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NOTE added in 2019:

Beginning in the year 1967, the University of Michigan Law School conducted an annual survey of selected alumni classes. The survey was administered by mail for forty consecutive years until 2006, upon the retirements of the survey's long-time co-directors, David L. Chambers and Terry K. Adams. In 2014, the survey was revived by Professor J. J. Prescott and continued annually thereafter online.

The following memorandum is one of a group of memoranda Chambers wrote in 2009 and 2010 – after the survey project was suspended but before its revival – on a range of topics that the initial forty years of data permit exploring. Some of the memoranda evolved into publications. The memo here did not. Thus, the accuracy of the tables and other statistical figures in this memo have not been double-checked as they would have been if formally published. To verify the claims here and for access to additional data from years after the Project was revived, qualified researchers may apply for access to the full Project dataset. For guidance, go to https://repository.law.umich.edu/alumni_survey/alumni_survey_dataset.html.

For important background information on the Project, the reader is encouraged to read The University of Michigan Law School Alumni Survey Project: Description, Scope and Limits, a seven-page memo available on this website.

https://repository.law.umich.edu/alumni_survey_scholarship/

For a fuller discussion of graduates' satisfaction with their law school experience, see Satisfaction with Law School among Graduates of the University of Michigan Law School, Classes of 1952-2001 (2019). https://repository.law.umich.edu/alumni_survey_scholarship/

David Chambers

File: Alumpaper-law school grades
April 24, 2009 (with some editing 2019)

Law School Grades and Their Effects: The University of Michigan Law School Alumni Survey

David L. Chambers

I am not a neutral observer on the subject of grades. No part of teaching was more discouraging to me than the task of grading examinations. Except in the coarsest terms, I doubted they measured what students actually took away from my courses. I believed the harm low grades did to the egos of many of our students outweighed the boosts that high grades provided to the egos of students who did well. As my colleague JJ White often said in a different context, for Michigan's students losing feels worse than winning feels good. I regretted especially the harm I thought grades did to the self-confidence of our minority students, whom we admitted with lower LSAT scores than white students knowing we would subject them to a forced grading curve, and thus knowing that, as a group, they could be confidently predicted in advance to end up disproportionately at the bottom of their classes. I also regretted giving an A+ to the guy who sat in the back row with his baseball cap turned backwards and who never volunteered in class.

I do not believe that my biases have distorted the findings I have reported on the following pages, but the reader should be on guard.

1. Rising grades

First, a bit about the Michigan's Law School's grading system. Throughout the half century of classes we surveyed, the school has had at heart the same grading scheme, a 4-point system with A+ the highest passing grade and C the lowest passing grade. All courses that students took were graded, though in the 1970s the school added the option of taking a limited number of upperclass courses on a pass/fail basis. But there has been a dramatic change over time in the distribution of grades.

Despite the fact that, throughout the period we studied, the grading system rested on a system of As, Bs, and Cs (and some Ds), there was a great change over time in the distributions of the letters. A person with a C+ (or 2.5) average in 1952 stood in a very different place in his class than a student with the same C+ average in 1982 or 2002. See Table 1 below.

Table 1
 Gradepoint Averages by Decade of Graduation

	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-01
	n=1882	n=3028	n=3656	n=3726	n=3780	n=671
Final GPA (mean)	2.53	2.70	3.07	3.14	3.23	3.27
Percent of class with Final GPA of 2.5 or less	54%	37%	12%	8%	3%	1%
Percent of class with final GPA of 3.4 or more (Honors now)	5%	8%	25%	29%	34%	35%

File: gr09 (aslon)

As can be seen, in the classes we surveyed from the 1950s, over half the graduates finished law school with gradepoint averages of 2.5 or less. Fewer than a fifth had gradepoints above 3.0 (not visible in the table) and only 5 percent had gradepoints above 3.4. The distribution started to change dramatically in the early 1960s, with the number of Cs plummeting and the numbers of Bs and As rising, a change that continued through the 1970s. By the classes that graduated in the 1980s, only 8 percent of the graduates had averages below 2.5, 68 percent had averages above 3.0, and 29 percent had gradepoints above 3.4. By the early 2000s, almost no one, barely 1 percent, had an average below 2.5 and 83 percent were above 3.0.

Why have grades risen? I initially assumed it was because we on the faculty became soft-hearted. I was surprised to find, through regressions, that much of the swift rise in average grades in the 1960s and into the 1970s can be explained by the rise in the qualifications of the students, for it was precisely during this same period that the law school became much more selective, a greater shift in selectivity than most people remember today. In the 1950s, the average LSAT of the graduating classes was only in the 74th percentile nationally. By the 1960s, it had risen to the 84th percentile and by the 1970s to the 94th percentile. Thus, in decreasing the numbers of Cs in the 1960s and 1970s faculty might well have been applying its same old standards and simply rewarding performance that seemed, on average, genuinely better. Grades have continued to edge up slightly in the 30 years since the 1970s, but there wasn't a lot of room left for entry credentials to rise. In the classes that are in the law school now (2009), the mean is in the 97th percentile.

