JD NEXT

The Research Behind JD-Next:

A Test that Better Predicts Law School Success and a Bridge that Improves GPA and Bar Passage

JD-Next is a fully-online, non-credit, 8-week course to train potential juris doctor (JD) students in case reading and analysis skills, with a summative exam at the end. Past research has demonstrated that the JD-Next exam is a reliable predictor of 1L GPA and course grades, on par with more traditional legacy exams. Further, racial and ethnic disparities in examination scores were insignificant with the JD-Next exam, while very significant with other legacy exams. Post-course surveys indicated that students who participated in the JD-Next course felt better prepared for law school. Additionally, these students experienced higher grades in Writing and Contracts courses, and a higher 1L GPA overall.

Today, Aspen announces new research that uses another more-recent cohort of data to validate previous research, while expanding the research in a new area: bar passage rates. The current research establishes that students who participated in the JD-Next course and exam were more likely to have passed the Bar Exam within 4.5 years than a matched group of students who declined the same opportunity to participate in the course and exam.
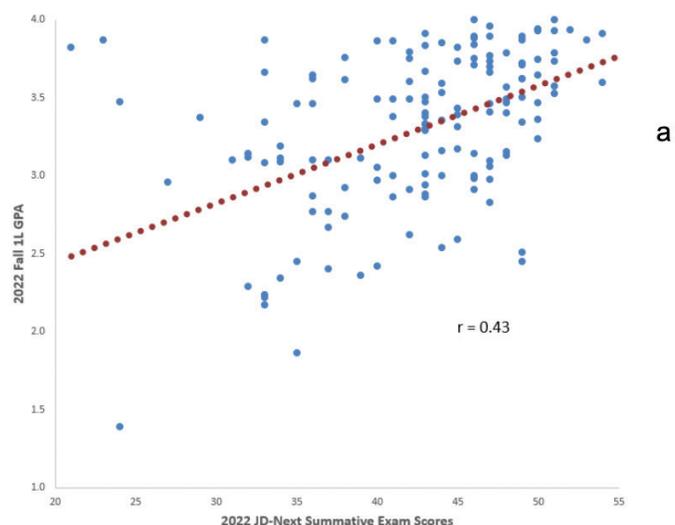
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Prediction of 1L Success

In the summer of 2019, the originators of JD-Next launched a nationwide randomized experiment, and in 2020 partnered with law schools around the country to recruit a cohort of their incoming law students. Approximately 1000 students who had been admitted to 17 different law schools participated, free of charge, in the JD-Next course and exam, while around 2000 students from the same schools declined to participate. Research comparing these groups of students established that the JD-Next exam is a valid predictor of 1L success, while participation in the course has a number of positive outcomes. These are discussed below.

The JD-Next exam was found to reliably predict first semester law school grades (LGPA). A raw correlation of r = 0.48 for the 2019 cohort and r = 0.42 for the 2020 cohort was observed, which are similar findings for the LSAT and superior to undergraduate GPA.

The researchers also calculated multivariate regressions, with base models including each law school's median LSAT score (as a measure of selectivity) and the student's undergraduate GPA (UGPA). The addition of JD-Next scores improved the prediction of 1L success, accounting for an additional 17% variance in predicting law students' first year GPA for 2019, and an additional 12% variance in 2020.

A 2021 analysis by an independent team at ETS, as well as current research using 2022 data, validated these results, demonstrating that a model using JD-Next scores, LSAT scores, and undergraduate GPA is superior to a model that only uses LSAT scores and undergraduate GPA. The JD-Next exam is powerful as either a replacement for the LSAT or as a supplement, helping schools select applicants who have greater chances of success than the LSAT alone would predict.
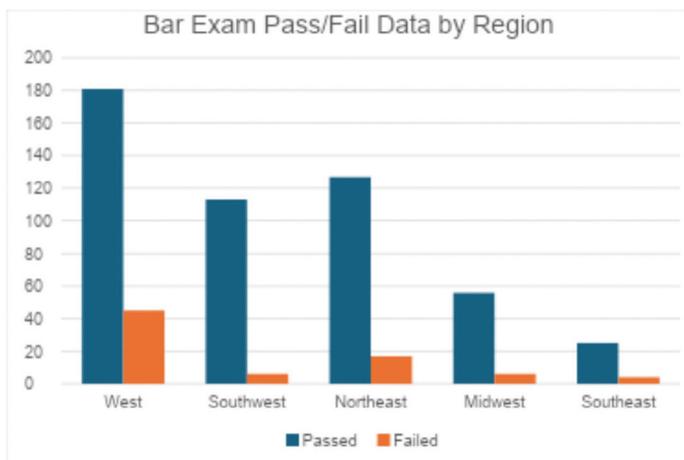
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Success on the Bar Exam

Data was recently collected (February 2025) from 11 law schools that offered the JD-Next program to their students in the Summer of 2020. Bar passage data was provided for 580 students, 178 of whom had participated in the JD-Next program and 402 who had not.

