It's Not Where You Start, It's How You Finish:
Predicting Law School and Bar Success

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ABSTRACT

A collaboration between AccessLex Institute and the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE), this study examines the extent to which academic and student engagement factors explain law school grades and first-time bar exam performance.
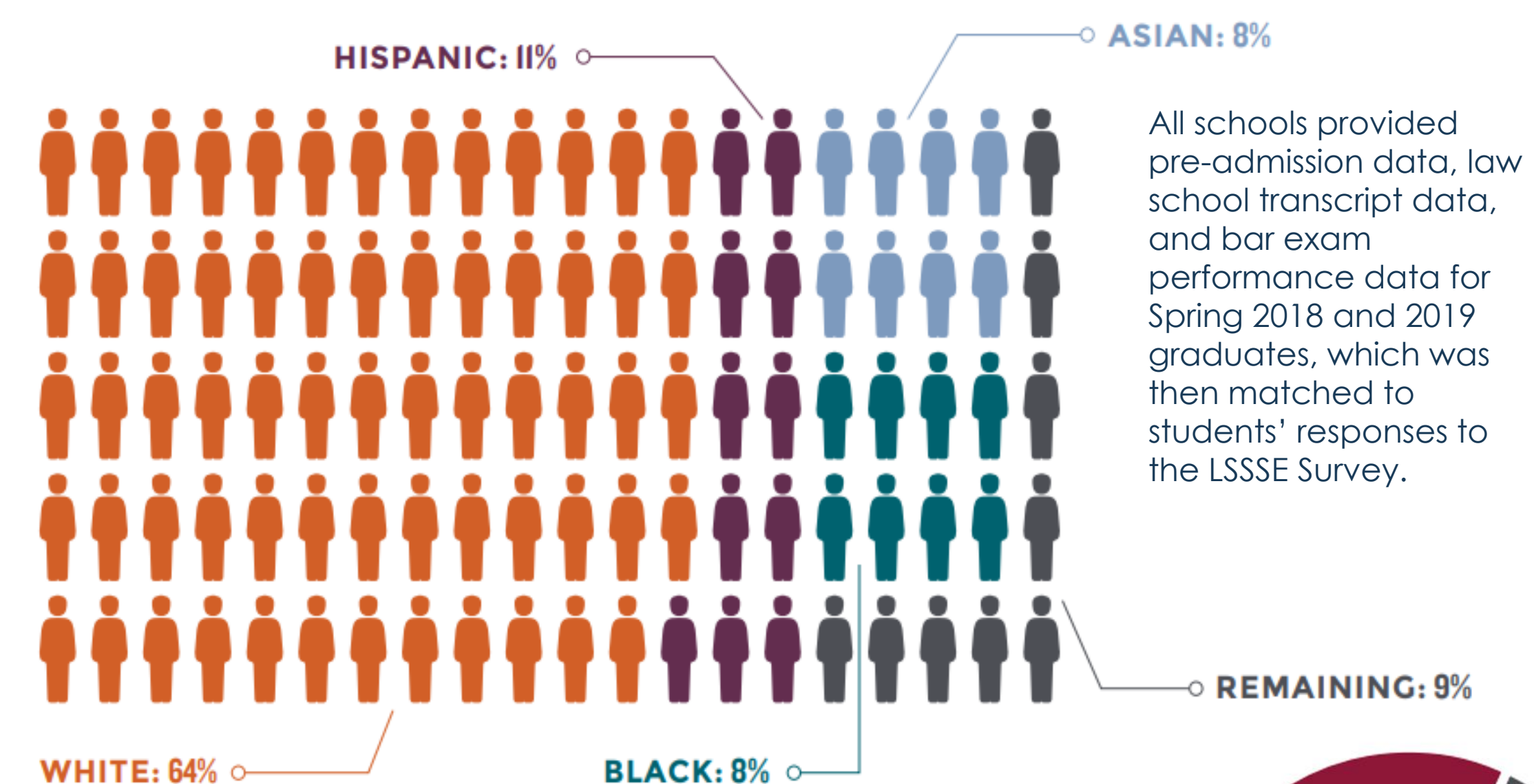
Applying fixed effects linear and logit modeling, our analysis leverages transcript data and responses to the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) among students from 20 law schools to estimate academic performance and