

Debunking the Mystique of Top 20 Law Schools

"GPAs don't practice law. People practice law."

—Ron Jordan

By Kara Mayer Robinson and Melanie Lasoff Levs

What makes an attorney successful?

For some minority lawyers, it may start with a degree from one of the top 20 law schools in the country (see sidebar), a high LSAT score, law review, or all three. According to law firm recruiters, managing partners, and law school deans, however, success is not measured for most attorneys by class ranking or even the law school they attended. When hiring both minority and non-minority candidates alike out of law school, these leaders look less at where candidates graduated and more at a variety of their characteristics and experiences, including drive, passion, work ethic, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Recruiters agree that if law firms care too much about recruiting at only the top 20 schools, they miss some highly qualified and exceptional candidates at the other 160 American Bar Association-accredited law schools.

"GPAs don't practice law. People practice law," notes Ron Jordan, founding principal of Carter-White & Shaw. "Their various experiences, along with their theoretical background, will determine what type of lawyer they will become. Going to Harvard is not going to guarantee that you're going to be successful."

Success is not automatic in the legal world, as it requires hard work no matter where you attended law school, observes Reginald J. Hill, partner and co-chair of Jenner & Block's hiring executive committee. "Because of high standards of admission in a number of top-tier law schools, I do think that there are many successful candidates there," he explains. "But that does not mean people with the same types of qualifications that aren't matriculating there won't have the same measure of success as lawyers."

Beyond the Top 20

Although the top 20 law schools may deserve their ranking, candidates from other schools may still be worthy additions to law firms. To ensure they find the best associates for their firms, the recruiters interviewed for this article recruit both at the top 20 and other schools alike.

Betsy Bousquette, director of professional resources at Bryan Cave LLP, recruits summer interns and associates from both the top-ranking schools and local schools in places where the firm has offices. For example, she notes that the firm recruits in Phoenix at the University of Arizona, at Arizona State University for its Phoenix, Ariz. office, and at the University of Missouri-Kansas City for its Kansas City office. "We have had successful lawyers from all these schools," Bousquette adds.

The firm keeps these historical successes in mind when recruiting from non-top-tier schools, she continues. "People choose to go to the law schools they select for a variety of reasons, so there are going to be strong candidates and excellent lawyers at any law school you recruit from," Bousquette explains. "The other thing is, no matter where a law school is ranked, law school is competitive. If candidates are succeeding wherever they are, it's worth getting to know them and seeing whether they're a fit for your firm."

Hill agrees. "We believe we'll get top candidates out of top schools. We also believe that we'll get that at other schools," he notes, adding that at the other schools targeted by the firm, the firm considers reputation, diversity of the student body, and its prior success with lawyers from those schools. Like Bryan Cave, the firm also looks at schools in regions where the firm has offices. To ensure they recruit top minority candidates, Hill remarks that the firm reviews published information and statistics provided by the law schools regarding diversity.

Law students choose their schools for many reasons. "Some reasons may exclude the top 20, like expense, geography, or that person's family situation," he explains. "I would think that there aren't too many large law firms that only recruit at top 20 law schools, just because the numbers aren't there; there are not enough students to fill the needs."

Graduates of the top 20 law schools, in turn, are sought by the top 20 law firms, affirms Jordan of Carter-White & Shaw. Therefore, he adds, "A firm loses out by not drilling down [by looking deeply for candidates] at other law schools."

In his 23 years of experience as a headhunter, Jordan has found that the majority of the most successful minority lawyers in the country are not from the top 20 law schools. "A lot of candidates I've recruited didn't go to top 20 schools," he adds.

That could be because many law schools—not just the top 20—have worked to attract top minority law students, says James J. Alfini, dean of South Texas College of Law in Houston. The school, whose full-time students in 2006-2007 included 23 percent minorities and 45 percent women, is ranked as a "Tier 4" institution by *U.S. News and World Report*.¹ "Some of our top students are members of minority groups," he notes, adding that law firms have been shortsighted in the past by interviewing candidates just from top schools, which means that minorities are often underrepresented in big law firms. To rectify that, Alfini posits, "Looking beyond the top 20 schools just gives recruiters a much wider pool of minority students to look at."

As firms continue to ramp up efforts to hire minority and women associates, limiting recruitment to the top 20 law schools makes this more difficult, says Veryl Victoria Miles, dean of the Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America, number 97 on the *U.S. News and World Report* list. Fifty-two percent of Columbus full-time students in 2006-2007 were women and 18 percent were minorities.² "Over the past five years, we have seen a steady decrease in the number of minority applicants to law schools, making it critical that firms look to more law schools for such recruits," she relates.

According to Miles, among law firms listed in the 2007 *NALP Directory of Legal Employers*, only five percent of partners were minorities and only 1.48 percent were minority women.³ In 2004, according to a report from the American Bar Association, only four percent of law firm partners nationwide were attorneys of color. "The decision to limit recruitment of new lawyers by survey rankings puts such firms in a zone of lost opportunities for diversity and practice excellence," she adds. "I think firms that limit their recruitment outreach to schools ranked in the top 20 of any survey of law schools are missing an incredible opportunity."

