

The Decline & Fall of the U.S. News Rankings

BRIAN L. FRYE & CHRISTOPHER J. RYAN, JR.*

ABSTRACT

Have the U.S. News & World Report law school rankings become irrelevant? The ostensible purpose of the U.S. News law school rankings is to give prospective law students convenient and reliable information about the relative quality of law schools and help them decide which law school to attend. Law schools care about the U.S. News rankings because prospective law students care about the U.S. News rankings. A ranking increase means more prestige and better-credentialed students, while a ranking decrease means less prestige and students with worse credentials. Accordingly, law schools are jealous of their U.S. News ranking.

Do prospective law students actually care about the U.S. News rankings anymore? We compared changes in law school U.S. News rankings to changes in prospective law student preferences the following year. Those variables should be strongly positively correlated. If a school's U.S. News ranking increases, prospective law students should prefer it more the following year, and if it decreases, they should prefer it less. But in fact, they were at best very weakly positively correlated, and often they are weakly negatively correlated. In other words, prospective law students appear to be largely indifferent to changes in a school's U.S. News ranking. This suggests that prospective law students are getting information about which law school to attend from someplace other than U.S. News. And it also suggests that law schools can safely stop paying attention to the U.S. News rankings because their customers don't care.

* Brian Frye is the Spears-Gilbert Professor of Law, University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law. CJ Ryan is Professor of Law, Indiana University Maurer School of Law; Affiliated Scholar, American Bar Foundation; and Academic Affiliate, International Center for Law & Economics.

INTRODUCTION

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.¹ Law school rankings are no exception. Once upon a time, the *U.S. News & World Report* law school rankings were critically important to law schools. In fact, they were existential. Law schools literally lived or died based on their U.S. News rankings.² For better or worse, the U.S. News rankings were once the bellwether of the legal academy. When a law school's ranking increased, everyone celebrated, but when it decreased, everyone lamented.

That time is no more. For some reason, the U.S. News law school rankings have gradually become less important. Sure, they still matter. Law schools still trumpet any increase in their U.S. News ranking and mourn any decrease. But the rankings are increasingly an afterthought. Many prominent law schools have even opted out of the U.S. News rankings by refusing to give U.S. News detailed information about their programs.

What changed? It's hard to know and is probably a function of many different factors. But a big one is information. Prospective law students have a lot more of it, so they are not as reliant on the U.S. News rankings as they used to be. This is because the U.S. News rankings gradually became less salient to them. As a consequence, U.S. News focused on ensuring law schools cared about their ranking, even if prospective law students didn't. The easy and obvious way to make the U.S. News rankings more salient to law schools was to make them more dynamic. If your school's ranking can't change that much, there's no point in worrying about it, but if it can change a lot, that's a different story.

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1. *See also* The Byrds, "Turn! Turn! Turn!" (1965).

2. The several law schools that have closed, due at least indirectly to their US News ranking, include: Valparaiso University School of Law, Concordia University School of Law, Indiana Tech Law School, Whittier Law School, Savannah Law School, and Golden Gate University School of Law. *See, e.g.*, Emma Whitford, *Another Law School Will Close*, *INSIDE HIGHER ED* (Oct. 30, 2018), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/31/valparaiso-law-school-will-close-following-unsuccessful-attempt-transfer-middle> [<https://perma.cc/763C-NF8Y>]; Lindsay McKenzie, *Concordia University School of Law Closing*, *INSIDE HIGHER ED* (June 25, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/06/26/concordia-university-school-law-closing> [<https://perma.cc/2Z44-JHLK>]; Stacy Zaretsky, *Indiana Tech Law School to Close, Citing \$20 Million in Losses*, *ABOVE THE LAW* (Oct. 31, 2016), <https://abovethelaw.com/2016/10/indiana-tech-law-school-to-close-citing-20-million-in-losses/> [<https://perma.cc/U98H-UFVM>]; Jack Crittenden, *Whittier Law School to Close After It Fails to Find Buyer*, *NAT'L JURIST* (Apr. 21, 2017), <https://nationaljurist.com/prelaw/whittier-law-school-close-after-it-fails-find-buyer/> [<https://perma.cc/S538-86CY>]; Don Macaulay, *Savannah Law School Is Closing After Seven Years*, *NAT'L JURIST* (Mar. 23, 2018), <https://nationaljurist.com/national-jurist-magazine/savannah-law-school-closing-after-seven-years/> [<https://perma.cc/SWJ7-2884>]; Jack Crittenden, *Golden Gate to Close JD Program, Keep Graduate Law Degrees*, *NAT'L JURIST* (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://nationaljurist.com/national-jurist/news/golden-gate-to-close-jd-program-keep-graduate-law-degrees/> [<https://perma.cc/8HK3-ES8E>].