odds of bar passage. Most notably, **we find that GPA improvement during law school is associated with greater odds of passing the bar exam,** particularly among students who struggle the most during the first semester.
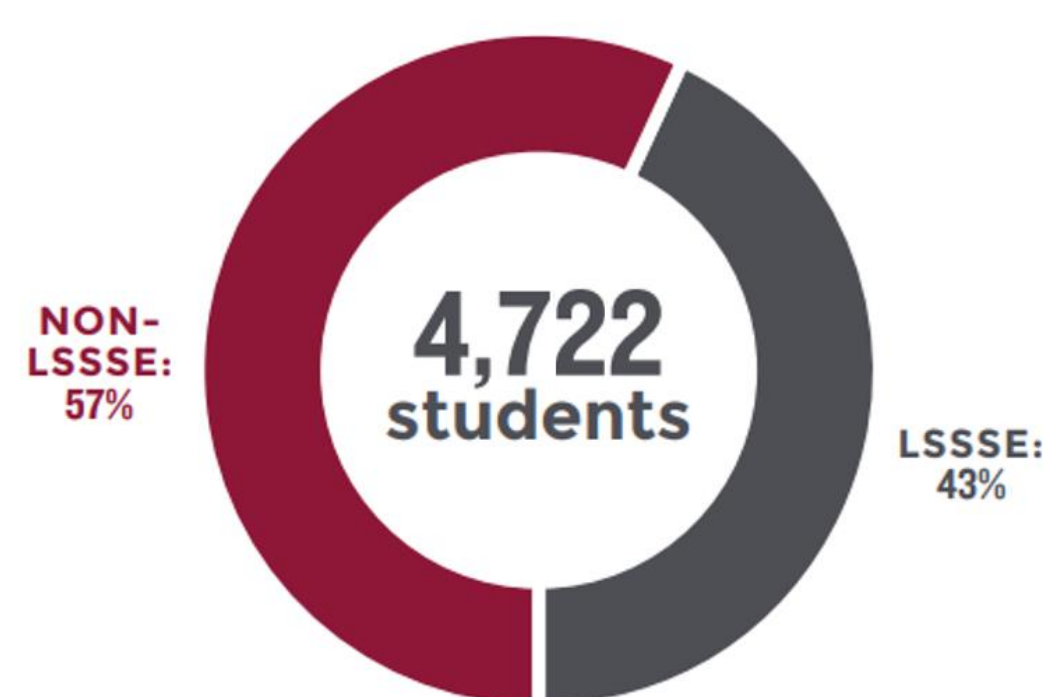
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- To what extent do LSAT score and undergraduate GPA (UGPA) predict law school academic performance and first-time bar exam passage?
- To what extent does law school academic performance predict first-time bar exam performance?
- What, if any, student engagement factors are associated with law school academic performance and/or first-time bar exam performance?

