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The University of Michigan Law School Alumni Survey Project: Description, Scope and Limits

Abstract

For 41 consecutive years, from 1966 through 2006, the University of Michigan Law School surveyed by mail its graduates after they had been out of law school for 15 years, asking questions about their lives since law school and particularly about their careers as lawyers. Beginning in 1973, the graduates five years out of law school were added to the survey and beginning in 1997, the classes twenty-five, thirty-five and forty-five years out were added as well. Across the 41 years of mail surveys, 79 percent of graduates responded to at least one survey. The survey project was suspended between 2007 and 2013 and revived in 2014 and has been conducted online each year thereafter. The memo that follows, written in 2009, provides basic information about the substantive coverage and scale of the survey project as well as about response rates and the representativeness of the respondents.

Researchers may apply for access to the full dataset for the years 1967-2006 and 2014 forward. See https://repository.law.umich.edu/alumni_survey/alumni_survey_dataset.html

The University of Michigan Law School Alumni Survey Project: Description, Scope and Limits

A. Short History of the Survey Project

Sometime in the fall of 1965, Blyth Stason, then dean of the University of Michigan Law School, approved a proposal from Richard Wellman, then a young professor, to survey the graduates of the class of 1951 about their careers “in order to test the utility of comprehensive information about graduates.” He picked the class of 1951 because it would soon be observing its fifteen reunion and because, as he put it in a later report, “fifteen years after graduation was long enough for careers to be well settled, and yet not so long as to make its members unresponsive to law school inquiries.” The faculty found the results of the first survey interesting enough that the survey was continued each year thereafter. In 1973, shortly before he left the law school to take an appointment at another school, Wellman added to the project an annual survey the classes five years out of law school.

In 1980, after a few years of administration by law school staff members Jane Dodge and at a point at which the school was considering ending the survey, David Chambers took over the supervision of the project. Chambers, who had joined the faculty thirteen year before, recruited Terry Adams, a graduate of the law school and research scientist at the Institute for Social Research. Chambers and Adams had at that point just completed work on another seemingly endless empirical project.¹ Chambers and Adams modified and expanded the questionnaire and from that point on oversaw the project together. For the first decade that Chambers and Adams worked together, Mary Louise Lowther handled the mailing of surveys and the coding of information from responses and from law school records. In 1997, Chambers and Adams enlarged the survey by adding the graduates 25, 35 and 45 years out of law school, and over the next decade, surveyed these older graduates, all of whom had previously been surveyed when they were fifteen years out of law school. All surveying for the Project was suspended in 2006, when both Chambers and Adams had retired. The Project was revived by Professor J.J. Prescott in 2014 and has been conducted each year online ever since. This memo deals solely with the surveys conducted through 2006.

¹ Making Fathers Pay (University of Chicago Press 1979) (a study of the effects of jailing and other sanctions on the collection of child support).

A report on the first class surveyed, the class of 1951, survives, but the original data has been lost. It was hand-tabulated on individual cards. The dataset that we have now covers fifty classes of graduates from 1952 through 2001, as follows:

- Graduates 5 years out in the classes of 1968 through 2001 (34 consecutive years)
- Graduates 15 years out in the classes of 1951 through 1991 (40 consecutive years)
- Graduates 25 years out in the classes of 1972 through 1981 (10 consecutive years)
- Graduates 35 years out in the classes of 1962 through 1971 (10 consecutive years)
- Graduates 45 years out in the classes of 1952 through 1961 (10 consecutive years)

Of these fifty classes, ten were surveyed only once (the most recent classes, 1992-2001), twenty-six were surveyed twice (the classes of 1952-1967 and 1982-1991) and fourteen classes were surveyed 3 times (the classes of 1968-1981). See Table 1-01.

Table 1-01
Intervals when graduating classes were surveyed,
Classes of 1952-2001

	5 years out	15 years out	25 years out	35 years out	45 years out
Classes of 1952-1961		*			*
Classes of 1962-1967		*		*	
Classes of 1968-1971	*	*		*	
Classes of 1972-1981	*	*	*		
Classes of 1982-1991	*	*			
Classes of 1992-2001	*				

File: overview

B. The Content of the Dataset: The surveys and law school records

Richard Wellman wrote the first questionnaire in 1966 for the fifteen year graduates of the class of 1951. He modified the survey the following year and the revised version and used in essentially the same form for the next twelve years. The questionnaire was eleven pages long and asked a wide range of questions about family background, sources of support during law school, current work setting, including number of other attorneys worked with, status at work, specialties, and income. When a survey of the five-year classes was added in 1973, the same questionnaire was used with only minor adjustments. An example of an early version of the fifteen year survey is on file with the Library.

