Choosing the proper law school can be very important a law student's future career.
Yet, sometimes law students don’t pick the correct school for their needs.
From that point on, it behooves these students to transfer to a law school that better suits their needs.
Read this article to find the advantages and disadvantages of transferring law schools, and which 15 law schools get the most transfer students.

Choosing a law school is an important decision for a student’s legal career future. Where they attend can affect their future job prospects, friendships, and quality of life; and some students who enter their first year realize the law school they chose is not the right fit for them. Thus, they have an important choice to make. Stick things out or transfer.

So what law schools do most students transfer to? And what law schools hemorrhage the most students? Professor Jerry Organ of the University of St. Thomas Law School compiled a list of this data that he released in 2015, and he wrote on The Legal Whiteboard that the number of transfers has been consistent over the years, unaffected by the decrease in law school interest since the economic depression of 2008. His research showed that top 10 schools such as Harvard and New York University attract transfers and have few students who choose to leave, but other schools such as Georgetown were both a receiver of students and a big feeder into other schools.

With this law school transfer data, what can we derive from it? Essentially, schools that receive the most transfer students are a good indicator of quality, and the good schools are taking students from the lower-ranked ones. Below are the top 15 law schools that attract the most transfer students, according to Professor Organ.

Law Schools That Gain the Most Transfer Students

1. Georgetown
2. George Washington
3. Arizona State
4. Harvard
5. Emory
6. New York University
Conversely, there are certain law schools that seem to make students jump ship. Inside Higher Ed observed, for instance, that American University’s Washington College of Law lost almost 20% of its students in 2015.

“The Washington, Phoenix and northern Florida area transfer markets are particularly hot, and deans on the losing end of the stick are beginning to get hot under the collar,” Inside Higher Ed stated. “In Washington, the clearest loser is American University’s Washington College of Law. Last year, it lost 100 of the 473 students it had enrolled a year before to other schools -- more departing transfer students than any other law school in the country.”

Following American, Florida Coastal, Arizona Summit, Hastings, and Suffolk lose the most transfer students, respectively, with many of those students heading to the top 15 schools listed above.

Schools that lose transfer students have remarked that it is unfair that they are judged negatively because of student exodus. Some of the lower-ranked schools have said that competitors poach their best students, and that those higher-ranked schools have an unfair advantage of not taking in students with low scores but then nabbing them when they exhibit talent in a school that actually gave them a chance. These lower ranked schools state that the poaching of quality students also negatively affects their bar exam passage rates, which also factor into their ratings.

Higher-ranked schools deny poaching, and whatever the truth of the matter, students who voluntarily transfer are doing so to receive what they think is an upgrade.

In 2015, approximately 2,200 law students transferred, according to the American Bar Association. Most students who transfer tend to do so after their first year, and many do not receive scholarships. These students take risks to transfer, so it’s worth examining if this risk matches the reward.

Why Do Students Transfer Law Schools?

Students transfer law schools for various reasons, but one popular reason is that students want to attend a better school, one with a more esteemed reputation or higher job placement statistics. While some law schools criticize their competitors for allegedly poaching students, the elite schools that attract the most transfers state that they do nothing of the sort.

Georgetown, for example, is the top choice for transfer students, according to Organ’s research, and the school told Inside Higher Ed that it did nothing to lure students towards them, indicating that their reputation was enough.

“We’re doing nothing, we’re simply giving them the opportunity to do what they want to do,” Andy Cornblatt, Georgetown law school’s dean of admissions, told the publication in 2015.

Besides trading up, some transfer students also choose to move schools because they want to be closer to family, change cities, finances, or other personal reasons.

What Steps Should Law Students Seeking Transfers Take to Appeal to Admissions?

Some potential law students can’t get into their dream schools right away because of low grades or LSAT scores. They attend a school with the intention of transferring, and for these students, they need to take the following steps to make their application as strong as possible:

1. Get good grades during your first year of law school: A good LSAT score is an indicator of one’s success in law school, but once admitted, a student’s 1L performance is an indicator of how he or she will finish the program. Getting good grades is essential to a transfer’s application packet. In fact,
many experts say it’s the most important thing you can show.

“Our transfer admission process is based almost solely on those grades, and successful applicants usually come from the top five percent of their respective 1L classes,” UC-Berkeley Dean of Admissions Ed Tom told LawCrossing.

2. Work on getting excellent recommendation letters: Another important part of one’s transfer application is the student’s letters of recommendation. Because of this, a student should cultivate relationships with their professors, even if they know they want to eventually leave the school.

3. Participate in at least one law-related extracurricular: Like in high school and college, participating in activities looks good on your resume. For one, it shows a commitment to the field and that you are a motivated person. But participating can serve other purposes—you can meet people who could possibly recommend you and you gain more experience in law.

What are possible consequences of transferring law schools?

The benefits of transferring law schools have been mentioned, but students considering making a switch should also consider the cons of doing so. The Law School Admissions Counsel warns that transfer students may lose important academic functions such as class rank, connections, or eligibility for scholarships; and it stated that students should weigh risks of transferring if there is an option to stay at their current school.

