

Decoding Law School Rankings

Why does the *U.S. News* rank law schools? A controversial question. But the answer is very simple. Law school rankings help you make educated decisions on vital issues supported by reliable comparison data. The *BCG Attorney Search Guide* relies on the time-tested metrics and rankings of law schools made by U.S. News and then provides supplementary information about each school to enhance the decision-making process. If you are a potential employer, the BCG Guide will help you make the best hiring decisions. If you are an aspiring lawyer, the *BCG Guide* will help you make the best choices about where to apply to law school.

The rankings of law schools by the *U.S. News & World Report* are based on a weighted average of quality indicators. These indicators are quality assessment (weighted by .40), selectivity (weighted by .25), placement success (weighted by .20), and faculty resources (weighted by .15). Specialty rankings are based on nomination by legal educators at peer institutions. These rankings are based on two types of data: expert opinion about program quality and statistical indicators that measure the quality of a school's faculty, research, and students. Statistical indicators fall into two categories: inputs, or measures of the qualities that students and faculty bring to the educational experience, and outputs, or measures of graduates' achievements linked to their degrees. Different output measures are available for different fields. In law, the measures include the time taken for new grads to get jobs and the state bar exam passage rates.

The *2016 U.S. News & World Report* has continued the same main law school rankings methodology that was used in the 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 editions for admissions data. The methodology uses combined class admissions data for both full-time and part-time entering students for median LSAT scores, median undergraduate grade-point averages, and overall ranking.

A school's rank reflects the number of schools that sit above it; if three schools are tied at 1, the next school will be ranked 4, not 2. Tied schools are listed alphabetically.

Name Counts

Let's say you are a recruiter for a law firm so prestigious that it has its choice of hiring any law graduate from any law school. By now, you have a good feel for the pecking order among law schools. But how do you separate one candidate from his or her classmates who on paper, with minor variations, appear equally desirable?

Given the fact that the average law firm would love to hire almost any attorney with a Harvard or Yale law degree, the most prestigious law firms can be even pickier. The rule of thumb used by such firms is that if you have your choice, you don't want to hire any attorney who can't outperform at least 70% of his or her class. Some international New York law firms go even further and routinely select only from the top 10% of the graduates from the top 10 law schools. That way, these firms argue, they hire the best of the very best.

The problem with selecting only the top-ranked graduates is that law schools are not always forthcoming about their methodology used to rank students. This secrecy is generally based upon

an attempt to give every graduate a shot at the top jobs. However, there are ways to gain a better understanding of the ranking methods used by various schools.

Caution

“Reputation ratings are not the final authority on the attributes of schools or graduates,” state Stephen P. Klein, Ph.D., and Laura Hamilton, Ph.D., in their report “The Validity of the U.S. News & World Report Ranking of ABA Law Schools.” Further, Indiana University School of Law Professor Jeffrey Stake observes in his article, “The Interplay Between Ranking Criteria and Effects: Toward Responsible Rankings,” that “while attending a brand name law school may mean that graduates will have an easier time landing their first jobs, it doesn’t necessarily mean that graduates of lesser-known law schools receive inferior legal educations.” Some schools that were at their peak years ago are still riding the wave of that success, while others have greatly improved their programs and have recruited talented faculty.

Like the monetary value of “goodwill” in the business world, law schools build up “goodwill” of their own regarding reputation. This allows them to gain “mind share,” and their perception as being premier institutions is likely to remain. Thus, Harvard and Yale will always be rated highly, even if objective criteria do not rate them as highly as public perception does. Indeed, Professor Brian Leiter of the University Of Texas School Of Law has conducted a study which “aims to assess which of the top schools have the most ‘national’ placement, as measured by hiring by elite law firms around the country.” The study examines what he terms the “usual suspects for top law schools,” as well as a few others, as a check on the results to see which schools had the most placements at the nation’s elite law firms. He found that in rank order, Harvard, Chicago, Yale, Virginia, Michigan, Stanford, Columbia, Georgetown, Duke, and Penn were the top 10 schools within this analysis.

Thus, it may be that in spite of the *U.S. News* rankings, law firms are indeed following a bit of their own bias, given that Harvard (ranked number two) and Chicago (ranked number four) come out ahead of Yale (ranked number one). Then again, as Professor Leiter notes, one must consider that students’ selection of which school to attend and a given school’s class size, in addition to a firm’s bias based on established reputations, affect whether a school feeds top firms.

Matters That Matter

Law reviews and journals: Law review articles serve an important purpose in that they express the ideas of legal experts with regard to the direction the law should take in certain areas. Such writings have proven influential in the development of the law and have frequently been cited as persuasive authority by the United States Supreme Court and other courts throughout the United States. Many law reviews publish shorter articles written by law students, normally called “notes” or “comments.” Almost every American law school publishes at least one law review, and most law schools have journals as well. Generally, the law review publishes articles dealing with all areas of law. Membership on a school’s law review is often a distinction, indicating rank at or near the top of the class and/or success in a writing competition. Law review membership is seen as a rite of passage by many firms that hire graduating law students. Membership on a law review or journal is significant because it enables students to gain legal scholarship and editing experience and often requires that students publish a significant piece of legal scholarship.

Judicial clerkships: Law clerks provide assistance to judges by researching issues before the court and writing opinions. Clerkships are considered some of the most prestigious and highly coveted jobs in the legal profession. Tenure as a law clerk suggests that a law school graduate possesses

the competence and intelligence to earn a judge's trust and even the ability to influence a judge's decisions. Working as a judicial law clerk at any level of government generally opens up vast career opportunities.

Moot court programs: Moot court, an extracurricular activity in many law schools, lets student participants take part in simulated court proceedings which usually include drafting briefs and participating in oral argument. Moot court competitions hone students' brief writing and oral advocacy skills. Many intramural, national, and international mock trials are held each year, and the best among aspiring lawyers display their talents before senior lawyers and judges.

Clinics, externships, and internships: Participation in clinics, externships, and internships also adds to students' knowledge of and experience in specific areas of the law. In addition, the typically low student-faculty ratios of these programs allow faculty members to devote significant time to helping individual students become better attorneys.