In seeking candidates from a broader range of schools, Jordan of Carter-White & Shaw examines what the students at other schools are actually studying. "I look at the degree of legal theory those students are being taught," he explains, adding that he prefers his recruits have "real world" experience. "I look at the school and see if they have quality work, and smart and articulate lawyers teaching at the school."

He also looks at where in the country the candidate's school is located; for example, in the New York, N.Y. area, law schools include Rutgers and Fordham Universities, so there are "a lot more schools than just NYU and Columbia," says Jordan.

What It Takes

What do these recruiters look for when assessing candidates for their firms? Although the ranking of the law school may play some role, other factors are more crucial.

"Things that are important to us are a combination of academic achievement, relevant work experience, and genuine interest in the practice and business of law," notes Bousquette of Bryan Cave. She also looks at personality. "We're focused on working together as a team to get results for a client. We like to see that they have the same approach to their work."

According to Bousquette, academic achievement is another sign of success, which includes working on law review or another journal. These activities reflect commitment, initiative, and interest in the law. A federal clerkship also weighs into a lawyer's future success. "It's a wonderful experience to get an insider's view of what takes place in the courtroom. Even if a person who does a clerkship eventually goes into a transactional practice, they'll understand the deals that haven't gone well," Bousquette notes. "Any work experience before you get started with the firm that has to do with the law will help."

THE RANKING

Each year, *U.S. News and World Report* ranks the law schools accredited by the American Bar Association (this year, 184) on criteria that include quality assessment (scores by lawyers and judges), selectivity (median LSAT scores and GPA, acceptance rate), placement success, and faculty resources (student/faculty ratio, expenditures per student). The top 20 law schools in the country for 2008 as ranked in 2007 by *U.S. News and World Report* are:

- 1) Yale University
- 2) Harvard University and Stanford University (tied for 2)
- 4) New York University
- 5) Columbia University
- 6) University of Chicago and University of Pennsylvania (tied for 6)
- 8) University of California-Berkeley, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (tied for 8)
- 10) Duke University and University of Virginia (tied for 10)
- 12) Northwestern University
- 13) Cornell University
- 14) Georgetown University
- 15) University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA)
- 16) University of Southern California Gould School of Law and Vanderbilt University (tied for 16)
- 18) University of Texas at Austin
- 19) Washington University in St. Louis
- 20) University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Boston University (tied for 20)

Source: http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/law/brief/lawrank_brief.php.

Being a successful attorney takes opportunity and hard work, agrees Hill of Jenner & Block. "We're interested in strong interpersonal skills, excellent writing capabilities, excellent oral

communication skills, people who are motivated and ambitious, who are leaders but also team players," he indicates.

How important are GPA and other law school factors? GPA is a "relevant measure," Hill states, but not the sole consideration nor absolutely determinative of success. As does Bousquette's, his firm places significance on clerkships and law review. "Federal clerkships are good because [the candidates] do get a comprehensive and intense view into the federal court system," he adds. "It's that experience that's helpful."

Those experiences mean success not just in top 20 law schools, suggests Alfini of South Texas College of Law. "Students in the top 10 percent of any ABA-accredited law school should be seen as competitive nationwide," he explains, adding that it is not law school entrance credentials—such as LSAT scores or undergraduate grades—that make a lawyer, but performance in law school itself. "If you perform well in any ABA-accredited law school, you are deserving and qualified to compete and perform well at any top law firm."

Better indicators of associate success involve the whole student, not just scores, he continues. "I have friends at big law firms, particularly in Chicago, who told me they were very pleased they took the number-one student at a fourth-tier school, because that person has performed beyond the top 20 person who came from Harvard," says Alfini. Therefore, he concludes, motivated candidates should not feel they cannot measure up to a graduate of a top 20 law school. "Our graduates may be a little uncomfortable working with students from Stanford or Harvard within the first week or two, but they realize pretty quickly that their education is certainly enough to make them perform well in that firm."

Jordan of Carter-White & Shaw states that a successful attorney works hard, multitasks well, thinks outside the box, develops relationships, and is mentored effectively. They also are leaders as summer associates, he notes. They are the individuals who took on additional responsibilities both in school and at the firm, and they maintained a high GPA throughout law school while participating in extracurricular activities. "Those mitigating circumstances encompass what type of lawyer you get," declares Jordan. "Being smart does not necessarily make you a good attorney."

Hill agrees that an attorney is not just what he or she appears to be on paper. Competitive recruiting involves assessing the whole candidate. Although attending a top 20 law school adds to an attorney's credibility, he notes, it does not mean automatic achievement, especially as the attorney moves further up the ranks. After all, as stated by Hill, it is what you do in the field that ultimately makes you successful. "If you've been practicing law for 25 years and the most outstanding thing about your career is where you went to law school, I guess that says something." **DB**

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NOTES

1. See http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/directory/dir-law/brief/glanc_03149_brief.php.
2. See Source: http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/directory/dir-law/brief/glanc_03030_brief.php.

3. See <http://www.nalp.org/press/details.php?id=64>.

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