

# Updated Analysis Of Law School Attrition Data – 2018

By [Jerry Organ](#)

In [October 2015](#) and [February 2016](#), I posted blogs discussing attrition rates between 2010 and 2014, and 2010 and 2015, respectively. With the release of the 2017 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 seven years, through 2016-17. 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. (Earlier this month, [Brian Tamanaha](#) noted that there are 14 law schools that have non-transfer attrition rates in the 2016-17 academic year in excess of 20%, the threshold set forth in Interpretation 501-3 which the Council for the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar adopted early in 2017.)

This blog reports that overall first-year non-transfer attrition increased each year until the 2016-17 academic year, going from 5.81% to 7.33% through 2015-16, before dropping back to 6.46% in 2016-17. This overall increase, however, results largely from increases in non-transfer attrition among schools with a median LSAT less than 150, as the non-transfer attrition rates for law schools with a median LSAT of 150 or greater have generally been in a downward trend over this period. Interestingly, one point reflected in this data is the inverse relationship between median LSAT category and attrition rates. “Academic attrition” rates increase significantly as median LSAT of law schools decreases; for four of the last five years, “other attrition” rates also increase as median LSAT decreases.

The decline in non-transfer attrition in 2016-17 is noteworthy given that it is the first decline in non-transfer attrition in the last several years. Notably, one significant contributor to the decline in non-transfer attrition in 2016-17 was the exclusion of Charlotte from the calculations given its closure. (For example, had Charlotte not been included in the 2015-16 non-transfer attrition calculations, the overall non-transfer attrition rate for 2015-16 would have been 6.96% rather than 7.33%.) That said, even taking into account the “Charlotte” factor, 2016-17 still shows the first decline in overall non-transfer attrition in the last several years.

## 1. 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 what had been known as “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.” For the 2016-17 academic year, the ABA did not separately report “academic attrition” and “other attrition,” but simply reported “non-transfer” attrition.

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. In 2014-15, however academic attrition increased modestly to 4.15% and then again in 2015-16 to 4.28%. Given that there was a corresponding decline in "other attrition" in 2014-15 (for the first time in four-years), 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.

**Table 1 - Overall First-Year Attrition for Classes Entering in 2010-2016**

|         | Beg.<br>Enrollment | Academic<br>Attrition | %<br>Academic | Other<br>Attrition | % Other | Total<br>Attrition | % Attrition |
|---------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------|--------------------|-------------|
| 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%       |
| 2015-16 | 36425              | 1558                  | 4.28          | 1113               | 3.06    | 2671               | 7.33%       |
| 2016-17 | 36104              |                       |               |                    |         | 2332               | 6.46%       |

(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 to 2016, transfers out were not comingled with "other attrition," so the calculations were based solely on the sum of "academic attrition" and "other attrition." As noted above, for the 2016-17 academic year, academic attrition and other attrition were not reported separately. Rather, they were combined and reported simply as non-transfer attrition.)

## **2. 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 through 2015-16 (the last year for which academic attrition was reported separately). For each year, the chart shows the average first-year attrition rates for law schools with a median LSAT of 160 or higher, for law schools with a median LSAT of 155-159, for law schools with a median LSAT of 150-154 and for law schools with a median LSAT less than 150. In addition, it breaks out "academic attrition" (A) and "other attrition" (O) as separate categories for each category of law school and for each year through 2015-16, and then provides the total non-transfer attrition rate (T) each year, except for 2016-17, for which it only shows the total non-transfer attrition rate. The chart also includes the seven-year average total non-transfer attrition rate.