So, U.S. News changed its methodology in ways that increased the volatility of its rankings.³ Suddenly, law schools were bouncing up and down the rankings. Even the formerly sacrosanct T14 and T20 changed in unprecedented ways. It was disconcerting and disturbing for law schools—and especially law school administrators. But did prospective law students notice or care?

I. A BRIEF SURVEY OF LAW SCHOOL RANKINGS

The *U.S. News & World Report* “Best Law Schools” ranking is the undisputed and indisputable heavyweight champion of law school rankings. Whenever someone discusses a law school’s ranking, they invariably mean its U.S. News ranking.

Why did the U.S. News law school rankings become important, and why did they remain important? While many different factors probably played a role, kismet and cynicism are obvious contenders. After all, the U.S. News rankings were the first law school rankings, or at least the first published by a national magazine. U.S. News first started publishing its law school ranking in 1987⁴ and has published an annual law school ranking ever since. It had the first-mover advantage.

The premise of the U.S. News law school rankings is simple but powerful. It helps prospective law students decide which law school to attend by ranking their prestige. In 1987, it was hard for prospective law students to find reliable information about the relative quality of law schools. As the practice of law became increasingly national, law schools also became increasingly national, and it became harder for prospective law students to know which law school to attend. Even if you had a rough sense of the relative prestige of the law schools in your state or immediate geographic area, it was hard to compare them to law schools in neighboring states, let alone on the other side of the country.

The U.S. News law school rankings filled the need for information about the relative prestige of law schools. Essentially, U.S. News asked law professors, judges, and prominent lawyers to rank law schools by relative prestige. Then, U.S. News passed that information along to prospective law students, along with some additional information they might find relevant.⁵ It turned out that prospective law

3. Historically, 40% of a law school’s U.S. News & World Report ranking was based on peer reputation and 25% was based on its selectivity, both of which are quite static. But in the 2024 U.S. News rankings, 58% of a law school’s score was based on placement success and bar passage, 25% was based on peer reputation, 10% of a law school’s score was based on selectivity, and 7% was based on faculty and library resources, all of which are much more dynamic. See Robert Morse & Eric Brooks, *Methodology: 2024 Best Law Schools Rankings*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., (Apr. 8, 2024) <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles/law-schools-methodology>.

4. *Brains for the Bar*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Nov. 2, 1987, at 72.

5. Until recently, 40% of a law school’s score in the U.S. News & World Report ranking of law schools was attributable to peer reputation, and one-quarter of a law school’s score was attributable to a law school’s selectivity, including median LSAT/GRE score (12.5 % of the overall score), median undergraduate GPA (10 % of the overall score) and acceptance rate (2.5% of the overall score). See Robert Morse, Kenneth Hines & Elizabeth Martin, *Methodology: 2020 Best Law School Rankings*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Mar. 28, 2019, 2:04 PM), <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles/law-schools-methodology> [<https://perma.cc/58BM-8TT2>].

students really wanted that information. The U.S. News law school rankings were an immediate success and soon matured into an institution.