DATA AND METHODS

Drawing from a diverse group of **20 ABA-approved law schools**, the students in the full sample largely **resembled** the racial/ethnic composition of law students nationally.

HISPANIC: 11%
ASIAN: 8%
WHITE: 64%
BLACK: 8%
REMAINING: 9%

All schools provided pre-admission data, law school transcript data, and bar exam performance data for Spring 2018 and 2019 graduates, which was then matched to students' responses to the LSSSE Survey.

Nearly half the students in the sample completed the **Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE).**

NON-LSSSE: 57%
LSSSE: 43%
4,722 students

Variables of Interest:
- Explanatory Variables: LSAT, UGPA, first-semester law school GPA (1S GPA), first-year law school GPA (1L GPA), student engagement
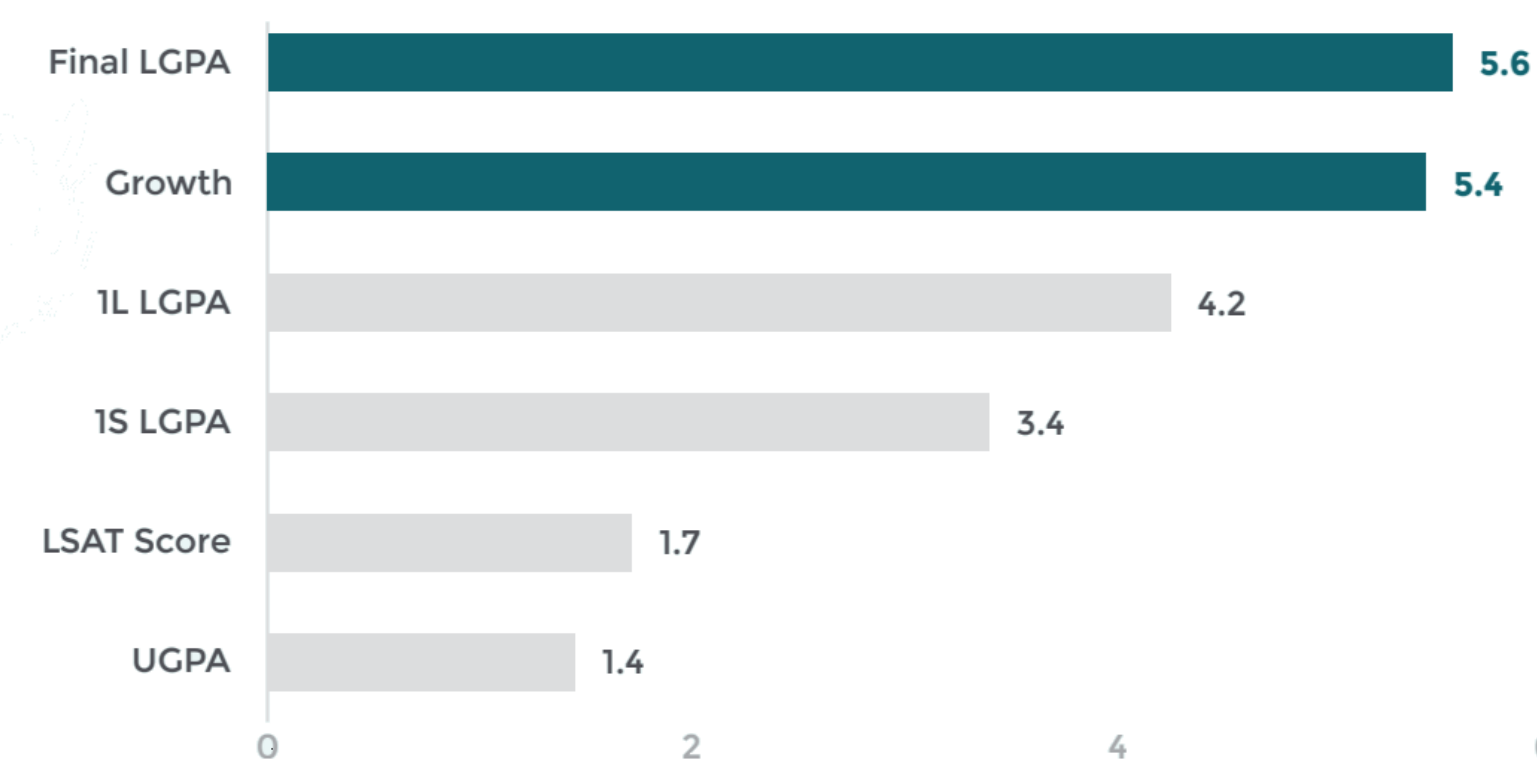- Outcome Variables: Final LGPA, bar passage

Control Variables: Include age, law school debt, first-generation status, graduation year, and jurisdiction

