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# Who We Were and Who We Are: How Michigan Law Students Have Changed Since the 1950s: Findings from 40 Years of Alumni Surveys

David L. Chambers

*University of Michigan Law School, dcham@umich.edu*

Terry K. Adams

*University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, tkadams@umich.edu*

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## Who We Were and Who We Are: How Michigan Law Students Have Changed Since the 1950s *Findings from 40 years of Alumni Surveys*

by David L. Chambers and Terry K. Adams

**F**or 40 consecutive years, from 1967 to 2006, the Law School surveyed its alumni regarding their lives and careers. The project began in 1967 with the mailing of a questionnaire to the class of 1952 shortly before their 15th reunion. The results proved interesting enough that surveys were sent each year thereafter to the class 15 years out. In 1973, the classes 5 years out were added to the survey.

Through 1979, the survey remained an adjunct to reunions. In 1980, the reunion planners decided to end the project, and the two of us, recognizing that annual surveys would permit observing changes in the student body of the Law School and the legal profession that they entered, took over the project and ran it for 26 years until its conclusion in 2006. For the final 10 years (1977-2006), we included the classes 25, 35, and 45 years out.

**“We’ve issued many reports from the survey over the years, but never brought it all together to paint a picture of some of the sweeping changes at the Law School over the past half century.”**

The end result is a body of data unique in legal education. No other American law school has systematically surveyed its alumni over a substantial period of years. Fifty consecutive classes, dating from 1952 through 2001, have been surveyed at least once, and all but the most recent classes have been surveyed at least twice. Response rates have been high. Of the 34,474 questionnaires mailed to alumni over the years (not counting repeat mailings of the same survey), 67 percent were completed and returned.

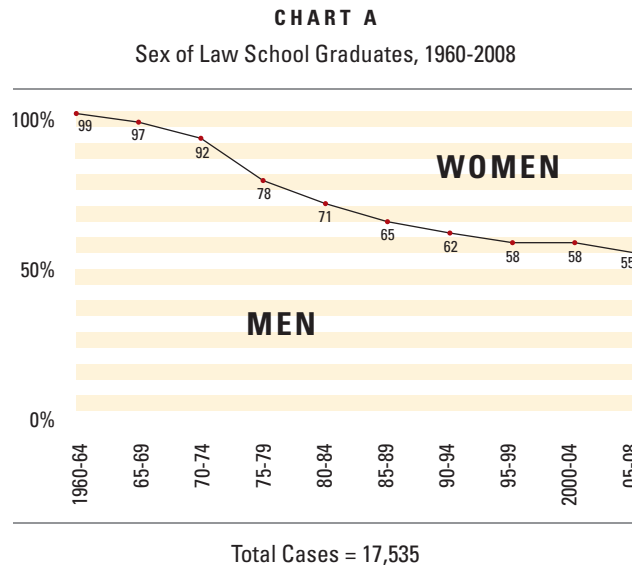
We’ve issued many reports from the survey over the years, but never brought all the years of our surveys together to paint a picture of some of the sweeping changes at the Law School over the past half century. Here, we review the changing composition of the Law School’s student body, drawing

on both our survey data and, for the most recent years, information from the School’s admissions and financial aid offices. In a future article, we will examine the many ways that the careers of our graduates have changed over time.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the background information on the Law School in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries comes from Elizabeth G. Brown’s *Legal Education at the University of Michigan, 1859-1959* (1959).

## The Changing Face of the Law School

In the classes of the 1950s and '60s, 95 percent of the Law School's graduates were white and male; and, of the males, the great majority entered Law School directly after college. In this regard, Michigan's student body looked similar to that of other distinguished schools across the country. And, as is true for those other schools, a great deal has changed in the intervening decades.