Prospective law students weren't the only ones who were in the dark. While the U.S. News law school rankings provided novel information to prospective law students, it also provided novel information to law schools, law professors, judges, and lawyers. All of them had opinions about the relative prestige of United States law schools. After all, that's the information U.S. News gathered and the heart of its original methodology. But none of them knew for sure what the rest of them thought until U.S. News gathered the data and shared it. A lot of them were unhappy about it and remained unhappy. It's disappointing to realize that your peers have a lower opinion of you than you have of yourself.

Anyway, if the U.S. News rankings were initially successful because they provided novel and valuable information about the relative prestige of law schools, they remained successful by sticking to their refreshingly cynical strategy of giving their customers what they want: information about the relative prestige of law schools. Sure, they eventually added some window dressing like subject-specific rankings and quality of life assessments, but everyone always knew the U.S. News ranking was a prestige ranking, even if they weren't willing to admit it.

Unsurprisingly, the legal academy has always hated the U.S. News rankings.⁶ Or at least, it has always at least pretended to hate the U.S. News rankings. Every law school says the U.S. News rankings are meaningless and counsels law students to ignore them. And their trade association, the Association of American Law Schools ("AALS"), piously agrees. And yet, law schools continue to celebrate or bemoan their U.S. News rankings, depending on their fortunes.

If the U.S. News rankings didn't exist, the AALS would have to create them. But it can't because its members would be shocked and appalled by even the suggestion that some law schools are "better" or more prestigious than others, even though the faculty of those very same AALS members have always provided some of the opinion data that enabled U.S. News to create its rankings in the first place.

While the U.S. News law school rankings are the only ones that have ever really mattered to prospective law students, many different publications and scholars have published a congeries of alternative law school rankings, which use different methodologies to consider different factors for different reasons.

- ALM publishes a law school ranking of the top 50 "go-to" law schools based on their employment outcomes.⁷
- Social Science Research Network ("SSRN") published a law school ranking based on downloads of scholarly articles.⁸
- Above the Law has also published a law school ranking based on employment outcomes.⁹

6. See, e.g., Rachel F. Moran, *Of Ranking and Regulations: Are the U.S. News & World Report Rankings Really a Subversive Force in Legal Education*, 81 IND. L.J. 383, 384–91 (2006).

7. *The 2024 Go-To Law Schools: Big Law*, ALM (Mar. 18, 2024), <https://www.law.com/rankings/go-to-law-schools/> [<https://perma.cc/DVD6-V6EG>].

8. *SSRN Top 350 U.S. Law Schools*, SOC. SCI. RSCH. NETWORK (last updated Mar. 1 2025), https://hq.ssrn.com/rankings/Ranking_Display.cfm?TMY_gID=2&TRN_gID=13.

9. E.g., *Law School Rankings*, ABOVE THE LAW, <https://abovethelaw.com/law->

- Vault published a law school ranking based on applicant acceptance rate, student LSAT scores, quality of life, and employment outcomes.¹⁰
- Black and Caron published a law school ranking similar to the US News rankings, but based on scholarly productivity, rather than peer assessment.¹¹
- The Legal Services Innovation Index published a law school ranking based on legal skills training.¹²
- Stake created the Law School Ranking Game, which enabled users to create bespoke law school rankings by choosing which variables to consider and how to weight them.¹³
- Gladwell used the Law School Ranking Game to show that a law school ranking based on academic reputation, LSAT scores, student-faculty ratio, and faculty law-review publishing closely resembled the U.S. News rankings.¹⁴
- Cooley Law School published a law school ranking based on student selectivity, faculty-student ratio, bar passage, class size, price, and minority enrollment, among other things, with an emphasis on library size and availability.¹⁵
- Sisk published a law school ranking based on scholarly citations.¹⁶
- Leiter has published law school rankings based on faculty quality, student quality, and job placement, among other things.¹⁷

school-rankings/top-law-schools-2019/ [https://perma.cc/9FWC-4DW4].

10. *2017 Best Law Schools*, VAULT, <http://www.vault.com/school-rankings/best-lawschools> [https://perma.cc/Y28G-TJKN].