**Table 2 -- Average Attrition Rates by Category of Law Schools Based on Median LSAT**

|                  | 2010-11  |          |             | 2011-12  |          |             | 2012-13  |          |             | 2013-14  |          |             | 2014-15  |          |             | 2015-16  |          |             | 2016-17     |                  |
|------------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|------------------|
| <b>Med. LSAT</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>A</b> | <b>O</b> | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>Tot</b>  | <b>7-Yr Avg.</b> |
| <b>160+</b>      | 0.6      | 1.7      | <b>2.3</b>  | 0.6      | 1.9      | <b>2.5</b>  | 0.4      | 2.0      | <b>2.4</b>  | 0.3      | 1.5      | <b>1.8</b>  | 0.3      | 1.3      | <b>1.6</b>  | 0.2      | 1.7      | <b>1.9</b>  | <b>1.4</b>  | <b>2</b>         |
| <b>155-159</b>   | 2.9      | 2.6      | <b>5.5</b>  | 2.2      | 2.8      | <b>5.1</b>  | 2.1      | 2.9      | <b>5.1</b>  | 1.7      | 3.2      | <b>4.9</b>  | 2.0      | 2.6      | <b>4.6</b>  | 1.8      | 2.7      | <b>4.5</b>  | <b>4</b>    | <b>4.8</b>       |
| <b>150-154</b>   | 6.3      | 3.8      | <b>10.1</b> | 6.2      | 3.4      | <b>9.6</b>  | 6.0      | 3.7      | <b>9.7</b>  | 4.2      | 4.3      | <b>8.5</b>  | 4.7      | 4.0      | <b>8.7</b>  | 4.6      | 3.8      | <b>8.4</b>  | <b>7.9</b>  | <b>9</b>         |
| <b>&lt;150</b>   | 10.1     | 2.4      | <b>12.5</b> | 9.4      | 3.8      | <b>13.2</b> | 9.1      | 3.0      | <b>12.2</b> | 9.7      | 4.7      | <b>14.4</b> | 12.7     | 4.4      | <b>17.1</b> | 13.5     | 4.7      | <b>18.2</b> | <b>16.1</b> | <b>14.8</b>      |

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

## **2A. Attrition Rates Increase as Median LSAT Decreases**

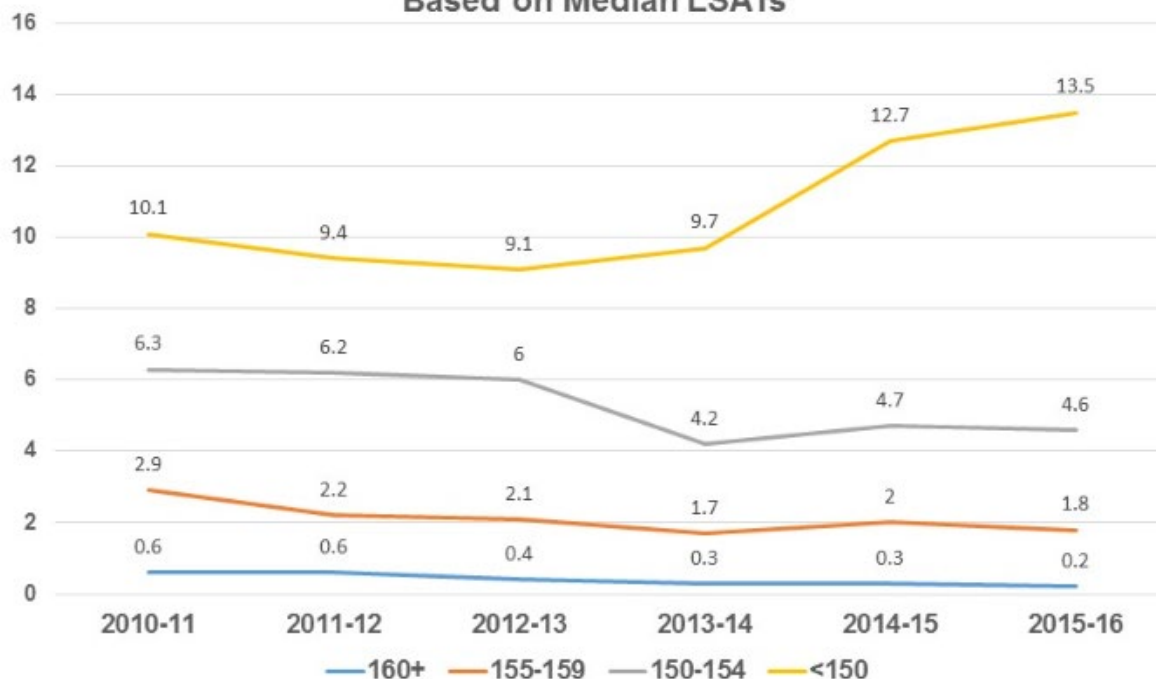
As one moves from law schools in the highest LSAT category to the lowest LSAT category, non-transfer attrition increases, going from an average over the seven years of 2%, to 4.8%, to 9%, to 14.8%. “Academic attrition” consistently increases as median LSAT decreases, while “other attrition” increased as median LSAT decreased in four of the five years up until 2015-16.