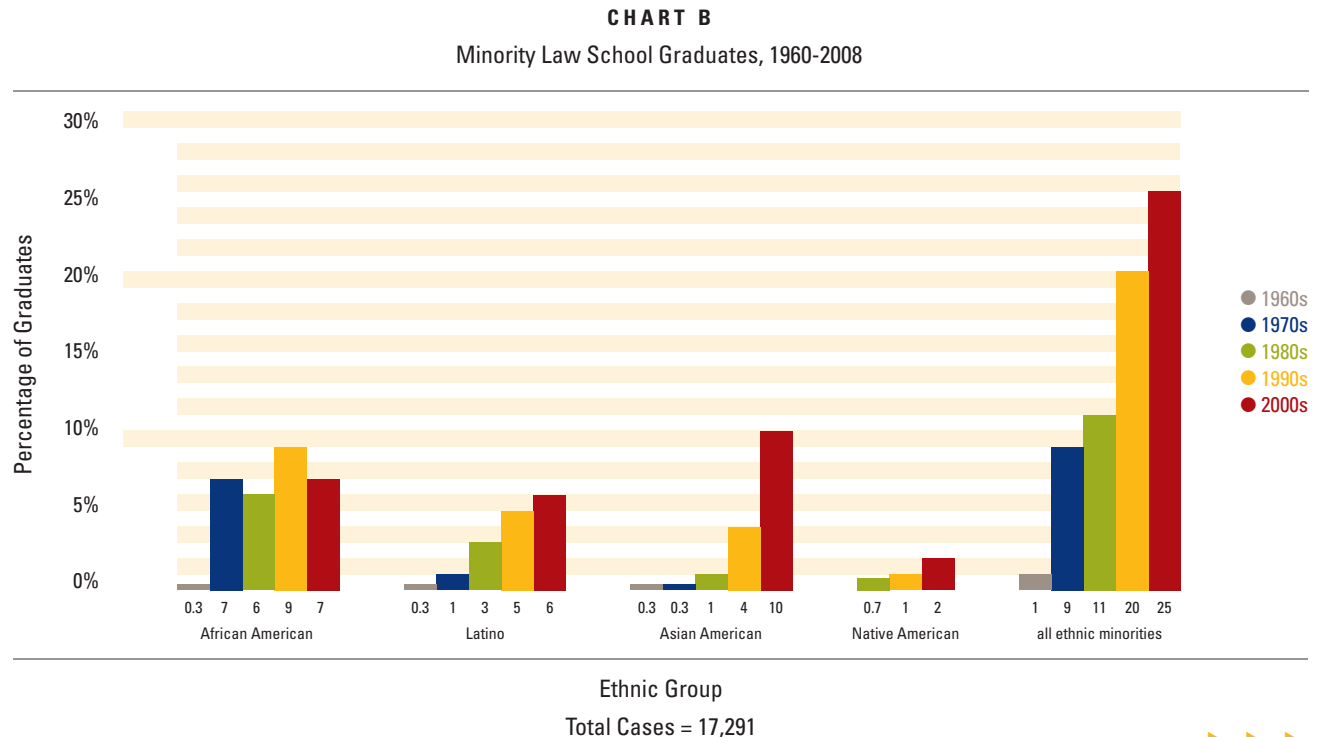
### GENDER

The University of Michigan was one of the first law schools in the United States to admit women as students, but as late as the mid-1960s, only a tiny number of women ever enrolled.<sup>1</sup> In the graduating class of 1964, for example, women accounted for only one percent of the students. Then a few years later, as Chart A displays, women started entering in large numbers. Beginning in the late sixties and continuing through the seventies, the numbers of women in each class doubled every few years. In the class of 1980, 28 percent of graduates were women. In the classes since 2000, including the class of 2008, women have constituted 45 percent of all graduates.

### RACE AND ETHNICITY

As recently as the mid-1960s, the Law School student body was also almost entirely white. In the combined classes of 1964 and 1965, for example, there were only two non-white students among the 597 graduates. Change began a few years later with the faculty's decision to make concerted efforts to increase the number of minority students, particularly African-American students, and by the late 1960s, substantial numbers of African-American students began to enroll.

Chart B displays the changes in the graduating classes over the succeeding decades. Hispanic-American students began entering in significant numbers during the 1980s and Asian-American students in the 1990s. In the classes of 2000 through 2008, a quarter of the graduates were African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic-American, or Native American.

