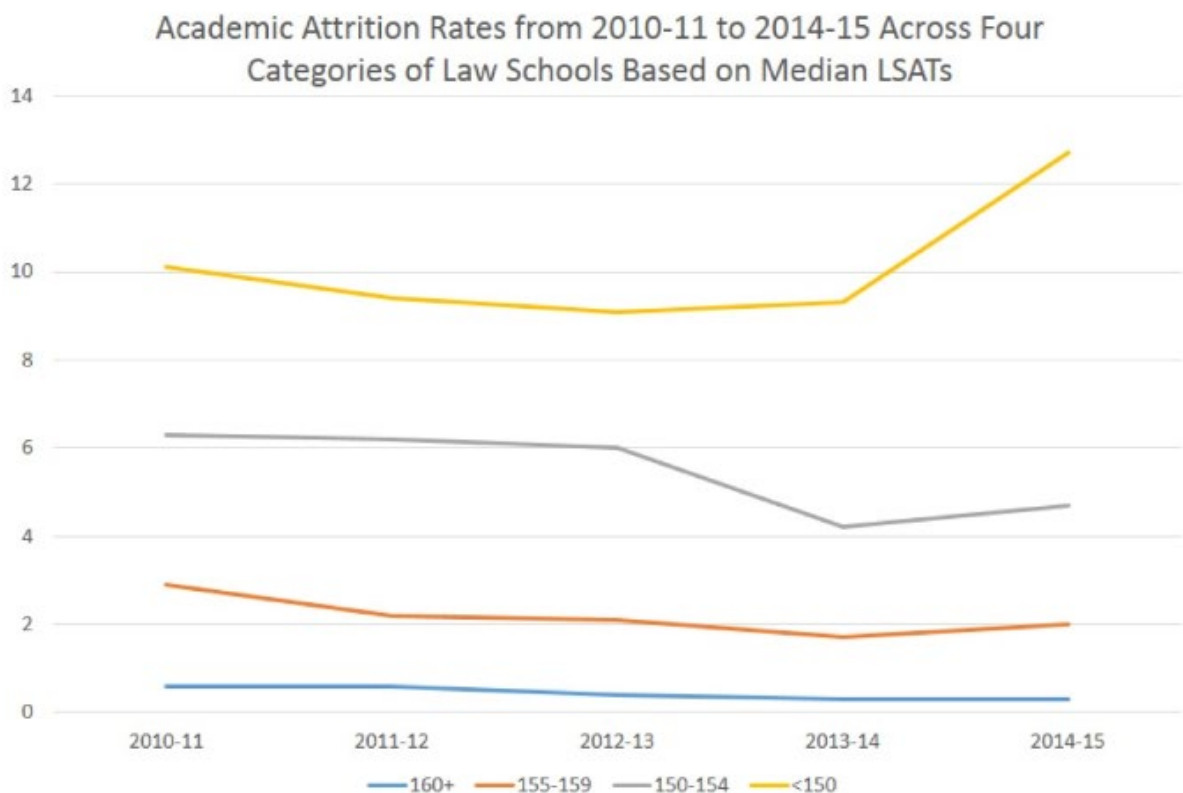
Attrition Rates Increase as Median LSAT Decreases

As one moves from law schools in the highest LSAT category to the lowest LSAT category, overall attrition increases, going from an average over the five years of 2.1%, to 5.0%, to 9.3%, to 13.9%. “Academic attrition” consistently increases as median LSAT decreases, while “other attrition” increased as median LSAT decreased in only three of the five years.