2. Why Some Students Attained Higher Grades than Others.

Can the data available to us help explain why some students do better than others? We can't say a lot beyond the partial explanation provided by entry credentials. Over the 40 years, we can account for 30 to 40 or so percent of the variance in law school gradepoint average simply on the basis of LSAT scores and undergraduate grades. 30 to 40 percent of variance is a

very high percentage to be able to explain given the rather narrow range of LSAT scores and undergraduate grades within the selective group who make up Michigan's classes.

We can say very little about personal characteristics or attributes that correlate with higher grades after LSATs and UGPA are taken into account. Women have performed as well as men, younger students as well as older, those who majored in the humanities as well as those who majored in science or engineering.

Much more analysis could be done with the data than I have done, but I'll mention one unusual sort of data that we have in the Michigan dataset that does seem to correlate with law school grades. Our survey asked graduates to compare themselves to other attorneys their age with regard to a range of qualities and skills, on a scale from 1 to 7 ranging from much less than most to much more than most. Among the qualities we asked about were aggressiveness, self-confidence and skill at deal-making. None of those three particular qualities correlated significantly with law school grades, but two other qualities we asked about did. One was the graduates' self-assessment of their effectiveness as a writer. Michigan graduates in general believed that they write better than other attorneys their age, but even after taking entry credentials into account, those who thought they were especially good writers did better in law school than others. The other self-assessed quality that correlated with higher grades even after taking entry credentials into account was their self-comparison with others about how compulsive they were about work. The more compulsive about work they saw themselves when surveyed 5, 15, and 25 years after law school, the higher the grades they were likely to have attained in law school.

3. Effects of Grades on Satisfaction with Law School

Students' grades during law school did not, of course, determine whether they were eligible to eat in the Lawyers Club. It didn't determine whether or not they got a date on Saturday night. It didn't affect the amount of their tuition. Still, no one can teach first-year law students and miss the pervasive place that grades play in the law school environment. Let's look briefly at the relationship between grades and satisfaction with law school. First a bit on what we know about satisfaction. On the survey for many years, we asked graduates on a 7-point scale how satisfied they were with their law school experience intellectually, socially, as career training and overall. See Table 2.

Table 2
Satisfaction with aspects of Law School on 7-point scale, 7 being the most satisfied,
for Classes 5, 15, 25, 35, and 45 years out of law school

	Intellectually		Career Training		Socially		Overall	
	Mean	Q.S.*	Mean	Q.S.*	Mean	Q.S.*	Mean	Q.S.*
Graduates 5 yrs out	5.70	68%	4.79	36%	4.79	41%	5.21	50%
Graduates 15 yrs out	5.86	73%	5.19	48%	4.75	37%	5.40	55%
Graduates 25 yrs out	5.89	74%	5.30	51%	4.69	33%	5.37	54%
Graduates 35 yrs out	6.22	82%	5.74	66%	5.19	46%	5.84	71%
Graduates 45 yrs out	6.43	88%	6.00	73%	5.49	55%	6.10	78%

* Q.S. = Quite Satisfied, Categories 6 or 7 out of 7

The table reveals some strong patterns. If you look across any line, you see that every group of graduates by years out of law school was more satisfied with law school “intellectually” than with either other aspect of law school or with law school overall. Similarly, with one exception, every group of graduates by years out of law school was *less* satisfied with law school “socially” than with either other aspect or with satisfaction overall.”

Similarly, if you look *down* the columns, you see that, with a few exceptions, the longer that respondents have been out of law school at the time that they are surveyed, the more satisfied they are with each aspect of their law school experience. Indeed, as to each aspect, the difference between the satisfaction of the 5 year graduates and the 35 and 45 year graduates is quite large, especially with regard to their satisfaction with law school as career training and their satisfaction with law school overall.

Examining to see what information other than years out of law school helps illuminate why some graduates were more satisfied with law school than others, we examined satisfaction by many pieces of information available to us: for example, sex, race, age at start of law school, political attitudes during law school (liberal to conservative), occupation of parents, marital status during law school, whether they were summer starters, how much debt they accumulated during law school, LSAT score, and law school grades. Among all of these one stands out more than any other: law school grades. (aslon run: gr05v, printout satisfaction 6i) Grades is the strongest predictor we have not only of satisfaction with law school overall and law school intellectually, but also of law school as career training and even with law school socially. One might have hoped that those who did less well in law school at least had more fun while they were here, but, no, the higher the graduates’ grades the more satisfied they were with the law school as a social experience. (gr05v) The pervasive relationship between grades and law school satisfaction holds true not just for graduates surveyed 5 years or 15 years out but also those surveyed after they’ve been away 25, 35 and 45 years. Grades never lose their grip. After controlling for grades, very few other pieces of information we had contribute much to

understanding overall satisfaction with law school. Black graduates and graduates who recalled themselves as far left politically were, for example, somewhat less happy with their law school experience, but grades remains by far the strongest predictor of law school satisfaction.

