Prediction and Selection in Law School Admissions

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Some years ago, a member of our faculty received a letter from an unhappy mother. Her son had been denied admission to the Law School and she had written to ask that his application be reconsidered. After criticizing the admissions committee for having placed too much weight on the traditional numerical factors—the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score and the undergraduate grade point average (GPA)—she suggested that the committee should consider a somewhat different approach. While attending her son's college graduation, she had noticed the license plates of cars that had come from all over the country for the event. She calculated that the amount of fuel consumed in bringing these people to the graduation was staggering. Vast amounts of additional fuel would be needed in the future as classmates traveled to join each other at weddings, reunions, and other meetings. She concluded that the Law School could do its part to conserve gasoline if the admissions committee paid special attention to the distance between an applicant's home and Chicago. This particular family, as I recall, lived in Evanston.

In recent years, many unhappy parents, frustrated applicants, perplexed alumni, and others have questioned how Chicago and other selective law schools make their admissions decisions. The angry mother's reasoning reflects common misconceptions shared by those who can see the process only in terms of who is admitted and, more often, who is denied. Unfortunately, this perspective makes it difficult to appreciate the relationships among a variety of factors contributing to the final decisions. This article will examine those factors and their relationships. One caveat: While I write from the experience of twelve years and 30,000 applications to the Law School, these views are my own and (fortunately) they have not always been shared by every member of the faculty admissions committee.

First, some historical perspective. Prior to the end of World War II, the law school admissions process was quite simple. Someone once suggested that the only number relevant to admissions during that period was 98.6. Any warm body with a college degree had the opportunity to attend law school because even the most selective schools had relatively few applicants for their available spaces. Those who could meet the tough academic standards received their law degrees; those who could not had to leave after the first year. Thus, while there were some efforts to identify those who were "qualified" (i.e., likely) to complete a law school program, the selection function was left largely to the rigors of intellectual competition during the first year of school.

The large cohort of World War II veterans seeking college and graduate educations brought dramatic changes in admissions procedures. Larger applicant pools gave schools the opportunity to make selective judgments about a candidate's ability to handle their academic programs. Not coincidentally, the first LSATs were administered in the late 1940s. During the 1950s, "qualified" was defined by the most selective schools as showing a "high probability" of earning the degree. As application volumes increased again during the 1960s and early 1970s, law schools had as many as ten to fifteen applicants for each available space in the class. In this context, being "qualified" was no longer a relevant test because a majority of the candidates for most schools were capable of meeting academic standards. Although the national applicant pool for law schools began to decline several years ago, some schools continue to have many more capable applicants than they can accom-
An applicant pool that determines the decision on each application and, in turn, the composition and nature of an entering class. Although the more selective undergraduate institutions tend to give the academic and personal considerations equal weight in the admissions process, Chicago and the other selective law schools emphasize academic ability in admissions. Why? First, the intellectual demands of legal education are greater than most work at the undergraduate level, and admissions committees feel it is important to judge how well a student will respond to those demands. This is particularly true at a school, such as Chicago, that emphasizes a rigorous and scholarly approach to the law. Second, our ability to make predictions about academic performance is better than at the undergraduate level because we are looking at more mature candidates with longer academic track records. Finally, because we know what our students will study, we need not be as concerned as undergraduate schools with many of the selection characteristics. While it is desirable to have a mix of poets, physicists, and point guards in the Law School, it is not necessary to ensure their presence. This does not mean that law school admission committees pay no attention to personal attributes. On the contrary, selection characteristics are pivotal in judging the many applicants who are essentially indistinguishable in terms of academic qualifications. To see which applicants those will be, we must first look at the process of predicting academic success.

There is a general belief that the LSAT score and the undergraduate GPA are the major, if not the only, factors involved in the admissions process. Our ability to quantify these two factors—to put them on numerical scales—gives them certain qualities other predictors lack. We can talk about the average LSAT score of an applicant pool but not its average level of maturity. We can compare an applicant's undergraduate GPA to equivalent figures for other candidates at the same undergraduate college much more reliably than we can compare levels of motivation. The most important characteristic of these numbers, however, is our ability to test whether they do what we want them to: predict academic performance in law school. Each year Chicago and most other law schools arrange for validity studies to see how well these numbers predict or correlate with law school performance. Although efforts have been made to correlate these predictors with various skills in law practice or professional promise, they have not been successful because of the inherent difficulty of quantifying these standards. Our validity studies tell us that at Chicago the undergraduate GPA does help to predict performance in law school, that the LSAT is a somewhat better predictor than the GPA, and that the two numbers, when combined in some fashion, provide better prediction than either does separately. While the numbers are helpful as predictors, they are far from perfect. At Chicago, the two combined predictors will explain between fifteen and twenty percent of the variation in academic performance for a typical first-year class. The correlation would be substantially better, of course, if we had a broader range of LSAT scores and GPAs in the class. In other words, the more we narrow the range of the predictors

