

3 reasons Yale Law was right to quit the U.S. News rankings

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Last week, Yale Law School, where I teach, [announced it was pulling out](#) of U.S. News & World Report's annual law school rankings. Many people were shocked. After all, Yale has perennially been No. 1 in the 30-plus years since the rankings first appeared. Why quit a system that has brought so much glory?

Because the U.S. News rankings are somewhere between silly and demented — they harm law schools, applicants and graduates. As somebody who has been reading law school applications and advising prospective students for almost a decade, I could offer dozens of reasons for ending the rankings. But here are the top three.

1. The list encourages students to make decisions based on the rankings — and nothing else. When helping prospective law students choose a school, I encourage them to talk to currently enrolled students or recent alumni to find out about the student culture. I tell them to explore whether the courses, clinics and professors match their interests. I encourage them to visit — in person or virtually — and get a feel for the school, the community, the city.

I'm mostly wasting my breath. Here's a story I could tell a dozen versions of: A couple of years ago, the Yale admissions office asked me to call an admitted student who was choosing between Stanford and Yale. As we spoke, I learned that the student was from California, was in a committed relationship with a partner in California and wanted to practice in California.

After hearing them out, I said, "Well, if it were me, I'd go to Stanford." The applicant was clearly surprised — wasn't I supposed to be pitching Yale? But I couldn't fathom why this was a hard decision. The longer we spoke, the clearer it became that there was nothing on Yale's side of the ledger except that it was No. 1.

A couple of months later, the admissions office circled back to thank me for my recruiting call: The student had chosen Yale.

2. The rankings discourage schools from helping graduates pursue public interest careers. When I was in law school, students aspiring to such careers — me included — complained that public interest jobs were harder to find than law firm positions. Civil rights firms and public defender offices can't afford to hire new lawyers because they need so much training in their first and second years. Even those who can hire newbies rarely know how many openings they'll have until long after graduating students need to make job decisions. The result: Students in my time commonly gave up their public interest dreams and joined law firms

because they feared they would otherwise leave law school unemployed.

In response to this problem, some schools have developed fellowships to pay graduates for the first year or two at civil rights firms or legal aid and public defender offices. I've lost count of the number of students who have gone on to fabulous social justice careers thanks to these fellowships.

But here's the glitch: U.S. News counts students in such fellowships as unemployed. Because the rankings measure the percentage of students who have jobs out of law school, the more public interest fellowships a school sponsors, the worse it looks in the rankings. Schools such as Yale can take the hit, but schools in the middle of the pack and trying to grind their way up are unlikely to extend such opportunities to their students.

3. I've saved the most important problem for last: The rankings discourage schools from admitting students with low LSAT scores. The LSAT does a decent job of measuring certain skills but ignores many others that good lawyers need. Yet it looms large in every law school applicant's file. As a result, students who struggle with the test are at a huge disadvantage.

Today I run a program that helps New Haven residents from underrepresented groups [navigate the path to law school](#). Each spring, I speak to admissions officers about the fellows in our program. These are compelling applicants who have overcome hurdles most of us can't imagine. They will bring dramatically different life experiences to law school and the legal profession. Most admissions directors get it; they've read the file and seen the grit and perseverance jump off the page.

But when I call about a fellow who didn't do well on the LSAT, the admissions director must balance their enthusiasm for the person with a concern for the school's average LSAT score, a crucial element of the rankings. A few great people with low LSAT scores will make it through, because admitting two or three won't hurt the overall average. But many more excellent candidates get rejected.

Opting out of the rankings won't fix all these problems, of course. It won't overcome ingrained patterns of thinking, incomplete definitions of merit, or the enormous structural advantage that race and wealth confer. But it is an important step.

In response to Yale's decision — and the growing list of schools joining it — to abandon the U.S. News rankings, the company pledged to keep publishing its list. This decision surprised no one. U.S. News publishes the rankings to make money, and it won't stop as long as people read them.

So what can we do about that? For law schools, the path is clear. You've complained about the rankings for years; now you can follow Yale's lead and quit. Consumers should do the same. Stop relying on the U.S. News rankings — or any rankings.

How will you know if a school is any good? Look at data, visit a school's website, speak to students and alumni, and visit if you can. Then, when somebody asks you if your school is No. 1, you can tell them, "It's No. 1 for me."