11. Bernard S. Black & Paul L. Caron, RANKING LAW SCHOOLS: USING SSRN TO MEASURE SCHOLARLY PERFORMANCE, 81 IND. L.J. 83, 84–85 (2006); See Paul L. Caron & Rafael Gely, *What Law Schools Can Learn from Billy Beane and the Oakland Athletics*, 82 TEX. L. REV. 1483, 1510 (2004).

12. *Law School Innovation Index*, LEGAL SERVS. INNOV. INDEX, (Nov. 2, 2017), <https://www.legaltechinnovation.com/law-school-index/> [https://perma.cc/K87Q-Y6XJ].

13. Jeffrey Evans Stake, *The Interplay Between Law School Rankings, Reputations, and Resource Allocation: Ways Rankings Mislead*, 81 IND. L.J. 229 (2006).

14. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Order of Things*, NEW YORKER (Feb. 6, 2011), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/the-order-of-things> [https://perma.cc/Q3ZM-UJTM].

15. The Cooley ranking was criticized for adopting a methodology designed to optimize the performance of its creator, Thomas M. Cooley Law School. See, e.g., Elie Mystal, *Latest Cooley Law School Rankings Achieve New Heights of Intellectual Dishonesty*, ABOVE THE LAW (Feb. 8, 2011, 6:23 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2011/02/latest-cooley-law-schoolrankings-achieve-new-heights-of-intellectual-dishonesty/> [https://perma.cc/PC5V-YB9X]. Unfortunately, the Cooley ranking is no longer available.

16. Gregory Sisk, *Measuring Law Faculty Scholarly Impact By Citations: Reliable And Valid For Collective Faculty Ranking*, 60 JURIMETRICS 41 (2019).

17. Brian Leiter, *Newest Rankings*, BRIAN LEITER'S L. SCH. RANKINGS, (June 11, 2014), <http://www.leiterrankings.com/new/index.shtml> [https://perma.cc/LJ63-UAJ9].

- Ryan published a law school ranking based on educational value, as measured by a law school's ability to improve a student's likelihood of passing the bar and finding a job.¹⁸
- Posner published a meta-law school ranking based on averaging a selection of other rankings.¹⁹
- Brennan published a law school ranking based on a wide range of factors.²⁰
- QS World University publishes a ranking of international law schools, including United States law schools.²¹
- The Princeton Review rates law schools, without ranking them.²²
- Ryan and Frye have published law school rankings based on the revealed preferences of prospective law students.²³
- Rothstein and Yoon also published a law school ranking based on the revealed preferences of prospective law students.²⁴

All of the different law school rankings are interesting, not only because they provide useful information about law schools in relation to each other, but also because they reflect different normative theories of the purpose of legal education. Law professors value the production of impactful scholarship, reformers value employment outcomes, and law schools value their own prestige relative to their peers.

For another, the U.S. News law school rankings are the most cynical rankings. Most law school rankings reflect a strong normative theory about legal education. The creator of the ranking decides what we should value in legal education and then creates a ranking based on that value. The U.S. News law school rankings have never reflected a theory of legal education. U.S. News doesn't care about changing minds, it cares about selling magazines and advertisements.

18. Christopher J. Ryan, Jr., *A Value-Added Ranking of Law Schools*, 29 FLA. J. L. & PUB. POL'Y 285-308 (2019).

19. Richard A. Posner, *Law School Rankings*, 81 IND. L.J. 13 (2006).

20. For example, it makes perfect sense to rank law schools based on their tuition cost, but it's unclear why you would rank law schools based on their age, enrollment, number of administrators, or library size. Thomas E. Brennan, Sr., *Judging the Law Schools*, <https://www.ilrg.com/rankings/>.

21. *QS World University, Rankings by Subject 2025: Law & Legal Studies*, QS TOP UNIVERSITIES, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-subject-rankings/law-legal-studies> [<https://perma.cc/7WYB-FV76>].

22. See The Princeton Review, *Best Law Schools*, at <https://www.princetonreview.com/law-school-rankings/best-law-schools> [<https://perma.cc/6622-APHA>].