To Interview or Not to Interview

Most medical schools do it. Many business schools do it. Even some graduate programs do it. For many years, however, law schools have not done it. Chicago is the only law school in the country that systematically interviews a substantial portion of its applicant pool in various locations around the country. We began using evaluative interviews in the mid-1970s primarily out of frustration. The applicant pool had increased in size and quality to the point that the admissions committee found it difficult to distinguish among a large number of very able candidates based on the paper records. While we hoped that the interviews would help us identify more clearly some of the important personal factors, we were aware that the use of interviews presented special problems.

Evaluative interviews are the most subjective aspect of the admissions process. The brevity of the exposure—twenty to thirty minutes—raises serious questions about the reliability of the impressions, particularly in comparison with faculty recommendations. Another major objection was the fairness of requiring all interviewed applicants to come to Chicago because some candidates could more easily afford the trip than others. Finally, there was the question of how much weight we should place on characteristics identified in an interview—poise, language facility, and quickness among others. To deal with these concerns we built into the interviews a number of safeguards. Because we did not expect the interviews to help us predict academic performance—a New York University Law School study some years earlier had established that point—we decided to use the interviews primarily with those candidates where there were not already strong prediction presumptions of admission or rejection. We arranged to conduct the interviews in most locations around the country (sixteen places last year) where we have concentrations of applicants. In most locations, we decided to have two interviewers working together—usually a member of the faculty or administration and a recent graduate—to obtain composite impressions. Graduates who help with the interviews generally spend at least a full day doing them so they will have an overall impression of fifteen to twenty applicants, a reasonable sampling of the pool.

Our experience has been that about half of the interviews create neutral impressions and thus are not much of a factor in making those particular admission decisions. In the other cases, however, favorable and unfavorable impressions are considered along with other selection factors in deciding which applicants to admit. Because interview impressions are not expected to help with academic prediction, it is impossible to judge their effectiveness in the same way we can test the validity of the LSAT scores and GPAs. There is, however, a general recognition among our students and faculty that the interviews help us to put together a more interesting and lively—some might even say "feisty"—entering class. In short, we believe there is a substantial institutional benefit derived from interviewing applicants without any cost in the prediction of academic success.

For people in the entering class by excluding those who have relatively low predictors, the less likely the predictors are to have a high correlation with actual performance. To use a sports analogy: We can expect that taller basketball players will probably make more rebounds than shorter ones. If all of the players on a team are selected on the basis of height and they are all very tall, the number of rebounds they will actually make, in comparison to each other, will have little to do with the small differences in their respective heights.

Once we know that LSAT scores and GPAs are useful in predicting academic performance, we can state as a general principle that the higher the LSAT score and the higher the GPA, the more likely it is that a particular applicant will perform well in law school. This likelihood establishes the prediction presumptions of the admissions process. To see how the process works, we must divide the applicant pool into groups that correspond to certain LSAT score and GPA ranges. In the accompanying diagram (page 20), the horizontal lines represent differences in GPAs and the vertical lines represent differences in LSAT scores. We can sort our applicants by placing individuals in the groups that correspond to their own LSAT scores and GPAs. Those applicants in the upper right hand corner will have both the highest LSAT scores and GPAs; those in the lower left hand corner will have the lowest. Based upon the results of our validity studies, we can establish the probability of academic success for any particular group of applicants. Thus, we could expect that perhaps ninety percent of the applicants in the upper right hand corner would do at least average work in law school but only five percent of those in the lower left hand section would do average work. The prediction question then becomes one of identifying which applicants within a particular section will be the successful students and which will be the unsuccessful ones. In essence, we have to ask ourselves how confident we are in making such distinctions among similar candidates, where the quantifiable factors suggest that most in a particular range will do well or most will not.

This process of dividing the applicant pool by LSAT scores and GPAs might be called a quantifiable factor sort because it is based upon the two factors in the application that can be easily quantified. We could stop at this point, as some law schools do, and simply admit all of the applicants in each section of our diagram, moving from the upper right hand corner toward the lower left hand corner, until we had filled the class. Such a procedure would reflect the belief that we cannot improve on predic-
tion by looking at individual applications and that the personal or selection factors should play no role in the admissions process. But it is my impression that only a very few law schools—none of the most selective ones—stop at this point.

