

# THE BEST LAW SCHOOLS FOR PASSING THE BAR EXAM

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According to the American Bar Association, bar passage rates are “the single best outcome measure . . . in assessing whether a law school is maintaining a ‘rigorous program of legal education.’”<sup>2</sup> Bar passage rates are better measures of the quality of legal education than graduation rates or employment results, for these outcomes “are not as directly relevant . . . to determining whether a law school is offering an educational program that is comprehensive and sufficiently rigorous. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Bar passage rates are—and should be—important to all law students and potential law students. Students “are entitled . . . to an education that provides them with a reasonable chance of passing the bar and entering the profession. . . . [L]aw students often incur substantial debt to earn a law degree. Whether students pass the bar influences their future livelihood and quality of life immensely, including their abilities to pay back their loans while maintaining an acceptable quality of life.”<sup>4</sup>

Undergraduate GPAs (UGPAs) and LSAT scores are the two primary factors considered by law school admissions offices.<sup>5</sup> Statistically, students with higher UGPAs and LSAT scores are more likely to pass the bar exam than students with lower UGPAs and LSAT scores.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, a predicted bar passage rate may be calculated for each law school based upon its

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<sup>2</sup> Revisions to Standard 316: Frequently Asked Questions, at [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal\\_education\\_and\\_admissions\\_to\\_the\\_bar/council\\_reports\\_and\\_resolutions/may19/3-19-may-316-faq.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/council_reports_and_resolutions/may19/3-19-may-316-faq.pdf) (last visited Aug. 1, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> The Median UGPA and LSAT score for each law school is available at <http://www.abarequreddisclosures.org/Disclosure509.aspx> (last visited Aug. 1, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> *See, e.g.,* Jeffrey S. Kinsler & Jeffrey O. Usman, *Law Schools, Bar Passage, and Under and Over-Performing Expectations*, 36 QUINNIPIAC L. REV. 183, 189 (2018).

UGPA and LSAT scores. Once a predicted bar passage rate is calculated, it is possible to determine which law schools are over-performing or under-performing in terms of preparing their students to pass the bar exam. In other words, it is possible to show which law schools are adding the most bar-passage value to (or subtracting the most from) their students.

Utilizing linear regression models, the performance of 187 ABA-approved law schools was assessed using four metrics (reported by the ABA) for each calendar year for the five-year period of 2015-2019:<sup>7</sup> (1) Median LSAT and Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate;<sup>8</sup> (2) Median UGPA and Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate; (3) Median LSAT and Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate Differential;<sup>9</sup> and (4) Median UGPA and Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate Differential. An annual rank was then calculated for each law school based on its over-performance (or under-performance) of predicted expectations for bar passage. An average annual rank was then calculated based on each law school's performance over the period of 2015-2019.

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<sup>7</sup> Twenty law schools were excluded from this study because of missing or inconsistent data. First, the two diploma-privilege law schools (Wisconsin and Marquette) were excluded because they do not report bar examination passage data for most graduates. Second, the three ABA-approved law schools in Puerto Rico (Inter American University School of Law, Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico School of Law, and University of Puerto Rico School of Law) were excluded because at the time of this study, their students took the LSAT in English, but took the bar exam in Spanish, creating language-based consistency problems in comparing performance on the input measure (UGPA and LSAT) and the output measure (bar exam performance). Third, six law schools, specifically Hamline, Penn State, Penn State-Dickinson Law, Rutgers-Camden, Rutgers-Newark, and William Mitchell, dramatically changed structure between 2012 and 2019; thus, there are consistency problems with the data for these schools. Fourth, the ABA did not report input and/or output data for the following law schools for a portion of the relevant time period: Arizona Summit, Charlotte, Concordia, Indiana Tech, La Verne, North Texas, Thomas Jefferson, Valparaiso, and Whittier.

<sup>8</sup> The "Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate" is a law school's bar passage rate for all graduates taking the bar exam for the first time in a calendar year. The Composite Average First-Time Bar Passage Rate for each law school is available at <http://www.abarequreddisclosures.org/BarPassageOutcomes.aspx> (last visited 8/1/2020).

<sup>9</sup> The "Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate Differential" is the difference between a law school's Composite Average First-Time Bar Pass Rate and the weighted bar pass rate for ABA graduates in the reported jurisdictions. The Composite Average First-Time Bar Passage Rate Differential for each law school is available at <http://www.abarequreddisclosures.org/BarPassageOutcomes.aspx> (last visited 8/1/2020).

