

Supplemental Information on the “National Grade”

Richard Sander, June 2005

The “national grade” is a measure that attempts to standardize undergraduate grade point averages (UGPAs) across the spectrum of four-year colleges. It does so by taking advantage of data LSAC generates on law school applicants. LSAC provides information on the distribution of LSAC scores among applicants at each college (e.g., 10% of applicants from College X score in the top 5% of the LSAT distribution). LSAC also provides the GPA distribution of applicants from each College (e.g., 10% of applicants from College X had grades of 3.8 or above).

The principle behind the national grade is that, for the large number of students at any college taking the LSAT and applying to law school, the average LSAT of cohorts at an individual school will be highly correlated with grades. One can predict with some confidence that if students at College X with a 3.5 have an average LSAT score of 160 in 2004, then students with the same GPA at the same college will score close to 160 the following year as well, and students with a 3.3 will have a lower average LSAT (say 155). By the same reasoning, if a GPA of 3.5 at College X is associated with the same average LSAT as a GPA of 3.7 at College Z, then these two different GPAs can be treated as academically equivalent.

To calculate a national grade, we estimate the LSAT percentile associated with each 0.2 increment of GPA (e.g., 3.0, 3.2, 3.4, 3.6) by using the LSAC mentioned above. If students with GPAs of 3.6 have average LSAT scores at the 82nd percentile at College X, then a 3.6 is given a national grade of 820; if those with a GPA of 3.8 have average LSAT scores at the 90th percentile, then a 3.8 at College X is given a national grade of 900. For intermediate GPAs between 3.6 and 3.8, we use linear interpolation: in this example, a 3.61 would be given a national grade of $[820 + 1/20 (900-820)]$ or 824, and a 3.61 would be given a national grade of 828.

National grades make UGPAs significantly more predictive of future law school performance, because they adjust UGPA both for college quality and for grade inflation at various colleges. Thus, a 3.0 at Swarthmore carries a relatively high national grade (746) because Swarthmore both has very strong students and comparatively stringent grading. Stanford students are academically comparable to Swarthmore students, but the school has notoriously high grade inflation, so a 3.0 at Stanford has a much lower national grade (575), comparable to the academically less elite but harder-grading University of Illinois at Urbana (where a 3.0 has a national grade of 560).

The real strength of national grades is that they provide a logical, consistent mechanism for comparing UGPAs across schools. But they have real limitations that users should keep in mind. For one thing, national grades are based only on data about law students, who of course are not randomly distributed across the curricula of the colleges they attend. Law students tend to be concentrated in majors like history, political science, and economics, which often have

different grading patterns than other departments. Thus, using these national grades to compare biology majors at different schools could be misleading.

More seriously, national grades are premised on the idea that, for large groups, LSAT scores will correlate very highly with UGPAs. Some groups of students – e.g., women – tend to get somewhat lower LSAT scores given a particular UGPA. If all colleges have similar proportions of men and women, then this skewness won't matter, because the national grade is modeled on the scores of groups, not individuals, and the groups are comparable. But national grades at an all-women's college could be biased downward somewhat.

By approximately June 20th, I will be reposting the National Survey of Law Student Performance with national grades added to the database as a new variable. Researchers who wish to examine an actual “national grade” table, to check my results or to code their own student databases, can make arrangements with me to use the table at UCLA. Because this data has value to the school for its own admissions procedures, I will not be posting comprehensive national grade tables online or mailing out hard copies.