Technique: Linear and logistic fixed effects regression to assess relationships between explanatory and outcome variables
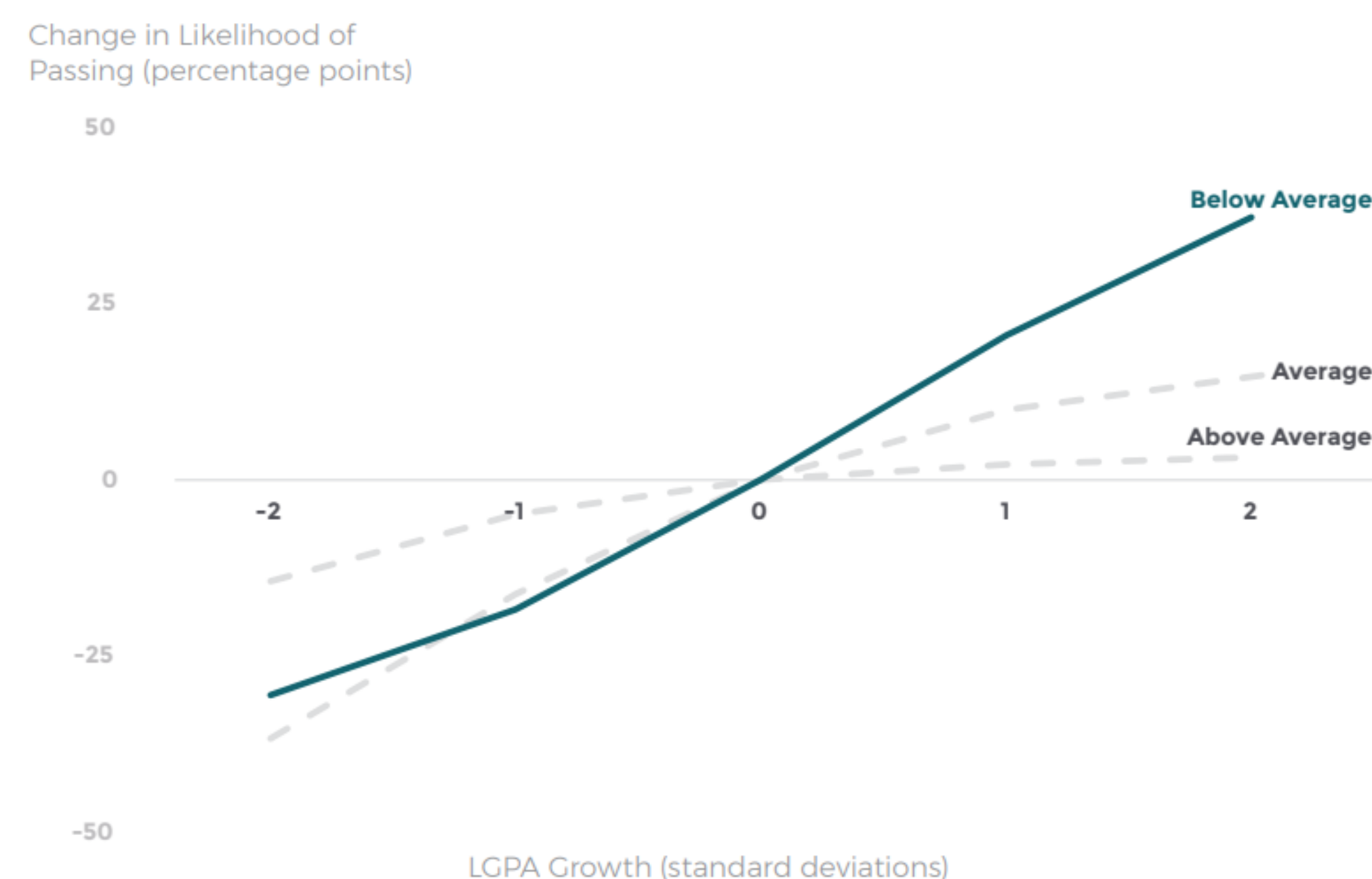
RESULTS

Regardless of when measured — even following the first semester — law school GPA more strongly predicts the odds of first-time bar passage than either LSAT score or final undergraduate GPA.

Odds Ratios (Less than 1 = negative effect; Greater than 1 = positive effect)

