

Schools whose grads overperform on the bar exam

LSAT scores and GPAs are used to predict success on the bar exam. But some schools' graduates surpass expectations.

BY TREVOR MASON

Some will tell you that a law school's prestige is what counts. Others point to placement in a ranking, such as that of U.S. News & World Report. Others like to play up employment rates or best value. But for Jeffrey Kinsler, the bar exam is what matters most.

"Bar passage rates are better measures of the quality of legal education than graduation rates or employment results," he said. "A law school's bar passage rate is a metric of the quality of its graduates and its educational program."

Kinsler is a professor and founding dean at Belmont University College of Law in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2018, he co-published a one-year snapshot of first-time bar passage rates for 187 ABA-approved law schools. Using linear regression models, he compared median LSAT scores and median GPAs of the students who entered law school in 2012 with bar passage rates for that same class after it graduated in 2015. His research resulted in a list of schools that overperformed on the bar exam compared to their incoming medians.

Not surprisingly, Belmont Law ranked No.1. It was followed by Georgia State University College of Law in Atlanta; University of Oklahoma College of Law in Norman; Florida International University College of Law in Miami; and Campbell University Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Kinsler repeated his study this year, but this time he compared LSAT scores and median GPAs for three graduating classes — 2017 through 2019 — with their ultimate bar passage rates, which is the percentage of graduates who pass the bar



CAMPBELL UNIVERSITY Dean J. Rich Leonard (left) said everything that the bar exam covers is already part of the required courses at the school.

exam within two years of graduation.

The top schools in this year's study were Campbell Law; Liberty University School of Law in Lynchburg, Virginia; Lincoln Memorial University John J. Duncan Jr. School of Law in Knoxville, Tennessee; Belmont Law; and Samford University Cumberland School of Law in Birmingham, Alabama.

"Bar passage is in our DNA, and we think about it constantly," said J. Rich Leonard, dean of Campbell Law. "We're a pretty old-fashioned law school, and we have a heavy required curriculum. Sixty of the 90 hours to graduate are courses we require, so everything on the bar exam is a required course here. Unlike many law

schools where students are seeing material for the first time in bar review, that's just not true here."

He said the school starts preparing students for the bar exam almost immediately and continues through all three years of law school.

One preparatory course is called Practical Skills for Lawyers. It is based on the methodology of the multi-state practice exam, the 90-minute sections students undertake on the first morning of the exam. Evidence shows that the way to succeed on that part of the bar exam is simply to practice.

"There doesn't seem to be much correlation on that piece of the bar exam with

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any other measure except how much you practiced,” Leonard said.

Third-year Campbell Law students take a course called Advanced Legal Analysis. It devotes two weeks to each of the seven subjects tested on the Multistate Bar Exam, which is multiple choice. The class is not a substantive review of the law in those areas. Instead, it teaches students how to break down and analyze the questions.

Campbell Law also has faculty members who focus almost exclusively on the bar exam. Sha Hinds-Glick is the director of academic support and bar success. One of her duties is to lead a bar essay preparation course. Students practice with essay questions from previous bar exams. Their practice essays are graded and returned within 48 hours so students get timely feedback.

Leonard said one of the school’s key tenets is preparation.

“I honestly believe that if you’re going to be a well-rounded lawyer, you need to know substantive law in a lot of areas, even if you’re never going to practice it,” he said. “You need to know what’s out there and understand when you’ve rubbed up against it and it’s impacting a case of yours.”

He said he is very proud of what the school has achieved, and he has a perfect anecdote to illustrate it.

“I think we are the only law school in North Carolina that still requires kids to take Secured Transactions. The folks who do the bar say that when you get to an essay question that’s a Secured Transactions question, all they hear are moans across the room — except all the Campbell kids smile and start writing.”

Florida International University, which is ranked second for first-time bar passage and 11th for ultimate bar passage, takes a different approach.

Dean Antony Page said the school’s method is more foundational: Students are taught to be good lawyers, and that translates into bar success.

“We start in the first semester with a course called Introduction to Study of Law,” Page said. “It’s focused on helping students learn how to be better law students. So it’s really working on meta skills more than anything doctrinal or anything specifically skills related. It’s teaching students how to best teach themselves.”

Law School	Ultimate Bar Passage Rank (2017-2019)	First-Time Bar Passage Rank (2015-2019)
Campbell University	1	4
Liberty University	2	3
Lincoln Memorial University	3	43
Belmont University	4	1
Samford University	5	N/A
Georgia State University	6	8
St. Louis University	7	16
Syracuse University	8	27
South Texas College of Law	9	23
University of Oklahoma	10	15
Florida International University	11	2
Seton Hall University	12	13
Northern Illinois University	13	20
Texas A&M University	14	5
City University of New York	15	45
Willamette University	16	N/A
University of South Carolina	17	12
Duquesne University	18	6
University of Kansas	19	26
Cardozo School of Law	20	N/A

Source: “Ultimate Bar Passage Rates: Which Law Schools Are Overperforming and Underperforming Expectations” by Jeffrey S. Kinsler

It’s an optional course with no credit, no grades, no tuition. Nevertheless, he estimates that 75% to 80% of the first-year students take it.

“It’s a proven way of learning to learn the law,” he said.

“Of course, this is something that isn’t just useful at law school. This is also useful to the practicing lawyer. Any time a new subject comes along, you need to know how to teach yourself.”

Page said it’s a given that students will know the rules; the key is to know how to apply them.

“Not everybody who gets out of undergrad and has a straight A average necessarily knows how to adapt to law school,” Page said. “Students don’t necessarily know the best way to learn or the most effective way to learn. That’s something that we pretty explicitly help them with.”

Other courses that FIU Law students typically take are an analytical reasoning course in the second semester of the first year and a third-year course called Florida Law and Procedure. Although it is designed for bar prep, it still has a strong

focus on foundational skills.

Page noted that the faculty sometimes gets pushback from students because of just how thoroughly this “teach them to teach themselves” idea permeates the curriculum.

“Occasionally there’s a little resistance,” he said. “They’re paying us a lot of money in tuition, and here we are telling them that they have to teach themselves. But we can’t do the learning for them. They have to do the learning.”

At the end of the day, preparing students to be better lawyers is what’s most important, and if that translates into bar success, all the better.

“Passing the bar is important, but that’s not why people go to law school,” Page said. “They go to law school so they can get good jobs. And that’s really what our overall focus is about: good employment opportunities for our graduates.

“I can very comfortably say, sure, I like having a great bar passage rate, but what I really like is having great employment opportunities for our students and graduates.”