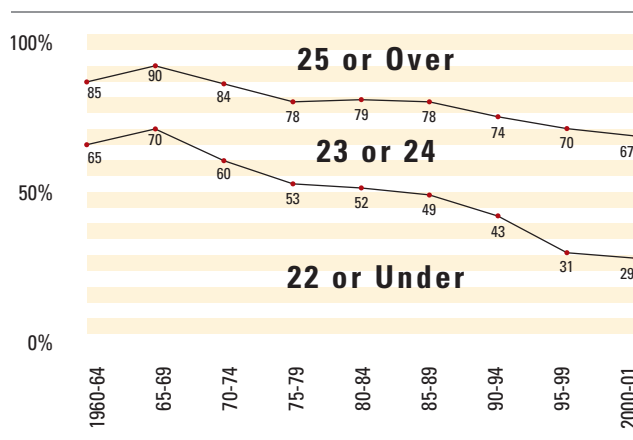




# FACULTY VIEWS

**CHART C**

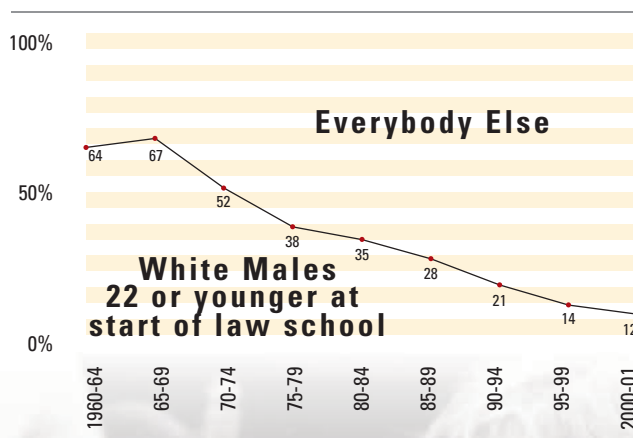
Age at Start of Law School, Law School Graduates 1960-2001



Total Cases = 13,375

**CHART D**

Sex, Race/Ethnicity and Age, Law School Graduates 1960-2001



Total Cases = 13,343

The entering class of 2008 (which will be the graduating class of 2011) reveals the effects of Proposal 2, which amended the Michigan Constitution to prohibit public institutions from considering race or sex as a factor in admissions decisions. Enrollment of African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Native Americans, the groups most affected by Proposition 2, declined from 15 percent of the student body (over the years 2000-2008) down to 9 percent.

## AGE AT START OF LAW SCHOOL

Another, less noticed change has occurred in the composition of the student body: it is getting older. In the 1950s and early 1960s, about two-thirds of the entering class was 22 or younger at the point of matriculation. The great majority entered Law School directly after finishing college.

**“Almost two-thirds of our students now begin Law School having worked for at least a year after completing their undergraduate degrees.”**

As Chart C shows, the number of students 22 or under has declined sharply in the intervening years. Today, fewer than a third of entering students are that young and nearly a third are 25 or over. Almost two-thirds of our students now begin Law School having worked for at least a year after completing their undergraduate degrees. They thus bring to the School more varied life experiences than students of the past.

## GENDER, RACE, AND AGE

When we combine the information about gender, race, and age, we find that the young, white male right out of college—who was once the typical Michigan Law School student—has become a small minority among the current graduating classes. Take a look at Chart D.

## What Else Has Changed in the Student Body?

### TIES TO THE STATE OF MICHIGAN

Unsurprising for a state school, every Michigan Law School graduating class since the beginning has included more students from Michigan than from any other state. Yet the School probably has had, over time, the most geographically diverse student body of any public law school in the United States. Even in the 19th century, most of our students came from states other than Michigan, primarily Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin. In the recent past, as more and more highly qualified students from other regions of the country—particularly the east and west coasts—have sought admission, the proportion of students from Michigan and the rest of the Midwest has declined. See Table 1.

As Table 1 also displays, the increase in geographical diversity has been accompanied by a steady decline in the proportion of students who attended the University of Michigan as undergraduates.

### ENTRY CREDENTIALS

In its early days, the Law School's only formal requirement for admission was that a young man demonstrate that he was 18 years old and "of good moral character." Even graduation from high school was not required if the applicant passed an examination administered by the faculty. In 1910, the age requirement was raised to 19, and soon thereafter a high school diploma plus a year of college was required, then two years of college, then three. It was not until after World War II that a bachelor's degree became a prerequisite for admission, although by then the great majority of each class had in fact graduated from college. In 1953, the School added the requirement that applicants take the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT).

As Table 2 illustrates, the median LSAT test score of the entering classes rose greatly during the 1960s and then again in the 1970s and remained fairly stable thereafter, with a jump up to the 97th percentile in the three currently enrolled classes. Similarly, the undergraduate grade point average of the entering class rose hugely in the 1970s and again in the 1980s and has risen slightly since.