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, and in 2015-16, there were 10 law schools with a median LSAT of 145 or less, with 2,467 students. The average academic attrition rate at these 12 law schools in 2014-15 was 15.6%. The average academic attrition rate at these 10 law schools in 2015-16 was 25.3%. By comparison, the academic attrition rate at the other 24 law schools with a median LSAT less than 150 but more than 145 in 2014-15 was 10.1%. In 2015-16, the academic attrition rate at the other 32 law schools with a median LSAT less than 150 but more than 145 was 14.3%.

## **2B. The Top Three Categories of Law Schools Saw Decreases in Academic Attrition Over Time**

As shown in Table 2 above and as presented visually in Chart 1 below, over the period from 2010-11 to 2015-16, “academic attrition” decreases fairly consistently for schools with a median LSAT of 160+ dropping from 0.6% to 0.2%. For schools with a median LSAT of 155-159 and 150-154, “academic attrition” generally declined from 2010-11 to 2013-14, but increased slightly in 2014-15, before dropping again in 2015-16 (still well below levels in 2010-11). The only category in which academic attrition in 2015-16 exceeded academic attrition in 2010-11, was for law schools with a median LSAT <150, for which the academic attrition rate declined from 10.1% to 9.1% between 2010-11 and 2012-13 before climbing up to 13.5% in 2015-16. (By contrast, “other attrition” is more of a mixed record over time.)

**Chart 1: Academic Attrition Rates from 2010-11 to 2015-16  
Across Four Categories of Law Schools  
Based on Median LSATs**



### 3. 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.” Chart 2 provides a pictorial representation of the data described below for the 2015-16 academic year, the last year for which separate academic attrition data is available.