**Best Law Schools.** Based upon this analysis, the top 15 law schools in terms of over-performing predicted expectations for bar passage based upon UGPA and LSAT scores of incoming students are as follows:

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Top 15 Law Schools for Bar Passage</b>
1	BELMONT UNIVERSITY
2	FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
3	LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
4	CAMPBELL UNIVERSITY
5	TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
6	DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
7	LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY
8	GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
9	TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
10	UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
11	REGENT UNIVERSITY
12	UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
13	SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
14	CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY
15	UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

The top performer—Belmont University—was the only law school ranked in the top ten for each of the five calendar years, including first place finishes in 2015 and 2019. Belmont had an average annual rank of 3.6, and was the only law school in the top 15 to have an average composite first-time bar passage rate above 90%. Florida International University—the second best performer—ranked in the top 15 law schools for each of the five calendar years. Florida International had an average annual rank of 9.4. Liberty University—the third best performer—finished first in 2018 and had an average annual rank of 11.4. Campbell University—the fourth best performer—finished first in 2017 and had an average annual rank of 16.2. Texas A&M—the fifth best performer—had an average annual rank of 16.8.

The over-performance of the top five law schools is not a fluke; these findings are based on 20 linear regression models using the most reliable input and output data for five calendar years. The reason these law schools succeed is that they dedicate substantial time and resources to

ensuring that their students pass the bar exam and become licensed members of the legal profession. Campbell University, for example, explicitly proclaims: “Our goal is always to have every student pass the bar exam.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, most of the top performers have an experienced faculty member in charge of bar preparation, such as Professor Raul Ruiz at Florida International or Professor James McGrath at Texas A&M.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, many law school professors (and law schools) felt that the bar exam was someone else’s problem. But as Professor Mario W. Maneiro wrote in 2016: “If we expect students to treat bar exam study as a ‘full-time job,’ then we must ourselves treat it as a full-time job and more, and be willing to expend whatever time is needed to deliver individualized assistance in writing, analysis, and practice to all of our students.”<sup>12</sup>

**Worst Law Schools.** The bottom 15 law schools under-performing expectations for bar passage based upon UGPAs and LSAT scores of incoming students are as follows:

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Bottom 15 Law Schools for Bar Passage</b>
173	TOURO COLLEGE
174	UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
175	NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
176	ATLANTA'S JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL
177	NEW YORK LAW SCHOOL
178	UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-HASTINGS
179	EMORY UNIVERSITY
180	THOMAS M. COOLEY LAW SCHOOL
181	UNIVERSITY OF BUFFALO-SUNY
182	AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
183	HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY
184	SOUTHWESTERN LAW SCHOOL
185	GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY
186	UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
187	UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

<sup>10</sup> Campbell University School of Law website, available at <https://law.campbell.edu/succeed/academic-support/bar-success/> (last visited 8/1/2020).

<sup>11</sup> McGrath recently became the dean of WMU-Cooley Law School.

<sup>12</sup> See Mario W. Maneiro, “We Should Not Rely on Commercial Bar Reviews to Do Our Job: Why Labor-Intensive Comprehensive Bar Examination Preparation Can and Should Be a Part of the Law School Mission,” 19 CHAP. L. REV. 545, 585 (2016).

Not surprisingly, the lowest ranking law schools consistently under-performed expectations. In particular, the University of San Francisco—the worst performer—was the only law school in the study to finish with a rank below 180 in each of the five calendar years. Admittedly, California has a low bar passage rate, but the University of San Francisco had an average composite first-time bar passage rate of only 41.38%, more than 20 percentage points below the weighted bar pass rate for ABA graduates in its reported jurisdictions. Similarly, the University of the District of Columbia—the second worst performer—had a rank below 175 in each of the five calendar years. The University of the District of Columbia had an average composite first-time bar passage rate of only 43.92%, nearly 30 percentage points below the weighted bar pass rate for ABA graduates in its reported jurisdictions. But not all of the bottom 15 law schools consistently under-performed; Atlanta’s John Marshall and California-Hastings ranked among the top 75 law schools in 2019.

Surprisingly, the under-performing law schools have little in common. Although most of them are lower tier law schools, one is a T14 school (Northwestern) and two others (Minnesota and Emory) are ranked in the top 25 by *US News*. In addition, while several of the bottom 15 are located in states with low bar passage rates (California, Michigan), most are located in states with above-average pass rates. The under-performing law schools are also geographically diverse; four are located on the West Coast, three in the Midwest, four in New England, and two each in the Southeast and the District of Columbia. Moreover, whereas most of the bottom 15 are private law schools, four are public.

The purpose of the bar exam is to ensure new lawyers have minimal competency.<sup>13</sup> There is some debate whether the bar exam serves this purpose. What is not debatable is that passing the

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Florida Rules of the Supreme Court Relating to Admission to the Bar R. 1-15.1.

bar exam is a prerequisite to practice law in nearly all U.S. jurisdictions. A school's successful (or unsuccessful) bar passage track record, therefore, should be a significant consideration for students applying to law school.