After Chambers and Adams took over the project in 1980, they winnowed out some questions that seemed (to them) to have produced information of limited interest. The questions about current work settings and career were expanded, and questions were added about first jobs after law school, periods of part-time work and time out of the labor force, about spouses' occupations and earnings, and about political views. Qualitative questions were also added regarding satisfaction with various aspects of the law school experience and of their careers since law school. In large measure, the new questions (after subsequently weeding out a few duds), along with the old ones that were carried forward or amended, were then retained in unaltered

form for the remaining twenty six years of the survey. An example of a fifteen-year survey used in the final years of the survey is preserved at the Library.

In 1997, when surveys were added of the graduates after they'd been out 25, 35 and 45 years, Chambers and Adams used the questions about career history and current work settings that had long been used on the 5 and 15 year surveys and added, for these classes, a new set of questions about retirement and plans for retirement.

Throughout the forty years of the survey, the data file on each graduate included not only their responses (if any) to the survey but also several items of information recorded from their applications to law school and their law-school records. This file information included the undergraduate institution they attended, their undergraduate grade-point average, their Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score, the state of their parents' residence at the time of application, the jobs they'd held after college but prior to law school, and their first-year and final law school grade-point averages.

Taking the information from both sources, each year for the last twenty-five years of the survey, more than 600 separate pieces of information were coded for each respondent (or created by combining two or more pieces of information)²

C. The Annual Survey Regimen

By the point at which Chambers and Adams assumed responsibility for the project in 1980, an annual routine had developed in which, sometime early in the calendar year, Mary Louise Lowther requested address labels from the law school development office and mailed the questionnaires to all the members of the class whose fifth or fifteen reunion was coming up, giving each questionnaire an identification number. The numbering permitted matching the survey responses with the respondents' law school records. Numbering also permitted sending a follow-up request to all those (and only those) who had failed to respond to the first mailing.

At about the same time as the mailing, Ms. Lowther transcribed onto a standard form for each graduate the information from the law school records, and, as surveys were returned, transcribed the responses onto the same forms. Over time the process became more streamlined. Information from law school files became available directly from computer records and no longer had to be hand-coded. The returned questionnaires, after checking by Ms. Lowther, went directly to keypunchers rather than having to be transcribed first onto forms and then keypunched. Ms. Lowther retired in the early 1990s and Adams relied on undergraduate student research assistants to perform the tasks Lowther had performed.

² Here is an example of a variable created from two or more pieces of coded information. Law school records contained information about the year of each graduate's birth, the year of matriculation at the law school, and the year of graduating from law school. Each of these dates was a variable in the dataset. From these dates, it was possible to calculate the person's age at the start of law school and at graduation, as well as their age at the time they completed a survey. These three calculations also became variables in the dataset. In a similar manner, the survey asked for the respondent's income in the prior calendar year. By using externally available information, an income figure adjusted for inflation by the Consumer Price Index was also calculated. Both income as reported and income as adjusted for inflation were included as variables in the dataset.

D. Rates of Response.

Our alumni cooperated to a remarkable degree in our efforts to learn about them. Table 1-02 reports the rates of response by the number of years that classes were out of law school when surveyed.

Table 1-02
Rates of response,
All classes, 1952-1991, by years out of law school

	n=	Rate of response
Graduates surveyed when 5 years out of law school (classes of 1968-2001)	12601	69%
Graduates surveyed when 15 years out of law school (classes of 1952-1991)	13133	66%
Graduates surveyed when 25 years out of law school (classes of 1972-1981)	3698	61%
Graduates surveyed when 35 years out of law school (classes of 1962-1971)	3003	65%
Graduates surveyed when 45 years out of law school (classes of 1952-1961)	2039	68%
Total	34474	67%

File: resp-01

The overall annual response rate of 67 percent for all survey years taken together is, a rarity in mailed surveys of any sort. Even more impressive is that 79 percent of graduates responded at least once across the forty years of surveying. At the same time, the overall rate disguises a worrisome downward trend over the years in the rate of response. (See table of response rates by ten year periods. Appendix Table 1-A).

The trend is most visible in the classes surveyed when 5 and 15 years out of law school, the classes that were surveyed for by far the greatest number of years. In the first decade of our surveys, 84 percent of the five-year graduates responded to the survey. By the last decade the response rate of the five-year graduates had declined to 61 percent. The decline in response was less precipitous but still serious among the fifteen-year classes -- from 70 percent down to 58 percent across the decades. Quite alarmingly, in the last two years of the survey, the combined response rate of the five and fifteen year classes fell to 53 percent, despite efforts in the last ten years of the survey to boost response. Each year during those final ten years, we hired undergraduate research assistants to check the mailing addresses provided by the development office. Using on-line bar directories and other sources, the assistants sought to locate a current address for each member of the classes to be surveyed.³ In addition, for the final decade, two follow-up letters were send to non-respondents rather than only one.

