Should Law Schools Require the LSAT?
*The Admission Test Is Now Under Review by the American Bar Association*
By Reshma Kirpalani
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"I did average," said Mitchell about his performance on the test. "I've always wanted to go to a top-tier school, so my score is well below what top-tier schools normally accept. I would have felt better applying if I would have been more confident in my score, but I did what I could do."

Now, a Standards Review Committee from the American Bar Association may recommend an end to the LSAT requirement for law schools, and make it optional.

"With a tentative vote, a majority was in favor of eliminating the requirement," David Yellen, a member of the 14-person committee and dean of Loyola University Chicago School of Law, told ABC News.

Currently, accredited law schools require a "valid and reliable" admissions test to "assist the school and the applicants in assessing the applicants' capability."

Traditionally, this test has been the Law School Accreditation School, or LSAT.

According to Donald Polden, committee chair and dean of Santa Clara Law, in Santa Clara, Calif., the LSAT has shown to be a reliable predictor of first-year performance for law school applicants, but "not how they will finish or what type of lawyer they will be," Polden emphasized.

So far, first-year UT law student Claire Smyser agrees. "I think that if you have a lot of trouble on the LSAT, then I wouldn't be surprised if you have a lot of trouble in law school because it tests the same type of reasoning," she said.

Why Drop the LSAT?

In light of changing college admission policies that make SATs or ACTs optional, Polden said the ABA is likewise evaluating the LSAT.

Waiver programs at several law schools at state universities already exempt these schools from the LSAT requirement for state residents who have graduated from their own universities.

"If the ABA can be giving waivers here and there, then [the LSAT] really isn't a full requirement and why not just say it's not a requirement?" said Yellen.

Diversifying Law Schools

An impetus behind such waiver programs and the potential elimination of the LSAT requirement is to help diversify law school student bodies.
"It's been definitively demonstrated that there's a significant test gap for African Americans whether you're talking about the SAT or the LSAT," he said. "There's a smaller gap for Hispanics, but still significant."

"A Disturbing Trend in Law School Diversity," published in 2009 by Columbia University School of Law in New York City and the Society of American Law Teachers, demonstrated a lag among African-American and Mexican-American law school admissions, even as these minority groups continued to apply to law schools in relatively constant numbers.

Statistics from the same study show spikes in the rates at which African Americans and Mexican Americans have been shut out of law schools from 2003 to 2008: 61 percent for African-American applicants and 46 percent for Mexican-American applicants as compared with 34 percent for Caucasians.

U.S. News and World Report Rankings

Yellen points to law school rankings such as those published in U.S. News & World Report as a possible reason behind this trend. The website publishes yearly law school rankings heavily based on the median LSAT score of a law school's incoming class.

According to Robert Morse, director of data research for U.S. News, law school admissions data counts for 25 percent of their annual Best Law Schools rankings. A majority of low scores from minorities can lower the median score for an incoming class and thereby drop the school's national ranking.

The importance of rankings reaches across the academic spectrum. John Hotard, former director of career services for the Fordham Graduate School of Business, in New York, said that for mid-or third-tier universities, "rankings and revenue are very closely attached." According to Hotard, higher rankings for these schools translate into a higher number of applicants.

"Schools are businesses, and admissions are marketing departments of all schools," Hotard told ABC News. "The prestige of a university is definitely based on keeping classrooms full."