

UB Law Forum

Volume 6
Number 2 *Spring/Summer 1992*

Article 10

4-1-1992

The New LSAT

John Henry Schlegel

University at Buffalo School of Law, schlegel@buffalo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation

Schlegel, John Henry (1992) "The New LSAT," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol6/iss2/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

A New LSAT

By John Henry Schlegel

Questions 8–13

A small software firm has four offices. Each of its offices has exactly one printer. Each of these eight printers was either bought in 1987, 1988, or 1989. The printers were bought in a manner consistent with the following conditions.

The computer in each office was bought in an earlier year than or in the same year as the printer in that office.

The computer in office 2 and the printer in office 2 were bought in the same year.

The computer in office 3 and the printer in office 3 were bought in the same year.

The computer in office 2 and the printer in office 3 were bought in different years.

The computer in office 1 and the printer in office 1 were bought in 1988.

It all depends on how long it has been since a lawyer took the test, what that lawyer thinks the real Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT) looks like. The LSAT has undergone many changes since it was first introduced in the late 1940s. But no matter how variable its content may be, the score scale has remained relatively steady.

Graduates from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s remember the 200-800 scale that was used for over thirty years. Test-takers since 1982 believe the true scale is 10-48. Starting in June 1991, the score scale was changed again, this time to 120-180 — a not-so-subtle cognate to the original scale.

One might sensibly ask why any change was made. The answer is simple. An LSAT score is a short-hand way of reporting a test-taker's place in a percentile-ranking. While it is true the 10-48 scale of the 1980s was better designed than the old scale, the test was never capable of sorting law school applicants accurately into 601 different piles — not even close. Yet, the 39 piles of the 10-48 scale were far too few.

As a result, during the last few years of the 1980s when the mean score on the test drifted modestly above 30 — for reasons that had to do with scoring formulas, changes in the applicant population and perhaps even the effectiveness of coaching schools — the percentage of students with very high scores increased dramatically.

At the same time, evidence was accumulating that for more than an insignificant number of people, the test was "speeded" (a technical term used to describe tests that are too difficult to be completed). While that may be acceptable in some kinds of tests, it isn't in the LSAT, which is trying to measure the presence of certain skills. Failure of a test-taker to answer all of the questions means that the grader knows less about the level of those skills. Estimates of ability, therefore, become less reliable.

The combination of a "speededness" problem and of the decline in the ability of the test to measure the relative level of skills of high ability test-takers suggested that it was an appropriate time to fix the way the test was constructed. It was also deemed a good time to adjust the relative proportions of the types of questions to better fit the changing abilities of the latest population of test-takers.

All four factors led to the conclusion that it would be misleading to maintain that test scores on the old bar and newer versions of the test were truly comparable. So the test scale was again changed, lest anyone fail to get the message.

Does it really make any difference? No, because the results of the regular statistical analysis of the LSAT show that the changes have not decreased reliability and that they have unbunched scores at the top; that changes in the proportions of the varying types of questions have made the appropriate adjustments in the way the test measures the abilities of the various populations of test-takers; and that the internal technical problems have been helped. Only "speededness" remains a bit of a problem.

Still, some may wonder, just what have they done to the test?

In recent years, the LSAT has consisted of four sections of approximately 33 questions, each 45 minutes

in length: one section of reading comprehension; one section of analytical reasoning (largely deductive reasoning); one section of logical reasoning (a mixture of deductive and inductive reasoning); and one unscored section used for pretesting future questions. There was also an unscored writing sample.

The new version of the LSAT has five sections of approximately 25 questions, each 35 minutes in length: one of reading comprehension, one of analytical reasoning, two of logical reasoning; and one for pretesting. The unscored writing sample remains.

Within these parameters, a more fundamental change has taken place. Recent versions of the test have concentrated questions in the middle difficulty range. That has resulted in getting rather precise measurements of skills in this middle range, but relatively poor measurements of skill levels for either weak or strong test-tak-

The combination of a "speededness" problem and of the decline in the ability of the test to measure the relative level of skills of high ability test-takers suggested that it was an appropriate time to fix the way the test was constructed.

ers. The new test has decreased the proportion of middle difficulty questions and increased the proportion of both easy and hard questions in an attempt to measure the skills of all test-takers with equal accuracy.

The result, of course, is that for most test-takers the test seems harder (there are more hard questions). In fact, since the LSAT is designed under the assumption of a normal, i.e., bell shaped, distribution of test-taker abilities, the test can never be truly harder — unlike an achievement test that can be adjusted to require a greater level of achievement to earn a given score.

What difference will these changes make in the admissions process? Much less than on the admissions processors. From long experience the admissions staff at the Law School and the members of the Admissions Committee "knew" what a 40 on the old scale meant. That knowledge is rapidly declining in value as the presence of applicants with old scores rapidly decreases. The old dogs are learning to adjust their tricks.

But for applicants, the changes make little difference. Students with scores at the 80th percentile on the new test stand about the same chance of gaining admission as did students with scores at the 80th percentile on the old test, save only for changes in the number and quality of the applicant pool at the Law School any increase in which would act to decrease those chances.

Nor will the best way to prepare for the test change. Practice on newly disclosed test forms is still the most effective preparation. ■

John Henry Schlegel is a professor of law and heads the Law School's Admissions Committee. He currently serves on the Test Development and Research Committee of the Law School Admissions Council, the people who create the LSAT.