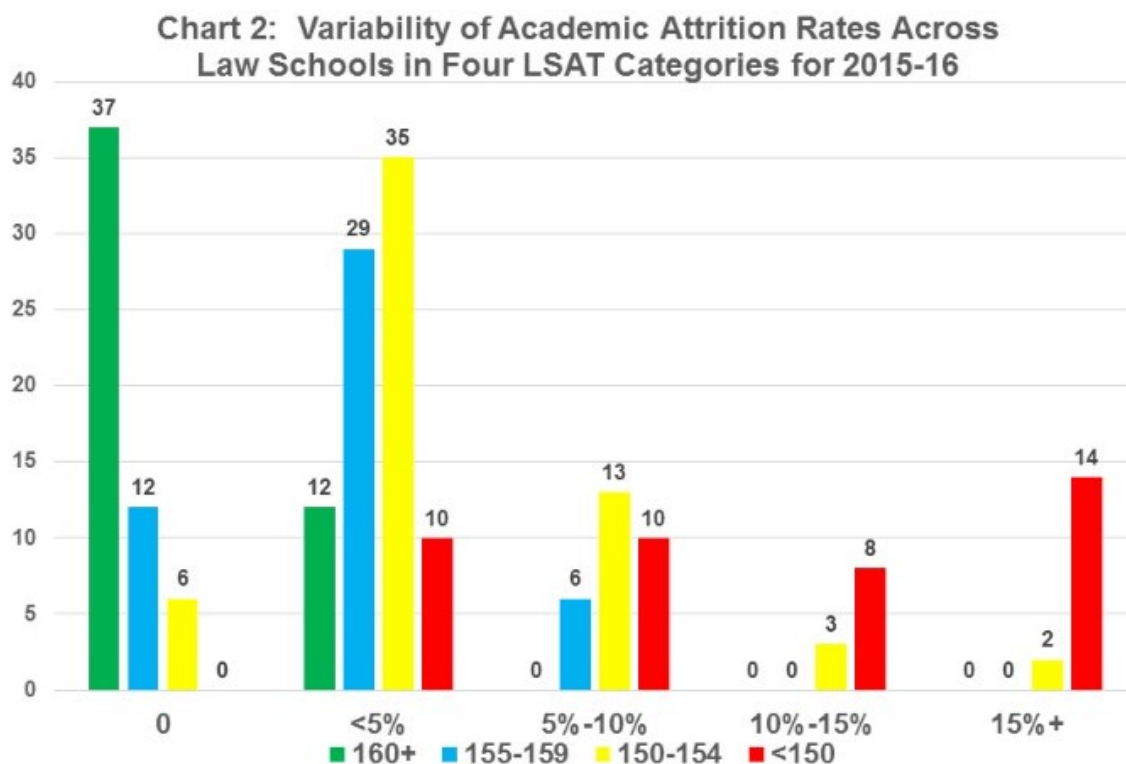
There were 49 law schools with a median LSAT of 160+ in 2015-16, of which 37 (roughly 75%) had an academic attrition rate of 0, while the other 12 had academic attrition rates less than 2% with only two having academic attrition rates of 1% or more, topping out at 1.9%.

There also were 47 law schools with a median LSAT of 155-159 in 2015-16, of which 12 had an academic attrition rate of 0 (roughly 25%), while 29 of the remaining law schools had academic attrition rates of less than 5%, and six had academic attrition rates of more than 5%, only one of which was above 7%, at 12.4%.

There were 59 law schools with a median LSAT of 150-154 in 2015-16, of which six had an academic attrition rate of 0 (roughly 10%), while 35 of the remaining law schools had an academic attrition rate of less than 5%, 13 had an academic attrition rate of 5% to 10%, and five were in excess of 10%, two of which were at 19.7% and 19.6%, respectively.

Finally, there were 42 law schools with a median LSAT <150 in 2015-16, of which none had an academic attrition rate of 0, while ten had an academic attrition rate less than 5%, 10 had an

academic attrition rate of 5% to 10%, eight had an academic attrition rate of 10% to 15%, and seven had an academic attrition rate of 15% to 20% and seven had an academic attrition rate of more than 20%, including one at 42.1%.



This phenomenon of much greater variability in academic attrition rates among law schools with a median LSAT of less than 155 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 1% or 2% to nearly 20% or more? 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?

A further question without an answer is how this varied approach to academic attrition ultimately impacts 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.)

#### 4. Recently Answered Questions

Up until the 2016-17 academic year, the publicly-reported attrition data did not provide any information regarding the gender or ethnicity of students leaving law school. Therefore, we didn't know whether women experienced different rates of attrition than men or whether students of different ethnic backgrounds have different rates of attrition. With the release of the 2016-17

data, attrition is now broken out by gender and by ethnicity. In my next blog posting on attrition, I will look at what we know about attrition as it relates to gender and ethnicity in light of the 2016-17 data.

While we still do not know for sure how attrition distributes across the profile of a given entering class within a given law school, the data presented here, showing increasing attrition as law school median LSAT decreases, 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.