

# Two Steps Backward?

## Number of Women Law School Applicants and Enrollees Down

By Hope Viner Samborn

For the second year, the number of women law school applicants and enrollees dropped, marking a reversal of an established trend.

In the fall of 2006, the number of women who applied to U.S. law schools—42,500—decreased by 7.7 percent from 2005, according to the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), a nonprofit organization based outside Philadelphia, which tracks these events for 200 law schools.

Between 2004 and 2005, the number of women applying to law school dropped 5.4 percent. The number of applications in 2004 marked the greatest number of female law school applicants in any year, according to LSAC figures.

The number of male applicants also dropped in 2005 and 2006. But

the two-year drop for male applicants was 10.5 percent compared with a 12.7 percent drop for women. To view the figures behind these percentages, see the chart of the statistics compiled by the LSAC at <http://members.lisacnet.org>. (Click on Data and select LSAC Ethnic/Gender Volume Summary.)

### Contributing Factors

“These are small increments,” according to Joan C. Williams, distinguished professor and director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. “It is too early to know whether this is a trend,” she says. “If it is a trend, I would suspect that the message is getting through to women that the hours required for women lawyers are spiraling up, up, up and there is not an end in sight, and women are worried about whether they can have a full legal career and family life.”

The lack of partnership and other high-level positions in the legal arena also may be dissuading women from applying to law school. “Only 17 percent of law firm partners are women,” Williams says. “There are significant glass-ceiling problems, and so that may be discouraging women.”

Popular culture and a lucrative job market also may be reasons for the shrinking number of law school applications.

“I’ve seen that in New York it is a booming market for college grads. People are throwing jobs at them,” says Dorothy A. Brown, professor and director of the Frances Lewis Law Center at Washington and Lee University School of Law in Lexington, Virginia.

Another reason both men and women might be forgoing law school is their undergraduate debt load.

“Debt is such a huge issue,” says Wendy Margolis, director of communications for LSAC. “When the economy is doing well, people don’t necessarily postpone getting into the job market.”

And the “debt load in law schools is going one way—up, up, up,” Brown notes.

Brown also suggests that students might be directing applications to medical school rather than law school because of the success of television shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy*.

“I haven’t done any research, but one thought I had was that medical school applications in general might be going up with the popularity of *Grey’s Anatomy*,” Brown says. “I remember *L.A. Law* (a legal drama popular in the 1980s) and the impact it had on law school applications.”

### Enrollment Figures

Although total JD enrollment increased for the 2006–07 year, the number of women decreased by 0.8 percent. In the current year, based on data from 195 ABA-approved law schools, women comprise 46.9 percent of the total JD enrollment and 46.3 percent of the first-year JD enrollment, according to legal education statistics on first year and total enrollment by gender recently released by the American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/statistics/stats.html>. The ABA data includes JD enrollment figures available from 1996 through 2006–07.

The year before women constituted 47.5 percent of all JD enrollment—66,613 students, compared with 73,685 male students.

### Law School Admission Stats

What's more, the number of women admitted to law schools shrunk by 1.7 percent between the fall of 2005 and the fall of 2006. That number has been declining since the fall of 2003 for a total drop of 4.6 percent.

In contrast, since the fall of 2000 the number of men admitted to law schools increased in every year except 2004 (when male admittees were down 0.5 percent). Overall, male admissions over the past six years grew by 18.4 percent.

Some professors who asked not to be identified speculated that lower Law School Admission Test scores for women may be influencing the drop in the number of women's applications and admissions.

But Brown disputes that because women's LSAT scores have consistently been slightly lower than those of males, based on LSAC statistics. "Male test takers have consistently scored about 1.47 scaled-score points higher on the LSAT than female test takers," according to the LSAC report "LSAT Performance with Regional, General, and Racial/Ethnic Breakdowns: 1997–1998 through 2003–2004 Testing Years."

Women's scores haven't been as high as men's for almost a decade, but

the number of women applicants has been on the rise for all but the past two years, so linking a decline to LSAT scores "doesn't resonate with me," Brown said.

Yet, female/male law graduate numbers still remain relatively close. In the spring of 2005, women received 48.8 percent of the JDs awarded, according to ABA statistics. That number was 20,804, compared with 21,867 men. The ABA and *Perspectives* will continue to monitor the statistics to see if the recent decline in women applicants and admittees represents an aberration or signals a trend. 🌀

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## Law Student Applicants and Enrollees, 2000–2006

School Year	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07
Female Applicants	36,880	38,230	44,040	48,170	48,680	46,050	42,500
% change from prior year	Not available	3.7	15.2	9.4	1.1	-5.4	-7.7
Male Applicants	36,520	37,890	44,510	49,690	50,720	48,640	45,370
% change from prior year	Not available	3.7	17.5	11.6	2.1	-4.1	-6.7
Female Admittees	24,600	25,360	26,980	27,000	26,400	26,200	25,760
% change from prior year	Not available	3.1	6.4	0.1	-2.2	-0.8	-1.7
Male Admittees	25,490	26,190	28,480	29,530	29,380	29,850	30,180
% change from prior year	Not available	2.8	8.8	3.7	-0.5	1.6	1.1
First-Year Enrollment Female	21,499	22,254	23,587	23,368	22,904	22,582	22,615
% of total first-year enrollment	49.4	49.4	48.7	47.8	47.5	46.9	46.3
First-Year Enrollment Male	22,019	22,816	24,846	25,499	25,335	25,550	26,322
% of total first-year enrollment	50.6	50.6	51.3	52.2	52.5	53.1	53.7
Female JD Enrollment	60,633	62,476	65,179	67,027	67,438	66,613	66,085
% of total JD enrollment	48.4	49	49	48.7	48	47.5	46.9
Male JD Enrollment	64,540	65,134	67,706	70,649	72,938	73,685	74,946
% of total JD enrollment	51.6	51	51	51.3	52	52.5	53.1
Female JD Awardees	18,006	18,644	19,133	19,818	20,804	Not yet released	Not yet released
Male JD Awardees	19,903	19,961	19,741	20,205	21,867	Not yet released	Not yet released
Total JDs	37,910	38,606	38,875	40,024	42,672	43,920	Not yet released

Source: Data on female and male applicants and admitted law students is from the Law School Admission Council, <http://members.lsacnet.org>. Data on JD enrollment and awardees is from the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/statistics/stats.html>.