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TEMPORAL TRENDS IN LSAT, MBE, AND ESSAY SCORES

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The research described in this report investigated whether an applicant with a given Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT) score was likely to earn a higher (or lower) Multistate Bar Examination (MBE) score on a recent administration of the MBE versus one given a few years ago. In short, are MBE scores drifting upwards (or downwards) over time relative to LSAT scores?

This research also examined whether Essay scores have changed over time and whether the relationship between Essay and MBE scores has changed. These issues were investigated to provide benchmarks for interpreting possible changes in the LSAT/MBE relationship.

If an upward drift in MBE scores is observed relative to LSAT, it could be due to improved legal education, increased effectiveness of bar review courses, a breach in the MBE's security, a change in the LSAT's psychometric properties, or some combination of these and other factors.

SAMPLES

The samples for this research consisted of applicants who had a two-digit LSAT score and who also took the bar exam for the first time between July 1985 and February 1988 (i.e., a total of six exams). The February 1986 sample was curtailed because many of the first timers on this exam had a three-digit rather than a two-digit LSAT score.

VARIABLES

The variables used in this research were LSAT score, MBE score, and average raw score on an essay question. The latter variable was the mean of an applicant's six essay scores. A raw score of 70 is considered just passing by the essay graders. We also examined the average raw Performance Test (PT) score on each exam.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that after controlling for exam date (February versus July), the mean score on all variables has generally increased slightly over time. The three exceptions are: the 2/88 LSAT score which was very slightly lower than the 2/87 LSAT; the 7/87 Essay was slightly lower than the 7/86 Essay; and the highest PT score was on the 7/85 exam.

Table 1

SUMMARY STATISTICS BY EXAM

Exam	Number of applicants	LSAT	MBE	Raw Essay	Raw PT
2/86	708	30.6	138.7	65.5	66.2
2/87	1054	32.7	144.7	67.9	67.0
2/88	1148	32.4	146.8	68.3	68.4
7/85	4446	34.6	146.0	67.7	70.6
7/86	4362	35.2	148.1	68.8	69.1
7/87	4590	35.3	148.3	68.0	69.6

Table 2 shows the typical MBE score at various LSAT score levels. For example, on the average, applicants with an LSAT of 35 earned an MBE of 147 on the July 1985 exam and a 144 on the February 1986 exam.

The data in Table 2, which are based on the linear regression equation between LSAT and MBE, suggest that there has been a very slight (albeit inconsistent) increase in MBE scores over time relative to LSAT. For instance, the average of the 7/85 and 2/86 exams for applicants with an LSAT of 35 was about 146. On the next two exams (7/86 and 2/87), their average rose to 148. And, it went to 149 on the last two exams studied.

Table 2

AVERAGE MBE SCORES AT VARIOUS LSAT SCORE LEVELS

Exam	20	25	30	35	40	45
7/85	127	134	140	147	153	159
2/86	126	132	138	144	150	156
7/86	129	135	142	148	154	161
2/87	128	135	141	148	154	161
7/87	130	136	142	148	154	160
2/88	132	138	144	150	156	162

Table 3 shows that after holding LSAT constant, there has not been a gradual rise or fall over time in average Essay scores. For instance, an applicant with an LSAT of 35 would earn, on the average, a raw Essay question score of about 68 or 69 regardless of which test was taken.

Table 3

AVERAGE ESSAY SCORE AT VARIOUS LSAT SCORE LEVELS

Exam	20	25	30	35	40	45
7/85	63	65	66	68	69	71
2/86	63	64	65	67	68	69
7/86	64	65	67	69	70	72
2/87	64	65	67	69	70	72
7/87	62	64	66	68	70	72
2/88	65	66	68	69	71	72

Table 4 shows that the correlation between LSAT and MBE scores has remained virtually unchanged over time. The correlation between LSAT and Essay scores has varied slightly over time, but not in a consistent manner. For instance, it has not been steadily rising or falling nor is it always greater at one time of the year than at another. The same can be said about the MBE/Essay relationship. However, this relationship is always stronger than the other two relationships.

Table 4

CORRELATIONS AMONG MEASURES

Exam	LSAT -MBE	LSAT- Essay	MBE- Essay
7/85	.55	.37	.59
2/86	.55	.37	.60
7/86	.55	.38	.63
2/87	.56	.41	.67
7/87	.53	.43	.65
2/88	.55	.40	.65

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There has been a small increase in MBE scores during the past three years. However, most (but not all) of this increase can be accounted for by a corresponding increase in LSAT scores. Moreover, the inconsistencies in this MBE trend suggest that it could be due to chance. And, Essay and PT scores also have tended to increase during the same period that the MBE scores rose.

The strength of the relationship between LSAT scores and the MBE was virtually the same on the six exams studied ($r = .55$). And, although there has been some variation in the strength of the relationship between MBE and Essay scores over time, this variation is not related to when the test was given. For example, the relationship has not gotten

consistently weaker over time (such as would likely occur if the MBE's security was being gradually breached).

The stability of the Essay results across exams relative to LSAT scores suggests that the Committee's Board of Reappraisors continues to be very effective in maintaining consistent grading standards. An applicant with a given level of academic ability (as measured by LSAT) earns about the same Essay score regardless of when that applicant took the exam.

Taken together, the statistical evidence presented in this report suggests that nothing has happened recently to affect the bar exam scores of large numbers of applicants. Thus, the interpretation of an MBE or Essay score (in terms of the level of proficiency to which it refers) appears to be about the same today as it was three years ago. Nevertheless, the next few exams should be monitored to see if there is a continuation of the slight upward spiral in MBE scores relative to LSAT. If there is, then this matter should be revisited.