23. See Christopher J. Ryan Jr. & Brian L. Frye, *A Revealed Preferences Approach to Ranking Law Schools*, 69 ALA. L. REV. 495 (2017); see also Christopher J. Ryan, Jr. & Brian L. Frye, *The 2019 Revealed-Preferences Ranking of Law Schools*, 7 BELMONT L. REV. 86 (2019).

24. Jesse Rothstein & Albert Yoon, *Rankings Without U.S. News: A Revealed Preference Approach to Evaluating Law Schools*, 12 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUDS. 241 (2024).

II. SUBJECTIVE V. OBJECTIVE RANKINGS

Most law school rankings are subjective rankings, because they rank law schools according to the criteria the author of the ranking considers important. U.S. News thought prestige was important, so it largely ranked law schools according to prestige, basing much of its methodology on a peer reputational survey. Law professors think legal scholarship is important, so they rank law schools based on scholarly productivity. Reformers think value is important, so they rank law schools based on employment outcomes, and so on. As the Law School Ranking Game elegantly demonstrates, the factors you consider and the weight you give them determine the ranking. And the Cooley rankings prove that rankings are almost infinitely malleable. You can achieve almost any ranking you like, albeit perhaps at the cost of credibility.

Subjective law school rankings can be useful to prospective law students, if they care about the same things as the author of the ranking. The problem with subjective rankings is that they do not necessarily consider or accurately evaluate all of the factors that are salient to some or all prospective law students. Subjective rankings try to tell students which law school will give them the “best” legal education by identifying factors associated with quality. But “quality” is defined by the creator of the ranking system, not the prospective students it advises. If prospective students value different factors or value factors differently—and they do²⁵—subjective rankings will provide inaccurate and unhelpful advice. In other words, subjective ranking systems tell prospective law students which law school they should prefer, but they cannot tell prospective law students which law school they actually prefer.

By contrast, an objective ranking of law schools asks what prospective law students actually want, rather than telling them what they should want. In 2017, we published the first revealed preferences ranking of law schools.²⁶ Our revealed preferences ranking of law school is arguably the first objective ranking of law schools, because its purpose was to provide a law school ranking that reflects the subjective preferences of prospective law students.²⁷ The methodology of our revealed preferences ranking of law schools is simple but elegant: It ranks law schools based on the GPA and LSAT scores of their matriculating students. It uses only six variables: the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile undergraduate GPA and LSAT score of a law school’s matriculating class.

In short, the methodology of our revealed preferences sorts law schools based on the credentials of their matriculating class. The logic of this methodology is straightforward. Law schools make admissions decisions based primarily on the GPA and LSAT score of their applicants. After receiving admissions offers,

25. Christopher J. Ryan, Jr., *Analyzing Law School Choice*, 2020 UNIV. ILL. L. REV. 583 (2020) (noting that, on balance, students at different tiers of institutions respond to different factors when choosing a law school).

26. Frye & Ryan, *supra* note 20. In 2004, a group of scholars published a revealed preferences ranking of undergraduate institutions, using a very different methodology than ours. See Christopher Avery, Mark E. Glickman, Caroline M. Hoxby & Andrew Metrick, *A Revealed Preference Ranking of U.S. Colleges and Universities*, Q.J. ECONOMICS, 425 (2013).

27. A cynic might characterize the U.S. News law school ranking as an objective ranking based on the preferences of law professors, judges, and lawyers.

prospective law students choose to matriculate at one of the law schools that admitted them. Schools compete to matriculate the students with higher GPAs and LSAT scores. So, the higher the GPAs and LSAT scores of a law school's matriculating students, the more attractive the school was to law students.

Law students choose to attend different law schools for different reasons. Some law students have idiosyncratic reasons for choosing a law school. But many - if not most - law students choose to attend the best law school they can. Of course, it's hard to know which law school is best. That's why law school rankings exist. Law school rankings tell prospective law students which law school they should attend. Or rather, law school rankings tell prospective law students which law school they should attend, if they care about the things that ranking is designed to measure.