An initial chi-square analysis indicated that bar passage was associated with participation in the JD-Next program. Additionally, a significant correlation of 0.33 was obtained between scores on the JD-Next exam and whether students passed or failed the Bar Exam.

Bar Exam Pass/Fail Data by Region

To ensure any findings were not due to a self-selection process, we matched students in the two groups based on law school attended, LSAT score, and undergraduate GPA. Afterwards, the two groups were almost identical in the three variables matched, along with other important variables such as gender and race. The chi-square findings were still significant, indicating that students who participated in the JD-Next program were 9.7% more likely to pass the Bar Exam within 4.5 years.

	Passed the Bar	Failed the Bar
Participated in JD-Next	102 (92.7%)	8 (7.3%)
Did not participate	292 (84.5%)	54 (15.5%)

(χ^2 (1, N = 456) = 4.9349, p < .05).

*Note: A percentage change from 84.5% to 92.7% reflects a percentage increase of 9.7% ((x = (.927 - .845) / .845) * 100).*

We speculate that the higher passing rate is a result of the improvement in 1L course performance, which is reflected in GPA (discussed below), which would lead to a more successful 2L year, which in turn would lead to a more successful 3L year, and subsequent success on taking the Bar Exam.

Improvement of 1L Course Grades and GPA

Prior research conducted on the 2019, 2020, and 2021 cohorts studied improvement in 1L course grades and GPA. The two groups of students (participants vs. non-participants) were either matched through propensity score estimation and weighting, or the subsequent analysis was adjusted for covariates. These strategies ensured that participant race, as well as UGPA and LSAT scores, were nearly identical for the two groups.

In the 2019 and 2020 report, students who participated in the JD-Next program experienced, on average, a boost of 0.20 for Fall 1L GPA over students who did not participate, while contracts and writing course grades were similarly higher. All effects were significant ($p < .01$). Current research on the 2022 cohort confirmed that completion of JD-Next likewise provided a significant boost to 1L grades.

Students' Perceptions of Being Prepared for Law School

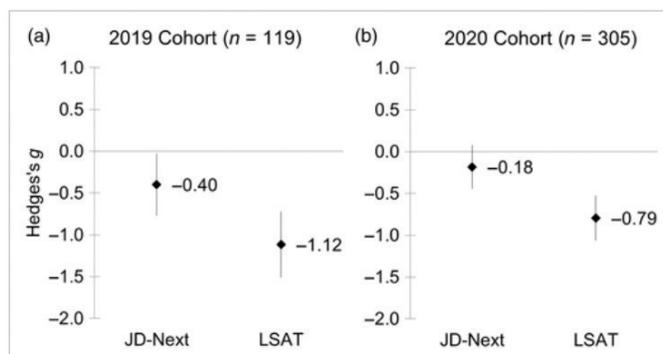Buzick et al (2023) surveyed 749 recent graduates of the JD-Next program about their perceptions of how the program may have prepared them for law school. On average, participants endorsed between 3 and 4 areas in which they felt more prepared following their completion of the JD-Next program. The top 10 areas identified, in order, were:

- Solving complex legal problems
- Acquiring legal knowledge and skills
- Preparing for exams
- Examining the strengths or weaknesses of a topic or issue
- Analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts
- Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
- Identifying key information from reading assignments
- Answering questions or contributing to course discussions in other ways
- Writing clearly and effectively
- Thinking critically and analytically

Note that "preparing for exams" is only one out of ten areas identified, and it was endorsed fewer times than "solving complex legal problems" and "acquiring legal knowledge and skills." This demonstrates that JD-Next is primarily a course designed to prepare students for law school. The end-of-course assessment is not the sole purpose of JD-Next but rather the logical end product that demonstrates what the students have learned.

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Racial and Ethnic Disparities

For the 2019 and 2020 cohorts, the performance on the JD-Next and the LSAT exams were compared for Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Multi-Race test takers vs. other test takers. Significant disparities were found on the LSAT test scores, and in every case the point estimates for the JD-Next exams trended toward smaller disparities. ETS conducted a similar analysis for the 2021 cohort, which confirmed these findings.

Conclusion

Current and past research in four peer-reviewed studies demonstrates unequivocally that the JD-Next exam is a reliable and valid predictor of 1L GPA and course grades, while racial and ethnic disparities that are common to legacy exams are lessened. Students who participate in the JD-Next program indicate greater feelings of confidence in preparing for law school, and subsequently perform better during the 1L year, as indicated by course grades and 1L GPA. This early success continues throughout a student's law school career, as demonstrated by bar passage rates, where JD-Next participants performed better than a matched group of students who did not participate in JD-Next.

References

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