How can we improve prediction by looking at individual applications? We can do this by making GPA adjustments which reflect our subjective judgments about individual academic records. Returning to the diagram, this would involve the movement of applicants up or down among vertical groups within the same LSAT range. Since not all 3.5 GPAs are created equal, we should not be surprised to discover that the LSAT, a standardized measure of all applicants, has been a better predictor than the unadjusted GPA. The overall quality of the undergraduate school attended and its grading practices will often be important considerations in adjusting the GPA. The quality of an undergraduate school is judged by the past performances of its graduates who have attended the Law School and, more generally, by the performances of all its students who have taken the LSAT in recent years. This adjustment favors students who have attended the most selective colleges and universities. In addition, the grading patterns and distribution will vary substantially among institutions. A 3.5 GPA at one institution might put a student in the top ten percent of the class while at another college a student with a 3.5 might be only in the top half of the class. A student's actual or estimated class percentile ranking is often more helpful information than the GPA.

A centralized data base, maintained by the Law School Admission Council, provides information from which these adjustments can be made. Finally, applicants' transcripts are reviewed to determine the difficulty of the courses taken. Letters of recommendation from professors play a particularly important role. The admissions committee tries to identify the extent to which an applicant has demonstrated analytical skills and the ability to speak and write with precision, fluency, and economy. Having made adjustments based on the examination of individual academic records, we have probably refined the predictive power of the admissions process about as far as possible. We could stop at this point, go back to our diagram, and begin to admit people in the upper right hand corner based upon our refined evaluation of their academic ability. At this stage, our decision to admit most applicants in the upper right hand corner and deny most applicants in the lower left hand corner will reflect our realization that we probably cannot "beat the odds" by trying to identify the few who will not perform as predicted. But as we move to the center of our applicant pool our confidence in the academic distinctions between applicants diminishes. It is at this point that we rely more heavily on selection or personal characteristics in deciding which applicants to admit.

Earlier in this article I indicated that the task for admissions committees with too many academically qualified applicants is to identify those most able and most likely to take advantage of a school's educational opportunities and most likely to enrich the opportunities of their classmates. Our efforts to improve prediction are directed primarily at judging an applicant's ability to make use of what the school has to offer; looking at the personal characteristics helps us determine the likelihood that an applicant will use that ability in law school and will contribute to an interesting and stimulating educational environment. What follows is a discussion of the personal factors that our admissions committee has considered in recent years. The relative weight given to these factors varies depending upon our ability to identify them and judge their significance. In order to make these judgments we look at the personal statements and letters of recommendation contained in most applications. We will also give evaluative interviews to approximately twenty percent of our candidates.
The nature of legal education—large classes, the case method, and substantial amounts of material to be mastered—make some personality traits especially relevant in judging the likelihood that an applicant will make the most of his or her education. Students will often learn as much from their classmates as from the faculty. Thus, interaction among students is an important feature of legal education, and those who enjoy engaging in discussion in and outside of class are more likely to flourish in this atmosphere. This is particularly true in a small law school such as Chicago, where every student is expected to contribute to the educational community. The student who is intellectually alive and curious is more likely to stimulate classmates and faculty, and sustain academic progress between examinations. A student must be diligent and well organized to handle large quantities of material. A well-developed sense of humor is helpful in adjusting to the pressures that many students will experience in law school.

Applicants and their advocates often point with pride to extensive lists of extracurricular activities and accomplishments. While there are obvious difficulties in judging the significance of these items in most applications, there are a number of applicants each year whose accomplishments clearly impress the admissions committee. These are generally students who have made a substantial commitment to a nonacademic activity—the college newspaper, varsity athletics, public service involvement, or part-time employment—while maintaining a strong academic record. Moreover, approximately forty percent of the students currently in the Law School were out of college for at least a year before beginning their legal studies. Many of these students had extensive work experience or graduate training in a variety of disciplines. The admissions committee believes that such students contribute useful perspectives to the classroom.

Chicago's Applicant Pool

To a large extent, the overall quality of a particular law school's applicant pool, expressed in terms of LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs, will determine an individual candidate's chances of admission. We received approximately 2600 applications for the 175 places in our 1984 entering class. The median LSAT score for the pool as a whole was at the 87th percentile in the country and the median GPA was a 3.42 on a 4.0 point scale (i.e., A=4, B=3, C=2, and D=1) which is about the 75th percentile nationally. For the admitted applicants, the median LSAT score was at the 97th percentile and the median GPA was 3.75, about the 93rd percentile. As impressive as these numbers are, perhaps the most striking statistics about the applicant pool—and the ones that most clearly reflect the importance of the personal characteristics—are the following: forty-five percent of our applicants who had LSAT scores at or above the admission median (97th percentile) and forty-six percent of our applicants who had GPAs at or above the admission median (3.75) were not offered admission. The diagram below represents the percentages of applicants who were admitted in various LSAT score and GPA ranges.

