

6-21-2019

Location, Location, Vocation? Toward a Post-Recession Analysis of Law School Choice

Elizabeth Chambliss

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/law_facpub

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Location, Location, Vocation? Toward a Post-Recession Analysis of Law School Choice

Author : Elizabeth Chambliss

Date : June 21, 2019

Christopher J. Ryan, *Analyzing Law School Choice*, __ U. Ill. L. Rev. __ (forthcoming).

Why do people go to law school? For a while there, it began to seem like it was all about the money. Large law firm competition for associates in the late 1990s and 2000s—with firms offering six-figure starting salaries and extravagant signing bonuses—helped fuel a ten-year surge in law school enrollment, peaking in 2010-11. The recession changed all that, plunging associate hiring into a free fall and focusing sustained, critical attention on law school marketing, the student loan industry, and the negative return-on-investment for many law graduates. Between 2010-11 and 2017-18, law school enrollment fell 25 percent, to its lowest point in forty years. Several law schools failed and numerous others have been exposed for gaming the [U.S. News rankings](#)—or outright cheating—in efforts to pad their profiles in a hyper-competitive market. (Sound familiar, celebrity parents?)

But “law school is cool again,”¹ according to the most recent numbers. Applications in 2018-19 were up nearly 11 percent. And while associate hiring also is up, at least part of the increase in law school applications appears to be a political response to recent assaults on civil rights, lawyer independence, and the rule of law—the so-called “Trump Bump.”² This makes it a good time for soul-searching by law schools as well as potential applicants, with an eye toward professional commitments as well as economic returns. [Christopher J. Ryan’s](#) forthcoming study of law school choice provides an important and timely starting point.

Ryan asks: what information do students consider when making decisions to enroll in law school? And how do they choose among schools? To answer those questions, Ryan conducted a 2017 online survey of students at four law schools, one from each tier in the U.S. News & World Report rankings: a first-tier private law school; a second-tier public flagship law school; a third-tier public law school; and a fourth-tier private law school. Responding students were offered a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift card and response rates ranged from 34 to 45 percent. (P. 7.) The analysis focuses on the salience of economic factors, such as cost sensitivity and opportunity cost, in students’ law school choices. Ryan writes, “[t]hat many students still choose to pursue legal education despite economic disincentives to do so raises important questions about these students’ motivations.” (P. 2.)

Ryan finds that “the market for law students...[is] heterogenous” and “driven by many other factors” in addition to cost. (P. 34.) Location, for instance, was a salient factor for students at all but the top-tier private law school, with 65 to 77 percent of students choosing schools within 250 miles of where they lived (compared to 17 percent of students at the top-tier private school). (P. 14, Table 2.) Job placement, not surprisingly, was important to students at all four law schools, with local career opportunities especially important to students at the two public schools. (P. 20, Table 4.) Law school reputation, while of “supreme importance” to students at the top-tier private school, was a secondary (or non) factor for students at the other three schools. Financial aid was the primary factor only at the state flagship law school. (P. 19.) These results suggest that different students go to law school for different reasons and that there are “a multiplicity of legal education sub-markets within the broader legal education market.” (P. 15.)

Ryan finds that law school websites play an important role in shaping applicants’ choices and were the most important source of information for students at the third- and fourth-tier schools. U.S. News rankings were the primary information source only for students at the top-tier private school. (P. 23, Table 6.) Ryan also finds evidence that students “come to terms” with their law school choices over time, based on the options available and their cost. (P. 18.) At the time of the survey, more than 80 percent of students ranked their law school as their first choice, though for many students it

had not been their first choice before applying to law school. (P. 16, Table 3.) Student price sensitivity also coincides closely with the cost of attendance at their own school. (P. 31.) These findings suggest that law school marketing and socialization play an active role in shaping student perceptions of the cost—and value—of legal education.

Ryan's findings remind us that law school choices are not driven purely by economics or a single, national ranking. There are multiple markets for legal education, and law schools play an important role in shaping student choices and values. And though Ryan does not address students' choice of law versus other careers, his study, coupled with the recent upsurge in law school applications, invites renewed attention to questions of vocation and law schools' efforts to distinguish themselves in vocational (versus economic) terms. The "law school choice" literature before the recession focused on questions of political vocation, particularly the effects of elite school socialization on public interest goals.³ Scholars recently have begun to return to questions of political vocation in studies of "public interest drift"⁴ and the mission of conservative Christian law schools,⁵ and soon more law schools may begin to market themselves in political terms.⁶

Meanwhile, U.S. News continues to expand its specialty rankings, enabling law schools to market themselves around specialized areas of practice and training, which likely will lead to increasing vocational differentiation among schools. Ryan's research invites renewed attention by law schools, applicants, and researchers to the role of professional vocation and vocational fit in law school choice.

1. [Kathryn Rubino, This is Really Good News for Law School Fans—More \(and Smarter\) Applicants are Here, Above the Law](#), Jul. 31, 2018.
2. [Stephanie Francis Ward, The 'Trump Bump' for Law School Applicants is Real and Significant, A.B.A. J.](#), Feb. 22, 2018 (reporting the results of a 2017 Kaplan Test Prep survey of more than 500 pre-law students, in which 32 percent indicated that the 2016 presidential election influenced their desire to become lawyers). In the 2018 survey, 45 percent of pre-law students said that the current political climate impacted their decision to apply to law school, and 87 percent of admissions officers said that the current political climate was a significant (or very significant) factor in the application increase. Press Release, [Kaplan Test Prep Survey: Nearly 90 Percent of Law Schools Say the Political Climate Was a Significant Factor in Application Increase](#), Feb. 25, 2019.
3. See, e.g., [Robert Granfield, Making Elite Lawyers: Visions of Law at Harvard and Beyond](#) (1992) (arguing that Harvard socializes students to begin their careers at corporate law firms); [Howard S. Erlanger & Douglas Klegon, The Socialization Effects of Professional School: The Law School Experience and Student Orientations to Public Interest Concerns](#), 13 *Law & Soc'y Rev.* 11 (1978) (questioning the magnitude of law school socialization effects).
4. [John Bliss, From Idealists to Hired Guns? An Empirical Analysis of "Public Interest Drift" in Law School](#), 51 *U.C. Davis L. Rev.* 1973 (2018) (finding that "students' job-path orientations and identities are altered during the 1L year and the 2L hiring process," rather than in the law school classroom).
5. [Joshua C. Wilson & Amanda Hollis-Brusky, Higher Law: Can Christian Conservatives Transform Law Through Legal Education?](#), 52 *Law & Soc'y Rev.* 835 (2018) (analyzing how three conservative Christian law schools seek to realize their transformative mission).
6. Nearly 50 percent of pre-law students in the [2018 Kaplan survey](#) said that "it is important for them to attend a law school where their fellow students generally share their own political and/or social beliefs."

Cite as: Elizabeth Chambliss, *Location, Location, Vocation? Toward a Post-Recession Analysis of Law School Choice*, JOTWELL (June 21, 2019) (reviewing Christopher J. Ryan, *Analyzing Law School Choice*, ___ *U. Ill. L. Rev.* ___ (forthcoming)),

<https://legalpro.jotwell.com/location-location-vocation-toward-a-post-recession-analysis-of-law-school-choice/>.