³ We had found that as our graduates, particularly the more recent ones, became more mobile, an increasing proportion of the addresses provided by the development office were no longer valid.

To be sure, even at 53 percent, the response rate to the survey is high by the standards of mailed surveys, but our earlier success made us accustomed to very high returns. The decline caused us to worry that the respondents in our final decade were no longer as representative of their class as a whole as were the respondents in earlier periods. The law school's experience of declining response is part of a national trend. [TERRY: Can you add a sentence or two and some references explaining the phenomenon of lower response rates to surveys generally?]

Were the Respondents to the Survey Representative of the Graduates as a Whole?

One question that faces all survey research is whether those who respond differ in significant ways from those who do not? If they do, findings from the research can be seriously skewed. In our case, in exploring this issue, we hypothesized that the non-respondents were likely to include a disproportionate number of those who were displeased with their law school experience or had become displeased with the law school over later years. We also suspected that the non-respondents included a disproportionate number of those least happy with their careers and achievements. Conversely, and tilting in the other direction, we suspected that the non-respondents may also have included a disproportionate number of those who, though quite successful, were so busy that they never got around to filling out the questionnaire. And, finally, we also suspected that the non-respondents included a disproportionate number of those whose careers have moved farthest from the practice of law. Such under-representations could affect the reliability of some of the most important results we report. For example, our figures on satisfaction with law school or satisfaction with work would be too high if the most disgruntled graduates did not in fact respond.

In addition, since we make extended analysis of certain subgroups within our survey – particularly of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and private practitioners -- we were also concerned that those within the subgroups who responded were like those within the subgroups who did not.

The information that we coded from student files for all graduates whether they responded or not permits us to examine a few aspects of the representativeness of our respondents. That information includes, most notably, each person's graduation year, race, age, date of birth, undergraduate institution attended, undergraduate major, undergraduate grade point average, employment and graduate work between college and law school, Law School Admission Test score, and first-year and final law-school grade point averages. We can thus learn whether our response rate was approximately the same for women and men, minorities and whites, persons with low grades and high grades, and so forth, but, because we have no direct information, for example, about how satisfied the non-respondents were with their careers or with their law school experience, we have only indirect clues about those important dimensions of representativeness.

Among the 15 pieces of information available to us for both respondents and nonrespondents, the one most strongly related to response is the one we have already discussed: the more recent the survey year, the lower the response. Among the others, few have any

substantial relation to response except law school grades (and LSAT scores, the significance of which largely disappears once law school grades are taken into account) and race.

Grades during law school. We standardized the grades of all members of each graduating class and then divided the class into ten groups, from the bottom ten percent of each class to the top. As we display in Appendix Table, 1-B, parts 1 and 2, there was a strong relation, especially at the extremes, between grades and response: the higher the grades in law school, the greater the rate of response. During both the first 20 and last 20 years of the survey, at least 30 percent more of those in the top 10 percent of classes responded than did those in the bottom 10 percent. We will later see that, among those who *do* respond to the survey, law school grades strongly correlate with satisfaction with law school. This correlation provides indirect support for our hypothesis that a disproportionate number of those least satisfied with their law school experience failed to respond to the survey, and we will explain the possible significance of this imbalance in reporting on satisfaction. In a similar manner, we will later see that grades in law school correlate positively with several aspects of later careers – for example, with the settings of first jobs and with earned income immediately after law school and five and fifteen years after law school.

Race. African-American, Asian-American, and Latino graduates have responded to the survey at lower rates than white graduates. African-Americans reply at especially low rates, lower than whites by at least a third both in both the early and more recent years of the project. See Appendix Table 1-B. For purposes of making comparisons between racial and ethnic groups, the question of importance is not whether the racial groups respond at the same rates but whether those who respond from each group are adequately representative of their group as a whole and whether the ways in which the nonrespondents differ from respondents are similar across groups. In the context of our data, once law school grades are controlled for, there is no significant difference in the response rates of whites and Latinos: that is, Latinos and whites with similar grade-points respond at the same rate.⁴ But even after grades are controlled for, African-Americans and Asian-Americans respond at lower rates than whites – that is, African-American students with low law-school grades are even less likely than white students with low grades to respond to the survey.⁵ Thus, to the extent that grades signify a likelihood of lower earnings or lower satisfaction with law school, our results for African-American and Asian-American graduates may produce figures that are slightly too high in comparison with whites.