LSAT SCORE PERCENTILES

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<th>GPA</th>
<th>Below 3.25</th>
<th>3.25-3.49</th>
<th>3.50-3.74</th>
<th>Above 3.74</th>
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<td>Below 71</td>
<td>71-80</td>
<td>81-90</td>
<td>91-95</td>
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<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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"The most frequently asked question about the admissions process is 'How much weight do you put on ______?'.... there is no simple answer to that question...."
The Toughest Cases

The predictive power of the LSAT score and the GPA is such that when they both point in the same direction, either relatively high or low, we feel comfortable using presumptions of admission or rejection. But what do we do when they appear to be inconsistent? The toughest admission cases each year are those in which one of the predictors is relatively high and the other is relatively low. These are applications which fall in the upper left and lower right hand corners of our applicant pool.

To the extent that one believes that the LSAT score indicates ability and the GPA represents performance, the high LSAT score-low GPA combination seems to present an easier problem. With applicants in this situation we look for reasons why the candidate might not have performed up to ability in college. Perhaps it was love, or football, or the wrong major, or just immaturity. Under these circumstances an applicant who "saw the light" in the last year or two of college is likely to look more attractive than one who has a consistently mediocre academic record. By the same reasoning, we are more likely to favor an applicant who puts several years of impressive work experience or strong graduate academic performance between college and his or her application to law school. We are sufficiently confident about the stimulating nature of a legal education to believe that we can turn underachievers into strong performers.

Applicants with excellent academic records and relatively weak LSAT scores generally argue that their strong academic records suggest the unreliability of the LSAT scores as predictors for them. They question how a three and one-half hour examination can carry as much weight as three and one-half or more years of sustained academic performance. While the underachiever points to potential, which he or she is now ready to realize, the applicant with a strong record and a low LSAT score points to past performance and urges that the test score be disregarded.

This year a faculty recommendation letter described an applicant with high grades and a low LSAT score as "a strong student who compensates with extraordinary effort when he lacks the acuity of sheer intelligence." There is a general view among those who read our applications that extraordinary effort in college, when many students may be "otherwise engaged," may yield higher grades than it does in law school when all students are working hard. Beyond that, there is the concern that a college student who has devoted all of his attention to academics may not have the extra ability to manage more demanding work in law school. In these situations, the admissions committee pays particularly close attention to the transcript and recommendation letters for guidance in resolving the inconsistency between the LSAT score and the GPA. Attendance at weaker undergraduate institutions or participation in apparently undemanding academic programs—frequently characterized as a "wind-assisted transcript" by a former member of the admissions committee—can be fatal to an applicant's chances. Thus, applicants with high GPAs and low LSAT scores who are admitted each year have usually followed very rigorous academic programs at the most selective colleges and have faculty references who make convincing arguments on their behalf.

Year to encourage admitted minority candidates to visit the Law School and meet with current students and members of the faculty.

Although professional promise is likely to be consistent with academic promise, there are some selection characteristics that may be of particular relevance to the careers of our graduates. While these traits are often the most difficult to identify, the admissions committee is responsive to clear demonstrations of leadership, good judgment, and common sense.

One final selection characteristic deserves mention. When relatives of Law School or University graduates and current students apply for admission, the Law School, of course, considers it legitimate and indeed desirable to give some weight to institutional ties and traditions. The admissions committee tries to take these institutional ties into account when reviewing "close cases." It has been

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my experience that our students and graduates have been very understanding about the limited extent to which such considerations can be used. They recognize, along with the admissions committee, that the continued preeminence of the Law School depends on a merit-based admissions process.

The most frequently asked question about the admissions process is "How much weight do you put on . . . ?" I have tried to demonstrate that at the Law School there is no simple answer to that question, regardless of which factor is being considered. Even the prediction factors will have varying degrees of importance depending on the circumstances of the individual application. Selection characteristics will play some role in most decisions, but their importance will increase as our prediction abilities diminish. My description of selection characteristics has been broad but hardly exhaustive. I think it accurately reflects the general approach our admissions committee has taken in recent years. But if there is another oil crisis, all bets are off.