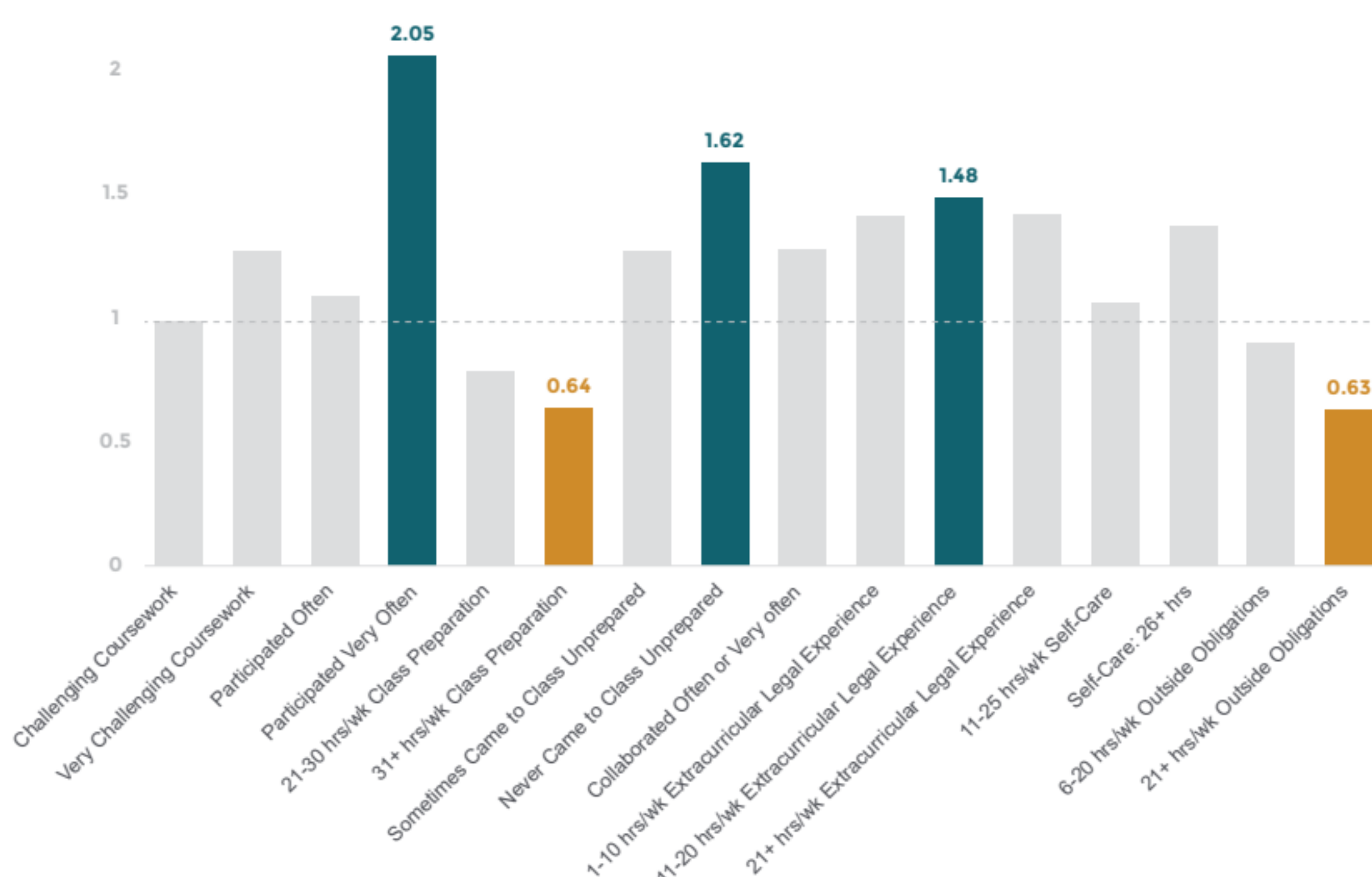|	
Final LGPA	5.6
Growth	5.4
1L LGPA	4.2
1S LGPA	3.4
LSAT Score	1.7
UGPA	1.4

Importantly, GPA growth — the change in GPA from the first semester to graduation — predicts first-time bar passage. GPA growth of one standard deviation is associated with quintupling a student's bar passage odds, translating to approximately a **15-percentage point increase in the predicted probability for an average 1S LGPA student at an average law school.**

Change in Likelihood of Passing (percentage points)

Below Average
Average
Above Average

LGPA Growth (standard deviations)

