

LSAT or GRE?

The Admissions Test Debate

More Law Schools Accept GRE Scores in Lieu of the LSAT

By Christian Nolan

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is tried and true – the only exam accepted by every law school and a proven indicator for potential success in a legal career.

But the LSAT has some unlikely competition now in the form of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which has long been the required admission test for graduate schools in America.

As the number of applicants dwindled in recent years, law schools became faced with a growing dilemma of whether to accept GRE scores in lieu of the LSAT as a way to increase and diversify their applicant pool.

In 2016, toward the end of that nationwide law school application drought, the University of Arizona's James E. Rogers College of Law announced that it was willing to accept applicants' GRE scores instead of LSAT scores. Since then, more than 20 other law schools across the country including top programs like Harvard, Columbia, and Georgetown have done the same. In New York alone, seven of the state's 15 law schools have joined in on the trend.

Additionally, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania will not only begin to accept the GRE, they will also accept the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), which has long been the admissions test used by business schools.

"By experimenting with greater flexibility in our application process, we hope to make a world-class legal education accessible to an even wider variety of students," Eduardo Peñalver, Allan R. Tessler Dean and Professor of Cornell Law School, said in a statement. "Our hope is that accepting the GRE and GMAT will allow us to reach a diverse group of prospective stu-

dents from different academic backgrounds, such as engineering or technology."

Cornell so far has only committed to this as a pilot program limited to no more than 20 students in order to encourage applicants with a broad range of backgrounds to apply. In June 2018, a day after Cornell made its announcement, New York University School of Law announced it would also accept the GRE for the incoming class in 2019.

The GRE trend began gaining so much traction that many thought the American Bar Association would pass a measure at its Annual Meeting in August eliminating the requirement for an admission exam as part of the law school admissions process.

In May, the council of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar passed such a measure by a slim 9-8 vote. However, in August, the same council withdrew its proposal to the ABA House of Delegates. There was substantial concern about the proposed changes from the ABA's Minority Caucus, Young Lawyers Division, Law Student Division and various state caucuses. The proposal will go back to the ABA council for further consideration.



"GOOD EQUALIZER"

According to a Kaplan Test Prep survey, 58 percent of aspiring lawyers say the ABA should keep the standardized testing requirement in place, 36 percent want it lifted, and 6 percent are unsure.

One student who favored keeping the requirement said: "The LSAT puts all students on a level playing field. GPAs vary tremendously based on school and major so the LSAT is a good way to score all students."

Said another student: "The LSAT is an important indicator of how students perform under pressure and timed. It also is a good equalizer."

An opponent of the requirement said: "I don't think standardized tests are really measuring a student's ability to excel at a law school. It's just measuring how good you are at taking standardized tests."

"Considering the potential significance this rule change would have had on the law school admissions landscape, it's understandable why this decision has been postponed," said Jeff Thomas, executive director of pre-law programs at Kaplan Test Prep. "It's important to note that it only passed by one vote in committee this past May. A close vote doesn't equal consensus and that may have given many ABA members some pause about making such a drastic change. The postponement also allows schools that are considering using the GRE and GMAT more time to conduct validity studies, a requirement for offering alternatives to the LSAT."

Thomas said they would be watching this issue closely over the coming weeks and months as they conduct an annual admissions officer survey about which test scores law schools plan to allow applicants to submit.

"In our 2017 survey, 25 percent of schools said they were considering allowing their applicants to submit GRE scores in lieu of LSAT scores," said Thomas. "A lot has changed since that time, so that percentage may increase, as the call for change among law schools remains strong."

Kellye Testy, president and CEO of the Law School Admission Council, the non-profit organization that administers the LSAT, said the LSAT is still the best choice for law school admissions despite the recent GRE trend. She said 99.8 percent of law school applicants in 2017-2018 still relied on the LSAT.

"Using the LSAT protects applicants by providing a good indication of their chances of graduating and passing the bar," said Testy. "The LSAT is the only test that allows candidates to see how they compare to other students being admitted to a given school, so they can focus on the schools that are right for them."

Testy was also pleased the ABA did not yet act on the matter.

"LSAC supports the goal of flexibility for law schools to design their admission processes, while ensuring clarity and fairness for applicants," said Testy. "The ABA Council's decision to reconsider the proposal is in the best interest of law schools and applicants because it allows more time for exploring admission practices that will continue to promote the access and equity in law school admission that the LSAT has long facilitated."

RELIABILITY

While alternative tests may be used by law schools in their admissions process, the schools must be able to demonstrate that the other tests are reliable. The criteria to prove such reliability is unclear. Schools must submit validity studies to the ABA.

According to the ABA *Journal*, Georgetown University Law Center looked at first-year Georgetown Law students between 2005 and 2016 and it found that the GRE was a slightly better predictor of how they performed than the LSAT.

While there is overall less data with regard to GRE exam results as a predictor of law school performance, Educational Testing Service, a non-profit that administers the GRE, has created a new GRE Comparison Tool for Law Schools.¹

Score users can now use the comparison tool to predict a test taker's LSAT score using the test taker's GRE Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning scores from the GRE General Test.

"This comparison tool helps the growing number of law schools accepting GRE scores to understand and appropriately interpret those scores in the context of LSAT scores to better inform their admissions decisions," said David Payne, ETS vice president and COO of Global Education. "The GRE test can help institutions achieve their admissions goals because it is taken by over half a million test takers annually from a broad range of backgrounds – including science and technology fields – that are relevant to the changing needs of the law profession."

Cary Cluck, Assistant Dean for Admissions at Arizona Law, the first law school to begin accepting the GRE scores in lieu of the LSAT, is on board.

"We already know that GRE scores are a valid predictor of law school success for us, and we've seen other law schools perform similar evaluations and reach similar conclusions," said Cluck.

Scores from the GRE Analytical Writing portion of the exam are not used in the comparison tool because the LSAT Writing Sample is unscored and does not contribute to the cumulative LSAT score.

Nolan is NYSBA's Senior Writer.

1. Access the GRE Comparison Tool for Law Schools online at https://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/about/law/comparison_tool/.