Sex. In the classes surveyed in the final 20 years of the survey, women and men responded at rates that were not significantly different. See Appendix Table 1-B. Among the graduates five years out, for example, 65 percent of women and 63 percent of men responded. On the other hand, in the first 20 years of the project – the first 20 years of the 15 year survey and the first 14 years of the 5-year surveys, women responded at somewhat lower rates than men. For purposes of comparing the women and men in either time period, the important question again is whether the women non-respondents are dissimilar to the women respondents and, to the

⁴ See resp03a

⁵ Among the classes surveyed 5 years after law school during the final 20 years of the study, only 44 percent of African-Americans in the bottom 20 percent of the class responded to the survey, in comparison to 59 percent of whites. Similarly, among the classes surveyed 15 years after law school during those final 20 years, 48 percent of African-Americans and 64 percent of whites responded to the survey. See resp02c.

extent that there are differences between them, whether the two groups of women differ in essentially the same ways that male nonrespondents differ from the male respondents. In regressions using the limited information available to us, women respondents and nonrespondents differ from each other in essentially the same way that men respondents differ from men nonrespondents – those with low grades are underrepresented to essentially the same extent; so too are African-Americans and Latinos.⁶

Age at Start of Law School. There was one other way, a slightly puzzling one, in which those who failed to respond differed significantly from those who responded: on the whole, the response rate was slightly higher from those who were younger at the point they started law school. See Appendix Table 1-B, parts 1 and 2 (particularly the 5-year classes from the first 20 years of the project and the 15-year classes from the second 20 years of the project). The difference in response rate shrinks but does not disappear once graduation year is taken into account (response went down and the average age of students at entry went up during the final graduating classes we surveyed).⁷ Among those who do respond to the survey, there is a weak but persistent negative correlation between age at the start of law school and both satisfaction with law school overall and satisfaction with career overall.⁸ Thus the correlation between age and response to the survey probably may well indicate that nonrespondents included a disproportionate number of those who had been older at the start of law school and who were comparatively unhappy with either their law school or career experiences.

⁶ Resp03b

⁷ Resp03.

⁸ Resp04.

Appendix Table for Chapter 1

Appendix Table 1-A
Rates of response,
by 10 year periods of mailings

	N=	%
Surveys mailed 1967-1976	3916	75%
Surveys mailed 1977-1986	6706	75%
Surveys mailed 1987-1996	7566	66%
Surveys mailed 1997-2006	16266	62%

File: resp01; printout reponse3

Table 1-B
Rates of response by sex, race, and gradepoint average

Part 1
5 and 15 year classes surveyed in *first* 20 years of project
(surveys conducted 1987-2006)

	Classes 5 years out (classes of 1968-1981)		Classes 15 year out (classes of 1952-1971)	
	n=	% who responded	n=	% who responded
Sex				
Women	768	70%	151	62%
Men	4268	78%	5418	74%
Ethnic/Racial Group*				
African-American	303	54%	54	54%
Asian-American	--	--	39	62%
Hispanic/Latino	56	46%	--	--
Native American	--	--	--	--
White	4633	79%	5380	74%
Age at start of law school				
21 or younger	788	86%	1111	87%
22	2224	78%	1605	78%
23 or 24	1144	73%	1051	81%
25 to 29	739	72%	663	79%
30 or older	130	65%	59	81%
Law school final grade-point average				
Lowest 10 percent	497	59%	547	65%
2d lowest 10 percent	506	70%	556	68%
Next lowest 20 percent	997	76%	1103	71%
Middle 20 percent	1018	78%	1102	77%
Next highest 20 percent	1012	80%	1106	74%
2d highest 10 percent	498	83%	548	79%
Highest 10 percent	495	86%	545	83%
Total	5023	77%	5506	74%

File: resp02a, printout response6

Part 2
 5 and 15 year classes surveyed in *final* 20 years of project
 (surveys conducted 1987-2006)

	Classes 5 years out (classes of 1982-2001)		Classes 15 year out (classes of 1972-1991)	
	n=	% who responded	n=	% who responded
Sex				
Women	2805	65%	1973	60%
Men	4717	63%	5547	62%
Ethnic/Racial Group*				
African-American	566	45%	536	45%
Asian-American	270	51%	80	58%
Hispanic/Latino	326	58%	197	49%
Native American	84	54%	29	62%
White	6238	67%	6657	63%
Age at start of law school				
21 or younger	310	65%	671	65%
22 years old	2733	67%	3184	63%
23 or 24 years old	2441	63%	2055	60%
25 to 29 years old	1429	63%	1251	59%
30 or older	481	61%	352	55%
Law school final grade-point average				
Lowest 10 percent	734	56%	739	45%
2d lowest 10 percent	754	59%	753	56%
Next lowest 20 percent	1482	63%	1491	60%
Middle 20 percent	1479	65%	1522	64%
Next highest 20 percent	1501	68%	1507	65%
2d highest 10 percent	759	68%	752	67%
Highest 10 percent	738	72%	748	68%
Total	7447	64%	7512	61%

File: resp02a, printout response6