

LSAT vs. GRE

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In fall 2017, Harvard Law School will not require students to submit a Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score and will accept GRE® General Test (GRE) scores in lieu of LSAT scores. Harvard is not the first law school to nix the LSAT requirement for applications. But the decision by Harvard, one of the most prestigious law schools and one of the schools involved in establishing the LSAT seventy years ago, could signal a broader movement away from dependence on the LSAT.

The LSAT, aimed at predicting applicants' ability to succeed in law school, particularly in the first year, has long been the baseline standard for law school admissions. While the test was envisioned as being one factor in determining a candidate's aptitude for law school, it developed into being the primary factor in determining admission, perhaps due to the correlation between average LSAT score and law school rankings.

While tests like the LSAT are criticized for implicit bias intrinsic in the tests themselves and may weed out applicants who are otherwise qualified and would make significant contributions to the profession, the LSAT may have served a role in opening the gates to a legal education to more people.

Nevertheless, the stated purpose of the Harvard program is to increase access to law school. The change comes at a time when aggregate law school application numbers are down; however, Harvard in contrast to law schools in general, has reported an increase in applications. In an internal study, Harvard has determined that the GRE is a valid predictor of law school success.

The timing of the change in policy could have interesting consequences. While Harvard is not seeing a decline in applications, law schools in general have seen a significant decline in applications for the past several years. In addition, in California, bar exam test takers for the past two-three years are facing historically low bar exam passages rates. Perhaps the low bar exam passage rate in recent years is an anomaly, but it may be a result of schools taking less qualified applicants due to many skilled individuals choosing careers other than the law. Law school officials are scrambling both to fill first-year classes and to explain decreasing bar exam passage rates. I anticipate that many law schools will follow Harvard's lead and begin accepting GRE scores in lieu of LSAT scores. While top tier schools will continue to fill their classes with top talent, expanding the accessibility of applying to law school by accepting the GRE may help keep class sizes up at all laws schools, but will likely not change the quality of student for these schools.

It will be interesting to see the magnitude of the effect of allowing GRE scores in law school admissions at Harvard specifically, and whether the change at Harvard will lead to a similar changes at other law schools. We will all have to stay tuned to see whether such changes increase the quality of students in law school or just the quantity.