

# Grades vs. Experience

By *Harrison Barnes* from *Los Angeles Office*

## Question

**At what point in a lawyer's career does experience outweigh grades and class rank?**

## Answer

Grades play a part in a great many hiring decisions. However, the weight they are given depends on the particular situation involved and whether you are (A) a junior attorney or law student, (B) a mid level to senior associate or (C) a partner. At each stage of your career the importance of grades will diminish.

When you are considering a lateral move, there are certain firms that will never look at you unless your grades meet a certain standard. The very most prestigious firms such as **Latham & Watkins**, **Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom**, **Wells Fargo**, **Rosen & Katz**, **Munger Tolles & Olsen** and others will in almost all likelihood never interview or hire you unless your academic performance falls within a certain cutoff set by the firm, regardless of what stage you are in your career.

However, it is also worth noting that the most prestigious firms are often willing to look at individuals who are stellar who did not go to Top 10 or even Top 25 law schools. The most prestigious firms are looking for excellence; excellence in your mind begins when you receive your first grades in law school even if it is a second or third tier law school. Either way, you don't.

### Learn More About This Video

There are many reasons that several top firms are so aggressive about grade cut-offs. The main reason is because their clients assure them that the best lawyers possible are doing the work. [It also increases the "aura" of a firm if it is widely known for being highly selective.](#) In addition, these firms can afford to be so selective because they are places where many want to work. If you want to move into the very highest rungs of [law firm practice](#) (which is defined by prestigious [grades will be significant throughout your career.](#)

### The Importance of Grades for Junior Attorneys and Law Students

As any attorney who has ever participated in on campus recruiting is no doubt aware, grades are an extremely important criterion that firms use in the hiring of junior attorneys. Grades are far more important for law students than junior attorneys. Indeed, at no other point in your career will your grades be more important than when you are a law student.

### Law Students

One of the main reasons that grades are emphasized so much for law students is that firms have very little else to go on when they are making hiring decisions. Firms can look at your college and your performance there. Firms can look at what you participated in during law school. Firms can also decide how much they like you. But in terms of judging how good you are about law school, and how much aptitude you show for the practice of law, grades are generally the most important factor.

criterion that firms use in the hiring of law students.

In many respects, this is somewhat understandable and there is support for firms taking law students' grades so seriously. For example, several studies have been done which have shown that your **LSAT score**, and not undergraduate grades, is the best predictor of your academic performance in your first year of law school. [Similarly, there have been studies done that show that your performance in your first year of law school \(and not during your second and third years\) is a better predictor of whether you will pass your state's bar exam on the first attempt.](#)

The largest and most prestigious firms typically have the most serious grade cutoffs for law students. In addition, firms that do on campus recruiting at your law school also tend to place a great deal of emphasis on grades due to the fact that they will compare the transcripts of many students at one time. There are many large national firms that will only consider the top 5% from top national law schools and others that will dip below this to the upper 50% in the hiring of law students from top national law schools. The importance of your grades will generally increase as you go down the law school ranking. For example, if you attended **Yale Law School**, your grades will be less important to most law firms than they would be if you attended a [fourth tier law school](#).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that law students from most law schools can find positions in most cases regardless of their grades. [If you are interviewing with firms that typically do not do a lot of on campus recruiting at your school, the emphasis on grades will be emphasized less than they otherwise might be.](#) In addition, many smaller firms may emphasize grades less than top national law firms due to the fact that they may be more than happy to get a student from your law school. There are certain specialties (such as patent law) where your academic performance in law school may be emphasized less than your undergraduate performance by some firms.

As recruiters, we have been amazed by the fact that grades are not always emphasized as much as some attorneys might think. We have seen attorneys from Fourth Tier law schools at the bottom of their class get positions during law school with top national law firms, for example. In general, there is some predictability to where people end up based on their grades. Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this rule and we continue to see them on an ongoing basis. The fact that these exceptions do occur with regularity should clearly demonstrate that there are forces at work beyond grades in hiring decisions at many firms.

## Junior Associates

Associates with 1 to 3 years of experience [considering a lateral move](#) are typically worried about their academic performance and how this might affect their move. The reasons associates worry about this so much is due to the fact that they were recently conditioned about the importance of grades during law school. As you progress in your career, grades recede in importance. Many attorneys are able to move to firms they might not have been able to get jobs in while they were in law school when they move laterally as junior associates.

The largest explanation for why grades will recede in importance when you have 1-3 years of experience is due to the law of supply and demand. If you think about it, the law of supply and demand is something that is important throughout your career. As a law student, you competed with many associates who are indistinguishable based on not much more than the law school they attended and how well they did there. The best jobs generally go to the best students from the best schools. When a practicing attorney moving laterally, the best jobs generally go to the attorneys who are most in demand. In this context, often than not, it means the attorneys from the best firms, with the level of experience and the demonstrated expertise that the firms need. As set off below, due to the law of supply and demand, as a [lateral attorney](#) moving you will be competing with fewer attorneys for the same positions and firms will not be able to be as selective in terms of your grades:

First, when you are one to three years [out of law school](#), you have presumably begun [to specialize](#) in some branch of law. The more unusual that branch of law is, the fewer attorneys you will be competing with for your position. Accordingly, someone with your skills will be more likely to overlook a less-than-stellar academic performance to get someone with your skills. As you are no doubt aware, firms are forced to "write off" a great deal of an attorney's time during their first year of practice because attorneys are not the most productive their first year. As you get more skills and experience, you

firms increases because they do not have to write off as much of your time. The value of this training increases depending on how few attorneys practice in the same branch of law as you do.

