



OPINION

Op-Ed: Be
skeptical of law-
school and other
college rankings.
Very skeptical



A student prepares for the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) in El Monte, Calif. on Aug. 1, 2013. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

BY AKHIL REED AMAR

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The news held no surprises. When U.S. News & World Report released its much-anticipated [annual rankings](#) of graduate and professional schools last week, Yale once again ranked No. 1 among law schools, a spot it has held since 1987, when the news magazine first entered the law-school ranking business.

But Yale, which is both my alma mater and my longtime employer, is not No. 1 in all respects. Prospective law students should treat the U.S. News rankings — and any other ranking system, for that matter — with caution and skepticism.

Rankings can be helpful in a crude first

analysis, if used as one among many tools for prospective students. But the U.S. News rankings have serious limitations, relying as they do on debatable and sometimes perverse weights and formulas

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The biggest factors in the rankings are lawyer and peer “assessments,” in which law deans, judges, practitioners, relatively junior professors and others are asked to rate programs around the country. But how much do they really know about the schools they are rating? Lawyer and peer assessments risk being simply an echo chamber in which a given law school ranks high this year largely because of a vague sense by distant and ill-informed observers that it is a top law school. Why? Often because it ranked well in previous years.

The U.S. News rankings have serious limitations, relying as they do on debatable and sometimes perverse weights and formulas.

Other metrics used in the rankings are at best imperfect proxies and at worst vulnerable to strategic manipulation by school administrators. One factor involves employment rates at graduation and 10 months later. The rankings don't fully reflect how good those jobs are or what kinds of law various graduates end up practicing. Yale may be tops for anyone seeking to clerk for a federal judge, but probably not for someone wanting to practice patent law or oil and gas law.



The U.S. News rankings can also make applicants feel that only the tippy-top schools are worth attending, but there are lots of strong schools beyond the top three (Yale, Stanford, Harvard) — or even the top 30. Some regional schools are particularly good at familiarizing students with state

law and state court systems and preparing them for leadership in state government and local hubs of national law firms.

Don't get me wrong. I think Yale is a great school, and we have been blessed by the current ranking system. No other institution of higher learning — no Ivy League college, no medical school, no business school, no university program in any major sport for that matter — has enjoyed anything remotely like Yale Law School's three-decade dominance in U.S. News standings.

And I have benefited personally from the system. The maiden law-school rankings issue of U.S. News in 1987 featured a large and flattering picture of me in the classroom. For most of the last decade, I have been closely involved in admitting and recruiting Yale's top prospective students. Thanks to U.S. News, most recruits need little persuasion; we have them at "hello." So my grapes are not sour and my gripes are not self-serving.

But here is some truth in advertising. Yes, Yale has some strong pluses. We're a tight-

knit school with a grand tradition of academic excellence and an abiding commitment to public service. Our alumni include dozens of notable law professors, two modern presidents, four current justices, five sitting senators, California's last (and longest-serving) governor, and three justices of the California Supreme Court. Many of the most important legal ideas of the last 60 years were born at Yale Law. But we have real flaws.

We have failed to achieve true intellectual diversity; our litigation clinics tilt left, and in my field, constitutional law, we need more top conservative professors. Several other schools do a better job populating the top tier of the private bar ("Biglaw").

Because we are small, our curriculum is at times spotty. Some Los Angeles schools, especially the sometimes underappreciated UCLA (ranked 15th), may be a better and more affordable fit for those intending to practice in Southern California

Serious applicants should consult leading

rankings beyond U.S. News, and should pore over the law-school data [freely available from the ABA](#) to create their own individualized weightings and formulas. Those desiring a large school with more courses and classmates might rank Harvard Law No. 1. Stanford Law might be best for someone into high-tech startups.

And there are many superb national schools beyond this triumvirate, including the University of Chicago, Columbia, Duke, Northwestern, NYU, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Virginia, among others. If you already have crushing undergraduate debt, the law school offering the best financial deal should perhaps top your list.

It's so easy in sports. The team that wins most consistently is best. No such clear and widely accepted rules define which law school is best. Notwithstanding last week's rankings, in truth there is no No. 1.

Akhil Reed Amar is a professor of constitutional law at Yale Law School. His most recent book is "The Constitution Today."