TABLE 3

Satisfaction with Law School Overall,
by Ranges of Final Law School Gradepoint Average,
and by years out of law school when surveyed.
Means, on 1 to 7 scale.

		Bottom 20% gpa	Next to bottom 20% gpa	Middle 20%	Next to top 20% gpa	Highest 20% gpa
Graduates 5 years out	6237	4.68	4.92	5.16	5.41	5.71
Graduates 15 years out	5861	4.82	5.16	5.36	5.61	5.89
Graduates 25 years out	2193	4.84	5.03	5.32	5.63	5.81
Graduates 35 years out	1875	5.41	5.60	5.81	6.01	6.33
Graduates 45 years out	1323	5.85	5.92	5.94	6.18	6.46

File: gr10 (aslon)

2. The role of grades after law school

a. Grades and Obtaining First Jobs

In this country, grades apparently count more in the initial jobs of law students than they do for the students in any other sort of post-graduate education. It's understandable why: first employers generally haven't had anything better to go on. Employers have little to go on because most law students have quite limited relevant work histories before law school and because few law students form mentoring relationships with faculty members who can provide well-grounded recommendations. This reliance of employers on grades will come as no surprise to our readers and our analysis simply confirms the reliance. Decade after decade, those who receive judicial clerkships tend to have higher gradepoints than students who do not have clerkships and, after any clerkship, those who entered law firms as their first job tended to have, on average, higher grades than those who took initial jobs in business or government or legal services. Similarly, decade after decade, among those who took jobs in law firms, the higher the graduates' grades in law school the larger the firm with which he was likely to take a first job.

To be sure, grades' effects on the job opportunities of Michigan graduates have changed over time, because opportunities in private law firms have changed. During the late 70s and early 80s most already large firms grew huge and many once small firms grew large. At the same

time, the numbers of students graduating from elite law schools across the country remained nearly constant. Put simply, the supply of new elite-school graduates changed very little, while demand for them surged. Firms that hadn't interviewed at Michigan in the past came to Ann Arbor in large numbers. Firms that *had* interviewed in the past but had considered only law review students began making offers to students with lower grades. By the end of the 1990s, roughly half the students in the lower half of Michigan's classes (by gradepoint) were taking jobs in firms of more than 100 lawyers. To be sure, even within the large firms grades continued to make a difference in hiring. Particularly prestigious firms like Cravath or Covington & Burling continued to hire only from the top of Michigan's classes. But what the change in opportunities meant most broadly was that Michigan graduates in ranges of gradepoints across their classes had access to jobs in law firms of all sizes.

Another difference that occurred over time also affected job choices and the relationship between grades and first jobs. In the 1950s and 1960s and even into the early 1970s, there was only a modest difference between the starting salaries in law firms and the starting salaries in government agencies. There was also only a modest difference between the initial salaries in smallish firms of 10 lawyers and the big firms then of 50 or more lawyers. Thus, on average, in both the 50s and the 60s, in their first year out of law school, the students in the bottom 40 percent of their classes earned as much on average as the students in the top 40 percent. Significant disparities of earnings by grades began in the late 1970s when the large firms began raising opening salaries at a much higher pace than other legal employers raised theirs. (gr07a1)

b. The relevance of grades in later years

We'd like to have been able to examine the relationship between grades and the quality of our graduates' actual performances as attorneys over the years after law school. Do grades correlate with effectiveness in oral or written advocacy, or with effectiveness in negotiation or in drafting agreements or with understanding clients' problems or making clients feel satisfied with the lawyers' services. Sad to say, of course, we have no direct information on what clients or other lawyers thought about the quality of the lawyering of our respondents. The only clue we have about competence, quite indirect, is the value put on our graduates' services by the marketplace as reflected in earnings, and particularly the earnings of those in the private sector. Income, even in the private sector, is for many reasons an imperfect measure of competence, but it's the only one we have. Here is the question we put to ourselves: do graduates who attained high grades in law school earn more than others 15, 25 and 35 years after they graduate?

