

Commentary: There Are Only Two Kinds of Law Schools

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What's in a number? For law schools -- and the students who love/hate them -- everything. We're talking rankings, and from the attention paid to the annual lists (the most prominent of which is *U.S. News & World Report's*), it would appear that the only thing better than attending a school in the single digits is a U.S. Supreme Court clerkship.

But do the numbers really matter? Put a different way, will it change your life to claw a few more rungs up the rankings ladder?

Consider what the rankings do not measure: your chance of getting a good job. While *U.S. News*, for example, considers the employment rate of recent graduates, it does not count whether those graduates are gainfully employed as well-paid associates or barely holding on as paralegals. More important, it makes no attempt to fathom whether young lawyers are working in jobs they want rather than the only jobs they can get. It also gives almost no weight to a school's bar exam passage rate -- the very thing lawyers need before they can practice law. Instead, *U.S. News*, like *Vault* and plenty of others, places an unnatural emphasis on the "reputation" of a law school as reported by others in the business.

While reputation surely matters -- and, certainly, doesn't hurt -- it is really a proxy for harder things to measure, like the success of a school's alumni. It is also difficult to budge and more influenced by perception than reality. (Harvard, for example, will always be Harvard, even if all of its graduates were suddenly abducted by aliens.)

Most important, the difference between the top-ranked school and the third-ranked, or between the 50th and the 95th, is trivial and insignificant, despite the teeth-gnashing and eye-rolling over standings.

It turns out there are really only two tiers of law schools -- those where students decide which firms they want to interview at and those where the firms decide. Most law schools belong to the latter group.

At the Tier 1 schools, firms will interview anyone with a pulse.

But at Tier 2 schools, firms create hard cutoffs based on GPA or journal membership that automatically exclude a large percentage of the class from ever having a chance. Indeed, many law firms simply do not interview at Tier 2 campuses and rely on students to contact them directly the old-fashioned way -- through the mail. (Good luck.)

Just as it makes little difference whether a student attends Harvard or Yale, it makes little difference whether a student attends the 50th-ranked law school or the 95th-ranked law school.

At both schools the quality of education is likely to be the same and the chances of getting a good job dependent on the same few factors.

And what are those factors? Most important among them: grades. Quite simply, in Tier 2 the best jobs go to the students with the best grades, regardless of school ranking. The valedictorian at the lowest-ranked law school will get a better job than someone from the middle of the class at a school higher up the ladder.

Geography also matters. A Tier 2 student who wants to work in New York, for example, should attend a New York school, even if that school is lower-ranked than a Tier 2 California school. Lawyers tend to hire their own, and local networks stop at the border.

Finally, commitment counts. Demonstrating your interest in a particular area of the law by taking classes and internships and pursuing volunteer opportunities will get more attention on a resume than a smattering of disjointed (even if prestigious) activities. Although everyone likes a dilettante at a cocktail party, the next day no one wants to talk to him or her at the office.

As my old track coach used to say, there's nothing magic in the numbers. What counts is a student's desire to succeed and the hard work she is willing to commit to it. Life is not a ladder; it's not even a staircase. It's a series of steps that lead anywhere and everywhere. You know what to do.

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