Since final GPA is the strongest predictor of bar success, it is important to understand how to improve it. **Preparing for and Participating in Class** are moderately strong predictors of **Final GPA. GPA Growth** is most impactful on **Bar Passage** among students with **below average first-semester GPAs.**
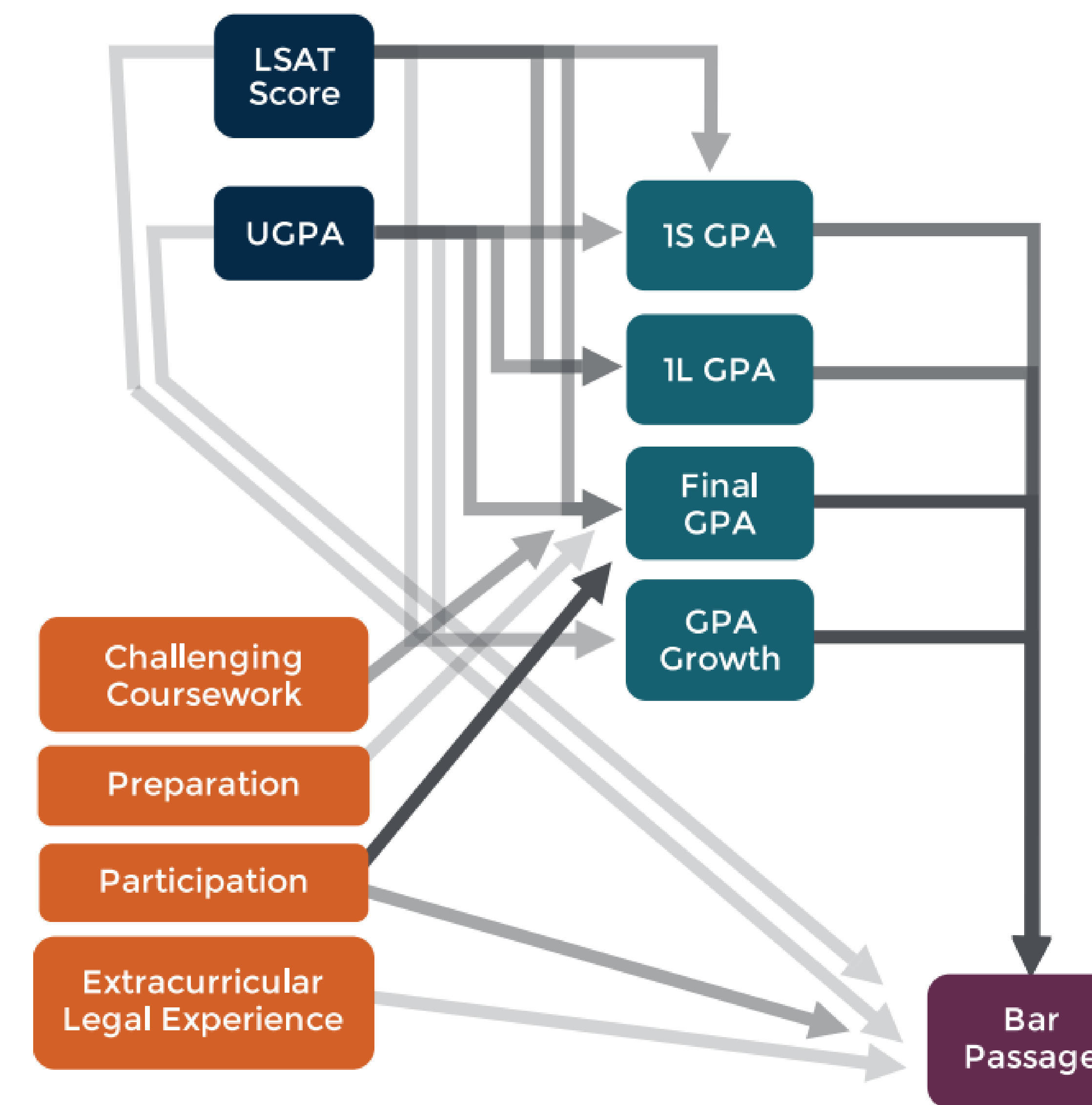
Color indicates result is substantively important; greater distance from the dotted line indicates stronger effect. Values below one indicate a negative effect, whereas values above one indicate a positive effect.

2.05 · 0.64 · 1.62 · 1.48 · 0.63

Challenging Coursework · Very Challenging Coursework · Participated Often · Participated Very Often · 21-30 hrs/wk Class Preparation · 31+ hrs/wk Class Preparation · Sometimes Came to Class Unprepared · Never Came to Class Unprepared · Collaborated Often or Very often · 1-10 hrs/wk Extracurricular Legal Experience · 11-20 hrs/wk Extracurricular Legal Experience · 21+ hrs/wk Extracurricular Legal Experience · 11-20 hrs/wk Self-Care · Self-Care 20+ hrs · 6-20 hrs/wk Outside Obligations · 21+ hrs/wk Outside Obligations

CONCLUSION

Academic and **Bar Performance** are closely related, and **Student Engagement** can enhance both. Thus, by the end of law school, **LSAT Score** and **UGPA** mean relatively little for student success.

(Shading of the lines below indicates the strength of the relationships.)

LSAT Score · UGPA · 1S GPA · 1L GPA · Final GPA · GPA Growth · Bar Passage
Challenging Coursework · Preparation · Participation · Extracurricular Legal Experience

ACTION ITEMS

- Explore relevance of varied admission factors
- Intervene after first semester to identify those at risk of bar failure
- Encourage growth mindset thinking
- Maximize opportunities for student improvement
- Support students with outside responsibilities
- Harness the cumulative potential of student engagement

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