**TABLE 1**

Michigan and the Middle West: Residency at the Time Started Law School and Attendance as Undergrad at University of Michigan  
By Decade 1952-2001

	1952-59	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-01
Michigan	43%	38%	45%	48%	38%	29%
Upper Midwest (other than Michigan)*	25%	29%	19%	17%	15%	13%
Rest of the World	32%	33%	36%	39%	47%	58%
Attended U-M as Undergrad	35%	28%	25%	22%	19%	15%

\* Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin

Total Cases = 14,676

**TABLE 2**

LSAT scores and Undergraduate Grades of Entering Student  
by Year of Graduation, Classes of 1952-2008

	1952-59	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-08	2009-1
	n=1813	n=3007	n=3642	n=3715	n=3817	n=3256	n=101
Median Percentile*	74	84	94	95	95	95	97
Undergraduate Final Grade Point Average	2.92	2.87	3.34	3.54	3.5	3.58	3.67

\* Percentage of test-takers nationwide who scored lower than Michigan's students' median

\*\* Currently enrolled students

Total Cases = 19,250

**"In its early days, the Law School's only formal requirement for admission was that a young man demonstrate that he was 18 years old and 'of good moral character.'"**

### FAMILY ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

Based on the limited data available to us, one aspect of the Law School's student body appears to have changed little over time. The sole indications we have of the economic or class backgrounds of our students derives from questions on the survey relating to parental occupations. Most informative has been the question

about fathers' occupations, since in the early years of our survey, most of the graduates' mothers were homemakers. Based on the fathers' occupations, it is possible to infer that, at least since the 1960s, the





# FACULTY VIEWS



families from which our students come have been, in the great majority of cases, solidly middle or upper-middle class. Decade after decade, the fathers of approximately one in eight of our graduates have been lawyers. In the majority of remaining cases, the fathers have been engaged in other professions or have been business owners or managers. Although it has varied somewhat over time, reaching a low point in the 1960s and a high point in the 1970s, only about one in five of our graduates since the early 1950s has come from a family in which the father was a blue collar or clerical worker.

## POLITICAL VIEWS

For the last 25 years of our survey, the graduates were asked: "Think back on your political attitudes when you entered Law School. How would you characterize now the attitudes you had then?" Respondents were asked to circle a number between 1, which we labeled "extremely liberal/left," and 7, which we labeled "extremely conservative/right."

The recalled political attitudes have changed very little across time. In every decade, a substantial majority of the graduates recall themselves as having been somewhat to extremely liberal (categories 1-3) and, in every decade, more than twice as many recall themselves as having been liberal rather than conservative (categories 5-7). These overall figures do, however, mask an interesting underlying change. On the whole, our male graduates have become somewhat more conservative since the 1970s. The overall average degree of "liberalness" has been sustained because women, who have constituted an increasing proportion of graduates, have—in every decade—recalled themselves as substantially more liberal than the men recalled themselves.

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## What Has Changed During Law School?

### GETTING MARRIED, HAVING CHILDREN

From the 1950s into the mid-1970s, about a quarter of all students were married at the start of Law School and about half were married by graduation. Since then, despite the fact that the average age of entering students has been increasing, the proportion married at the beginning or end of Law School has been in steady decline. By the classes of the 1990s, the proportion married at the beginning and the proportion married at the end had each fallen by about 50 percent.

The percentage with children by the point of graduation has declined even further, from about a quarter of all graduates of the sixties down to only 7 percent of those in the 1990s. The decline in numbers with children is due in part to the increased age at which college-educated people in general in the United States are having their first child, but it is also due, at Michigan, to the increasing number of women attending the Law School. Very few women students have babies while in school.

### GRADES IN LAW SCHOOL

Law school grades keep going up. In the 1950s, the mean final grade point average (GPA) of all graduates was only 2.53, and over half the class had an average below 2.50. Average grades have risen in each decade since. By the early 2000s, the mean GPA was 3.28 and almost no one—only 1 percent of graduates—had a GPA below 2.5. Rising grades seem to be due to both the rising entry credentials of our students and to grade inflation—that is, to faculty giving higher grades in recent years for work that would have earned a lower mark in the past.

### CAREER PLANS

For the 35 classes that finished between 1966 and 2001, the questionnaire asked graduates about their long-term career plan when they began Law School. In the 1960s, nearly half the graduates began with no long-term plan at all, and two-thirds of those with plans expected to work in a private law firm. Only one in ten planned to work in “public service”—that is, in government, legal services for the poor, a public defender organization, or a public interest organization. By the 1990s and early 2000s, far fewer arrived at Law School without a long-term plan and for most with plans, the expectation, as before, was to work in a private firm. One surprise in the data is that between the 1960s and the end of the century, there was a steady increase in the proportion of students arriving at Law School hoping to work in a public service setting—up to 32 percent of the classes of 2000-2001.