The short answer is yes. We find that just as higher grades go along with higher earned incomes in the first year, so too, among our graduates, they are strongly and positively related to

earned income 15, 25, and 35 years after law school.¹ Consider, for example, private practitioners 15, 25, and 35 years after law school and see the relationship between their grades and the earnings they reported for the calendar year prior to the year we surveyed them. See Table 4.

Table 4

Mean earnings (adjust for inflation into 2007 dollars)
of Private Practitioners 14, 24, and 34 years after graduation,
by law school grades

	14 years after graduation		24 years after graduation		34 years after graduation	
	n=	mean earnings	n=	mean earnings	n=	mean earnings
GPA, lowest 20 percent	655	\$191,000	112	\$225,400	145	\$226,900
GPA, second lowest 20 pct	866	\$211,400	187	\$283,900	178	\$251,100
GPA, middle 20 percent	1010	\$234,400	260	\$292,000	210	\$290,500
GPA, second highest percent	1016	\$246,800	261	\$321,000	196	\$363,800
GPA, highest 20 percent	1124	\$307,900	280	\$482,100	213	\$420,600
<i>Total</i>	<i>4671</i>	<i>\$244,400</i>	<i>1100</i>	<i>\$339,100</i>	<i>942</i>	<i>\$318,000</i>

File: gr06b3

Why do grades and earnings continue to correlate strongly so many years after law school? One hypothesis would be that some set of personal qualities people with high law school grades tend to have – strong analytic skills, craftiness at figuring out what others want, good work habits, whatever – are also attributes that contribute to making money. A different hypothesis, one that might operate together with the first hypothesis, would be that those with the highest grades are the ones who, as their first job, get the opportunity to work in the highest paying settings or in the settings (such as federal judicial clerkships) that open the most doors for the future and that, having been given this initial break, those with high grades keep getting breaks and keep making money for reasons that have little or nothing to do with their special talents. Our data suggest that both explanations have force. That is, in regressions on income 14 years, 24 years and 34 years after law school, we find that the more a graduate earned in his first job (after any judicial clerkship) the more he or she was likely to earn 15 years and 25 years and 35 years later, but we also find that even among graduates who had similar first-year incomes the ones with higher grades earned more years later than the ones with lower grades.² Law school grades, that is, seem to remain independently related to income. (gr06c1(all), gr06c1a (PP)).

¹ At 45 years after law school, the factor most strongly related to earned income is hours worked. Most of these graduates, now in their 70s, reported working only part-time.

² Another probable explanation why the graduates with higher grades earned more in later years is that, among those who started out in large firms, those with the higher grades stayed with those firms longer than those who had lower grades. (gr08).

And the benefit in income that grades provide isn't trivial. Consider, for example, those in private practice 15 years after law school and think of grades in ranges of percentiles, the lowest 10 percent of GPA to the highest 10 percent. For each additional 10 percent range a private practitioner was higher in GPA in his class, the average private practitioner earned an additional \$13,900 each year in inflation adjusted dollars, even after taking into account his first years income and whether his first job was in a large firm. At 25 years out, each additional 10 percent range a graduate was higher in his class was worth an additional \$19,700 dollars. If the 25 year grad had been in the top ten percent of the class – in the first to tenth percentile, he earned on average nearly \$100,000 more in his 25th year than his classmate in the 50th to 60th percentile, even if he and the other grad had earned the same amount in their first year after law school.³

I've wondered whether many of those who had high grades and who earned very high incomes 15 and 25 years out might have taken different directions with their careers if they hadn't earned so much in the settings where they started out.⁴ As a group, they were, when we surveyed them, highly satisfied with their incomes but comparatively dissatisfied with the social value of their work. At the same time it is also the case that, in comparison with their classmates working in government or public interest work, the very high earners say they care much more about making lots of money and care somewhat less about the impact of their work on society than those working in public service say about themselves. (gr08a).

³ I was curious whether among the very high earners grades made a difference. Of the 4502 graduates who responded to our income questions when surveyed between 1997 and 2006 when they'd been out 25, 35 or 45 years, 174 or about 4 percent reported earning more than \$1 million in the year before we surveyed them. (Test43b.) As money goes, these were the superstars, the Dean's best friends. What sorts of grades did this group earn in law school? Among the highest earners, there were graduates at every level of grade point, but the highest earners were not evenly distributed across the grade distribution. Of the million dollar earners, only 11 percent came from the bottom fifth of the class, while 39 percent came from the top fifth, with the other fifths of the classes arrayed in between. The figures are even more skewed among the larger number of graduates (538) who reported earning half a million dollars or more -- 8 percent had grades in the bottom 20 percent of the class, 39 percent came from the top fifth. Test 43c.

⁴ Those in firms of 150 or more in the top 30 percent of their class by grades earned on average \$378,100 if they'd been out 15 years and \$648,200 if they'd been out 25 years. Gr08a.