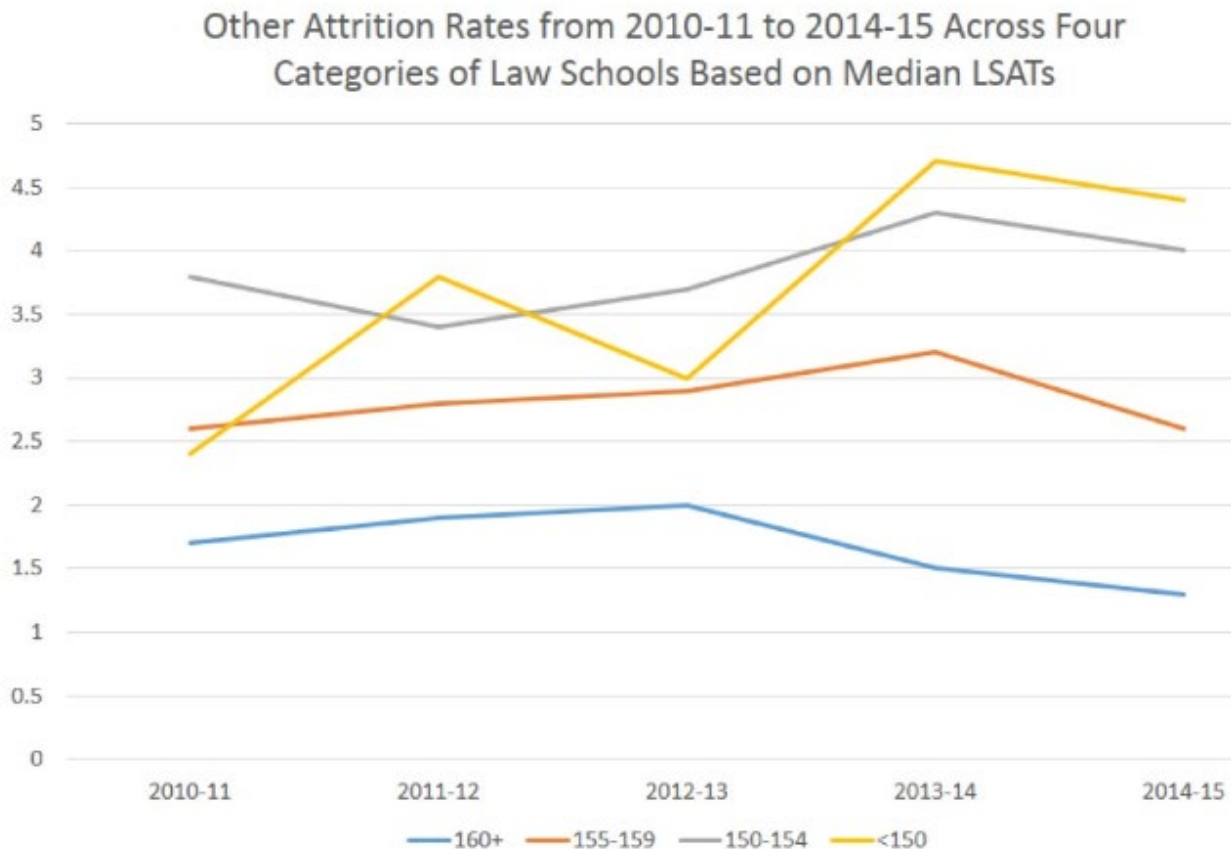
Although this analysis is focused on four LSAT categories, the trend of having academic attrition increase as median LSAT decreases continues if you add a fifth LSAT category. In 2010-11 there was only one law school with a median LSAT of 145 or less, with only 320 students. By 2014-15, however, there were 12 law schools with a median LSAT of 145 or less, with 2,826 students. The average academic attrition rate at these 12 schools in 2014-15 was 15.6 percent. The academic attrition rate at the other 24 law schools with a median LSAT less than 150 but more than 145 was 10.1 percent.

The Top Three Categories of Law Schools Saw Decreases in Academic Attrition Over Time

Over the period from 2010-11 to 2014-15, “academic attrition” generally appears to be flat to decreasing for schools with median LSATs of 160+. For schools with median LSATs of 155-159 and 150-154, “academic attrition” generally had declined from 2010-11 to 2013-14, but increased slightly in 2014-15 (although still well below levels in 2010-11). The only category in which academic attrition in 2014-15 exceeded academic attrition in 2010-11, was for law schools with median LSATs <150, where the academic attrition rate increased from 10.1% to 12.7%.



By contrast, “other attrition” presents more of a mixed record over time, but decreased in 2014-15 across all LSAT categories (perhaps because of the redefinition of “academic attrition” discussed above).



[If you are wondering why the average overall attrition rate has increased while the overall attrition rates for the top three LSAT categories have decreased, the answer is because of the changing number of students in each category over time. The number of students and percentage of students in the top LSAT category has declined significantly, while the number of students and percentage of students in the bottom LSAT category has increased significantly. This results in the average overall attrition rate increasing even as rates in various categories are decreasing.]