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CHART E

Final Grade Point Averages in Law School, Graduates, 1952-2001

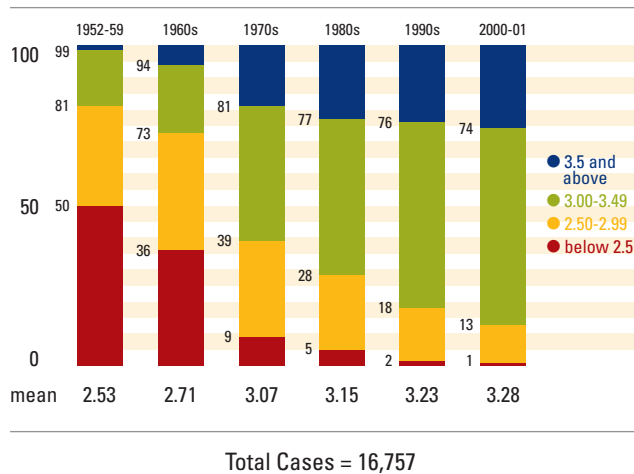
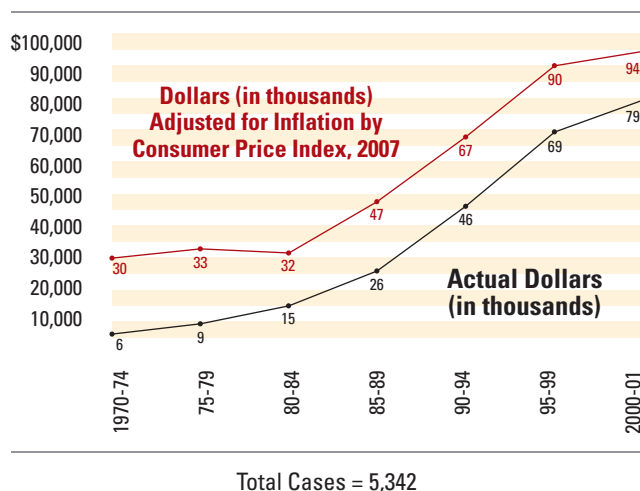




CHART F

Mean Educational Debt from College and Law School  
Law School Graduates with Any Debt, Classes of 1970-2001



For the same 35 classes, the survey also included a question about long-term career plans at the *end* of Law School. Between the start and end of their time at Michigan, the great majority of graduates in all decades developed a long-term plan, and for most, that plan has been to work in a private firm. Indeed, since the 1980s, for about 40 percent of graduates the long-term plan has been to work in a private firm of 50 or more attorneys, which is about twice as many as had such a plan when they matriculated. As large-firm private practice has become the goal of more students, the numbers who planned to work in public service have declined. Across the decades, nearly half of those with a public service plan at the beginning of Law School have abandoned the plan by graduation, and only a modest number of those who had no such plan at the beginning developed such a plan by graduation.

### EDUCATIONAL DEBT

Even in the early 1970s, about half of all entering law students finished Law School with some educational debt from their undergraduate or Law School years. By 2001, the proportion with debt had risen to 80 percent, and the average debt, even after adjustment for inflation, had tripled to over \$93,000 in 2007 dollars. By the graduating class of 2008, according to the Law School's financial aid office, large numbers of students were graduating with debts of more than \$130,000. Fortunately for the students who took jobs in private practice, salaries at firms have, in general, kept pace with the rising debt. Very unfortunately for others, salaries in government, public interest jobs, and legal services have risen considerably more slowly.

In the preceding section, we reported that large number of students arrive at law school planning to work in public service but abandon their plan by the time of graduation. Many people attribute their change of plans to the burdensome debts that students are now carrying. We have tried to examine the possible link between debts and career choice in several ways but find little evidence that debts cause many students to change their career aspirations. On the contrary, we find that, among those who arrived at law school with a long-term plan of public service, those who abandoned their plan by the end of law school have, on average, no higher debts than those who retained their plan. We do, however, find that among those who hold onto a public service plan at the end of law school, those with higher debts are somewhat more likely to postpone taking a job in public service and take instead a first job in a high-paying setting such as a large firm.

### Conclusion

Michigan Law School's student body changed dramatically during the latter half of the twentieth century. The students, always bright, grew even brighter (at least as measured by their LSAT scores and undergraduate grades). And, though consistently upper-middle class and left of center in their politics, the student body became far more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and geographic origins. [Q](#)