Second, many attorneys leave the practice of law entirely during their first three years of [practicing law](#). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only about 10% of law graduates continue to practice law are competing with fewer people for the same positions. Because there are fewer people competing with, firms do not feel the need to be as selective with whom they hire based on grades.

Third, you will be benefited by the fact that you have proven that you are dedicated to the geographic location you chose. The benefit of being part of the legal community and having stability in the region is something that is very important to many firms.

Fourth, the law of supply and demand is also governed by the fact that many attorneys disqualify themselves from practicing very early in their careers by accepting jobs with firms that are not conducive to moving laterally to a greater firm at a later date. For example, many attorneys accept positions with [insurance defense](#) firms, or smaller unknown firms that do unsophisticated work. While there is nothing wrong with this decision, the fact of the matter is that most firms that hire attorneys they perceive as having the training it takes to practice law in a [big firm](#) environment. The substantial majority of [law graduates](#) go to firms that grade conscious firms perceive as not providing a high-level training, the fact of the matter is that most grade conscious firms cannot afford to be overly grade conscious when hiring laterals. In fact, the quality of the firm you are coming from is most often more important than your grades when you come in as a lateral with 1-3 years of experience.

If there was ever a better illustration of the points discussed above in action, it is the [hiring of corporate attorneys](#) on the West Coast in 1998 through most of 2000 which took place at a dizzying pace. Many of the most prestigious national law firms were hiring corporate attorneys out of small law firms without ever seeing so much as a transcript. This pattern emerged because many firms had more work than they could handle. While most of the best-known names in the legal profession were in the process of lowering their standards, a great many firms did budge on their standards and hired everyone they could get. In this circumstance, the importance of grades virtually vanished.

None of this is to say that grades completely recede in importance. If you think about the law of supply and demand, you can quickly realize that it can also make grades important later in your career. In the example above, there was a tremendous demand for corporate associates on both coasts for a three-year period. In 2002 this trend has reversed itself. With fewer corporate attorneys from top national law firms competing for the same positions, grades can certainly become more important in distinguishing between candidates.

## Mid Level to Senior Associates

In the mid-level to [senior associate](#) realm, the same prejudices that the largest firms have about grades are still present. The largest and very most prestigious firms still are generally quite interested in your grades. Nevertheless, as recruiting has slowed, you have noticed a greater willingness of firms to "look the other way" or not take grades as seriously as they definitely would for students and to a lesser extent would for junior associates.

## The Midlevel Associate

As a midlevel associate, firms are generally most concerned about your legal skills and the potential you show. If you are coming from a firm with some stature, then law firms will assume you have the training that they need. Midlevel associates are typically quite profitable for firms because they can efficiently do the work at rates that clients will not balk at. As a midlevel associate, most firms will look at your grades. Nevertheless, firms' largest concern will be with your ability to do the work and the potential you show for growth within the firm.

The same illustrations outlined above regarding (1) your specialization, (2) the number of attorneys still practicing in your geographic commitment, and (4) the firms that have given you high-level training become even more important for midlevel associates than they are for junior associates.

## The Senior Associate

After several years of practice, the same four factors identified above become increasingly important in firms' evaluation of candidates.

relative strengths. In addition, firms become more concerned with your potential to make partner and your business generation abilities. At this level, these other concerns far outweigh grades at 99% of firms.

## The Partner

At the partner level, grades have almost no importance. Concerns about your business generation ability and other factors assume an importance far beyond your grades. In fact, we would estimate that in 7 out of 10 partner placements, firms hire our candidates without ever requesting to see their grades. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. There are some super prestigious national firms that will continue considering your grades to be of paramount importance to your career. On some occasions, we have seen partners who were national figures in their practice area with multi-million dollar books of business not get interviews because of their law school grades. Nevertheless, this occurs quite infrequently.

## Conclusions

Grades are most important for law students. At the junior associate level they become less important and become so throughout your career. While law school is three short years, your [legal career](#) can span over 30 years. Accordingly, it goes without saying that your law school performance is by no means the most important indicator of the success you will have in the practice of law. Nevertheless, there are some [American law firms](#) where your grades will prevent you from getting a top position throughout your career. However, with all the opportunities available in the market, one's law school grades, even 1 year after law school are not something that will hold you back with most firms if you have managed other aspects of your career correctly.

**See the following article to learn how much the law school you attended matters when moving to a new firm:**  
[How Much Does the Law School You Went to Matter When You Lateral Firms?](#)

[Click Here to Let Us Answer Your Legal Career Question](#)