Increasing Variability in Attrition Rates

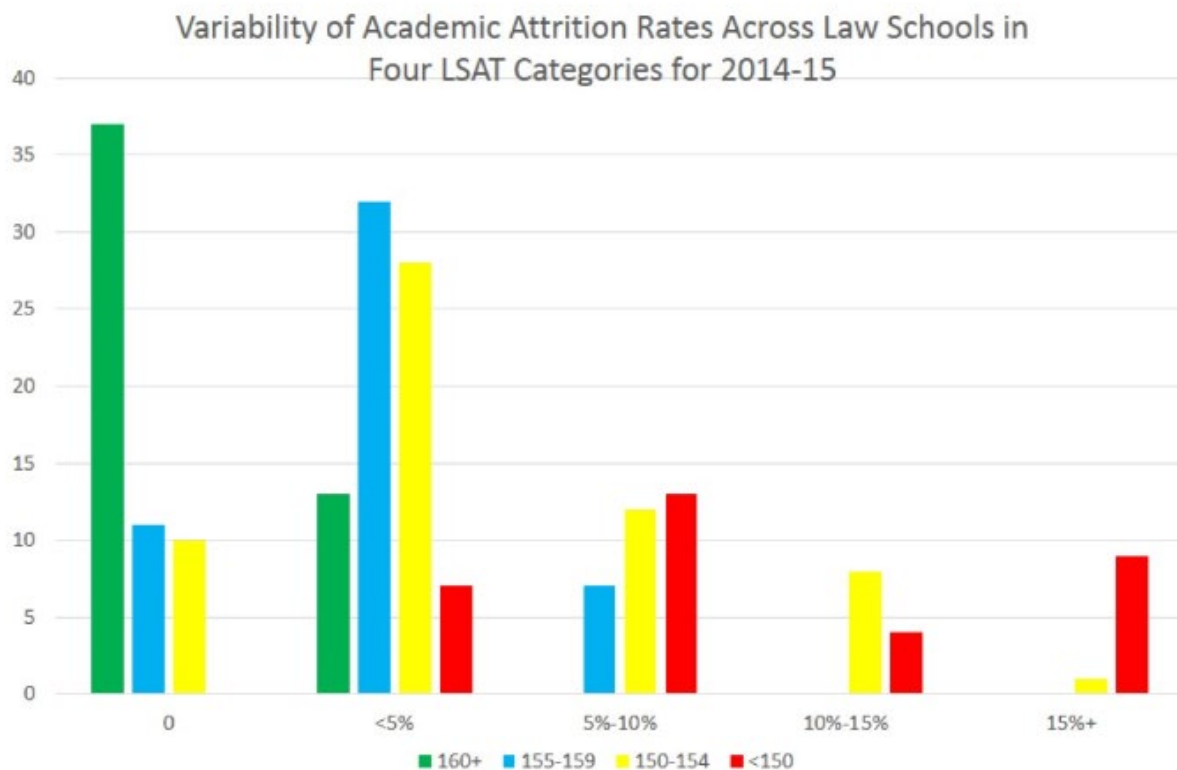
While it may make sense that “academic attrition” increases as law school median LSAT decreases, when one looks at the data within each LSAT category, there is a surprising range of academic attrition rates across law schools, with variability increasing significantly as median LSAT scores decrease. There was much less variability with respect to “other attrition.”

There were 50 law schools with median LSATs of 160+ in 2014-15, of which 37 (roughly 75%) had an academic attrition rate of 0, while the other 13 had academic attrition rates less than 5% with only four having academic attrition rates of 1% or more, topping out at 3.7%.

There also were 50 law schools with median LSATs of 155-159 in 2014-15, of which 11 had an academic attrition rate of 0 (roughly 22%), while 32 of these law schools had academic attrition rates of less than 5%, and seven had academic attrition rates of more than 5%, topping out at 8.6%.

There were 59 law schools with median LSATs of 150-154 in 2014-15, of which 10 had an academic attrition rate of 0 (roughly 17%), while 28 of these law schools had an academic attrition rate of less than 5%, 12 had an academic attrition rate of 5% to 10%, eight had an academic attrition rate of 10% to 15%, and one had an academic attrition rate in excess of 15% (17.9%).

Finally, there were 36 law schools with a median LSAT <150 in 2014-15, of which none had an academic attrition rate of 0, while seven had academic attrition rates less than 5%, 13 had an academic attrition rates of 5% to 10%, four had an academic attrition rate of 10% to 15% and nine had an academic attrition rate of 15% or more of which five were over 20%, with one at 33%.



This phenomenon of increasing variability in attrition rates may merit further attention. For law schools with a similar 50th percentile LSAT and 25th percentile LSAT for their entering classes, what can explain a range of academic attrition from 2% to 20%. Does one school have a much

higher standard for academic good standing and dismissal? Does one school have a much more robust academic support program? Have the professors at one school failed to adjust their grading to reflect a significantly different entering class profile among their students?

How does this varied approach to academic attrition ultimately impact bar passage results? If we have two law schools with comparable entering class profiles in states with comparable cut scores and bar passage percentages, does the law school with a higher rate of academic attrition show a higher bar passage rate when compared to the law school with a much lower rate of academic attrition? (I hope to explore this question in a subsequent blog posting.)

Unanswered Questions

The publicly-reported attrition data does not provide any information regarding the gender or ethnicity or socio-economic background of students leaving law school. Therefore, we don't know whether there are different rates of attrition for women as compared with men or whether students of different ethnic backgrounds have different rates of attrition. We also don't know whether first-generation law students experience attrition at different rates than other law students, or whether students of lower socio-economic status experience attrition at different rates than students of higher socio-economic status. Similarly, at law schools with part-time programs, we don't know whether part-time students and full-time students experience attrition at comparable rates.

We also do not know for sure who is experiencing attrition within a given law school. The data presented here would suggest that students on the lower end of the distribution of a law school's entering class profile are more likely to experience academic attrition than students on the higher end of the distribution, but presently that is not easily verified.

Further Thoughts

This is an appropriate time to pay closer attention to attrition data. The Standards Review Committee recently revisited Standard 501 and [suggested to the Council](#) that attrition rates might be used to inform the appropriateness of a law school's admission policies. I hope to discuss the Standard Review Committee's proposal at greater length in a subsequent blog posting. Given that the Standards Review Committee also recommended changes to Standard 316, the bar passage standard, trying to develop a better understanding of the relationship between academic attrition and bar passage (discussed above) also makes sense.

(I am grateful to Bernie Burk and Debby Merritt for comments on a earlier draft of this blog posting.)