

COMMENTARY

School Rankings That Matter

By Cameron Stracher

Updated Dec. 31, 2007 12:01 a.m. ET

The publication this year of U.S. News & World Report's first ranking of high schools has parents in a twitter, worrying that their property taxes are too high (or too low), or that public education has failed them entirely. But leaving aside the merits and methodology of these particular rankings, we might wonder whether rankings matter at all and, more importantly, if they should.

In fact, there are some numbers that really matter. Getting them is the rub.

To understand this problem, consider another set of rankings, released about the same time as the high-school rankings, that didn't garner as much attention: bar-exam passage rates. The school at which I teach -- New York Law School -- jumped to fifth on the list of New York area law schools (with an all-time high passage rate of 90%), while Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School at Yeshiva University leapfrogged to third, behind only NYU and Columbia.

Cardozo, however, is ranked 52nd by U.S. News among all law schools (fourth in New York), while New York Law School is ranked in the "third tier" of law schools (along with Albany, Hofstra, Pace and Syracuse). So which ranking matters?

On the one hand, the U.S. News ranking would seem to be more comprehensive, because bar passage rate is only one of many factors it considers. On the other hand, what good is a law degree if a graduate can't practice because he doesn't pass the licensing exam?

Moreover, if the bar exam measures a student's fitness to practice law (as the bar examiners claim), a school's bar passage rate should be a pretty good indication of how the school is doing in turning out graduates who know how to practice law.

Nevertheless, according to a paper commissioned by the Association of American Law Schools, bar passage rate accounts for only 2% of a school's overall rank in the U.S. News survey. This doesn't seem right.

Of course there are other things that matter to law-school graduates -- like getting a job. Although the U.S. News rankings purport to measure a school's success at placing its graduates into gainful employment, the rankings do not distinguish between success at placing students at high-paying corporate law jobs versus low-paying paralegal-type jobs. Nor do they distinguish between jobs that graduates *want* and the jobs that graduates *get*. Students who assume that going to a more highly ranked school is more likely to get them a good job are essentially being misled by lazy reporting.

The U.S. News rankings are also heavily weighted toward reputation, which would seem to have some real world significance. But again, "reputation" is misleading, and often irrelevant. Beyond the top 20 or so law schools, law firms care less about the ranking of a school when making hiring decision and more about the ranking of the students at the schools.

Put a different way, there are really two kinds of law schools: those at which students decide where they want to interview, and those where firms decide. The large majority of law schools belong to the latter group. Hiring partners admit that they use GPA or other bright-line criteria (like law review membership) to interview at Tier 2, 3, and 4 schools, while taking resumes from nearly everyone at Tier 1 schools.

In short: The difference between the 55th-ranked law school and the 105th law school is of little significance in determining which students are more likely to get a good job. At both schools, unless a student is in the top 15% or 20% of his class, he has little chance of getting a high-paying job directly upon graduation. Students might be better served by going to a lower-ranked law school and doing better, rather than going to middling law school and not doing as well.

Students and parents are led astray by U.S. News because in putting a simple number on something that is incredibly complex, they are missing the nuances that are likely to be more important. But schools themselves -- high schools and law schools -- are partly to blame, because they resist fully disclosing important information.

Just as law schools would better serve their constituencies by releasing accurate information about numbers that matter -- bar results, jobs, and average salaries -- high schools should make more of an effort to fully disclose test scores, college admissions, class sizes and other important data. More information may put some schools under a harsh light. But it will help students and parents decide whether those high taxes and tuition rates are worth it. The alternative is letting U.S. News decide for us.

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