“Some students have no or little choice but to transfer for personal or hardship reasons, including finances, job relocation of a spouse or partner, or proximity to family,” LSAC wrote. “Others seek to transfer to another law school that they perceive as having a higher status or ranking. If you are seeking a transfer for this reason, be advised that the transfer may do you more harm than good; there are many negative aspects of law school transfers.

Possible consequences of transferring, according to LSAC:

- Loss of community and connections: Most students report making their closest friends and allies during their first year. Some transfer students may lose these connections and have a hard time breaking into cliques at their new school.
- Ineligibility for moot court, law review, or other activities: At some law schools, eligibility to participate in moot court, law review, journals, and more come only after being a student at the school for one year. However, schools such as Columbia Law or Arizona State University do not have these types of restrictions, so potential transfer students should look at law schools’ FAQ pages for more details.
- Ineligibility for scholarships: Many law school scholarships are given to incoming 1L students, and transfer students may miss out on these opportunities.
- Altered class rank: Class ranking may not include your grades at your previous school, and transfer students sometimes are not eligible for GPA-based graduation awards.
- Limited class selection: Some transfer students find their class court selection is not as extensive as their peers because their peers may have signed up for much of the classes before the transfer arrived. Additionally, transfer students may not have taken the prerequisites.

It is noted that while negative results can happen, not all transfers experience them. For instance, Dean Douglas Sylvester from Arizona State University Law School, the third most popular transfer school on Professor Organ’s list, shared with LawCrossing that ASU does not treat transfer students like “second-class” students. He stated that choosing to transfer is something that is done after careful consideration and that students who join ASU as transfer students report to liking the decision.

“Students who are thinking of transferring to another law school are likely considering multiple factors such as the quality of education and reputation of the law school, location, and overall value and outcomes such as employment opportunities,” Dean Sylvester said. “Transferring to another law school may have its challenges, but ultimately when I talk with students who have transferred to ASU Law, they are so glad they did. I would encourage them from day one, to get involved in the many opportunities we offer – from student organizations to externships and clerkships to clinical work… there are endless possibilities.”

How much does your law school matter?

With possible negative consequences to transferring, students should determine how much of where they went to law school matters. Experts overwhelmingly agree—long-term, it doesn’t matter much where you went to school. A law degree is what you make of it, and your career success depends on factors such as
your work ethic, your business, your location, and your practice area.

In the short term, however, where you went to law school can affect your job prospects. Many law firms look to your education as an indicator of your success, and in their minds, the better law schools have already weeded out the best lawyers.

“The law school you went to matters – but it does not matter forever,” said Harrison Barnes of BCG Attorney Search, a leading legal recruitment firm. “The law school is simply a way to distinguish you from the tens of thousands of people graduating from law school each year. After that, no one cares for the most part.”

Attorney Ali Mattern said that there was very little difference from a school ranked in the 60s to one in the 30s. She stated that an optional transfer is not really worth it unless you are trying to get into an elite school like Harvard.

“You should only change schools if the jump you are going to make is going to put you in a substantially better place than you are. I could have easily transferred to Fordham law school (which is ranked in the 30s) from Brooklyn (ranked in the 60s) but I did not even apply because the move was not worth it,” Mattern wrote on The Student Appeal. “The key if you decide to transfer is to make sure that the jump is significant. As a general guide, you should jump at least 35 points in the rankings and higher if you can. Also, the move should move you from one tier to another or from a first tier school to a top 5 school. I know students who moved from Brooklyn Law School to schools ranked from 20–30 and they had a tough time during the on campus interview process and did not substantially benefit from the transfer. Make your jump count!”

Conclusion

Despite possible negative ramifications, thousands of students transfer law schools each year. Some do it because they have to for personal reasons, but many do it because they see the move as one that can improve their educational and professional prospects.

“Our transfer students come to us in search of a superior legal education experience,” UC-Berkeley Dean of Admissions Ed Tom told LawCrossing. “They are attracted by all of the usual factors, of course, including faculty, course offerings, programs, and centers. But they also want our learning ambiance, which is best described as nurturing, rather than cut-throat. They also transfer to improve their job prospects and to graduate from Berkeley, and they are willing to forego financial aid incentives that their home schools offer to do so."

In conclusion, if you are a student considering transferring, make sure you are going to a school that is better than your original institution. If not, the reward may not exceed the risk. And remember—where you went to school only matters for your first job. After that, other factors will be much more important.

“Human nature is such that most want to apply the same philosophy to many aspects of life and want to upgrade homes, cars, and even law schools,” Mattern wrote. “The current system allows you to “upgrade” law schools by transferring to a different higher ranked school after your first year and this option could put your dreams of going to an ivy league school well within reach. In some cases a transfer makes sense but “upgrader” beware as higher rank does not always mean better.”

See the following articles for more information:

- Does Law School Rank Determine Success?
- Is Law School Worth The High Cost?
- The Law School Brain Drain: Why Are More People Failing The Bar Exam?