Our revealed preferences methodology for ranking law schools was widely discussed and generally well received, albeit with some confusion about its purpose.²⁸ Many people misunderstood the purpose of our revealed preferences ranking as yet another effort to tell prospective law students which law school to attend, when in fact its only purpose was to ask which law school they actually chose

28. See, e.g., *Alternative Law School Ranking System*, BARCO 3.0: LAW LIBR. REFERENCE (Mar. 20, 2017) <http://barcorefblog.blogspot.com/2017/03/alternative-law-school-ranking-system.html> [https://perma.cc/7GXB-RTFS]; David Bernstein, *This Law School Ranking System Is Much Better Than U.S. News*, THE WASH. POST (Mar. 15, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/03/15/this-law-schoolranking-system-is-much-better-than-u-s-news/> [https://perma.cc/8EAQ-9TM2]; Paul Caron, *Law School Rankings by Student Quality (LSAT and UGPA)*, TAXPROF BLOG (July 25, 2017), http://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2017/07/law-school-rankings-by-student-qualitylsat-and-ugpa.html [https://perma.cc/2ASA-BKTF]; Joe Hodnicki, *Ranking Law Schools by LSAT Scores: The Best and the Worst*, LAW LIBR. BLOG (Mar. 27, 2017), <https://llb2.com/2017/03/27/ranking-law-schools-by-lsat-scores-the-best-and-the-worst/> [https://perma.cc/PK3B-U7FA]; David Lat, *An Interesting New Set of Law School Rankings*, ABOVE THE L. (Mar. 27, 2017, 6:15 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2017/03/an-interesting-new-set-of-law-school-rankings/> [https://perma.cc/2586-UYX2]; Kathryn Rubino, *What Are the Most Underrated Law Schools?*, ABOVE THE L. (Dec. 8, 2017, 1:05 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2017/12/whatare-the-most-underrated-law-schools/> [https://perma.cc/8FGB-D77F]; *Should Law Schools Be Ranked Based on Student Preferences?: Article Weighs In*, SCHOLASTICA (Apr. 7, 2017), <https://blog.scholasticahq.com/post/should-law-schools-be-ranked-based-on-studentpreferences/> [https://perma.cc/8YMR-4UGM]; William Vogeler, *Non-Traditional Law School Ranking -- By Student Quality*, FINDLAW (Aug. 1, 2017, 2:00 PM), http://blogs.findlaw.com/greedy_associates/2017/08/non-traditional-law-school-ranking---by-student-quality.html [https://perma.cc/ZYF9-77WK]; see, e.g., David Bernstein, *The Most Useful Law School Rankings for Prospective Law Students: The 2018 Revealed-Preferences Ranking of Law Schools*, INSTAPUNDIT.COM (Apr. 5, 2018, 10:30 AM), <https://pjmedia.com/instapundit/293282/> [https://perma.cc/3G3YR5DT]; Paul Caron, *Law School Rankings by Student Quality (LSAT and UGPA)*, TAXPROF BLOG (Apr. 2, 2018), https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2018/04/law-schoolrankings-by-student-quality-lsat-and-ugpa.html [https://perma.cc/PH43-YB6Z]; Joe Hodnicki, *The 2018 Revealed-Preferences Ranking of Law Schools*, LAW LIBR. BLOG (Apr. 3, 2018), <https://llb2.com/2018/04/03/the-2018-revealed-preferences-ranking-of-law-schools/> [https://perma.cc/SA4D-G9K3]; *Pepperdine Law Rankings*, PEPP. L., <https://law.pepperdine.edu/about/at-a-glance/rankings/> [https://perma.cc/3PPA-XAG8].

to attend, for whatever reason. In 2019, we updated our revealed preferences ranking of law schools, and slightly modified our methodology to account for the decisions of transfer students.²⁹

Our revealed preferences rankings of law schools were interesting for at least two reasons. First, they suggested that most law students decide which law school to attend based on the U.S. News law school rankings. In general, our revealed preferences ranking of law schools was similar to the U.S. News ranking of law schools. But second, they suggested that some law students don't decide which law school to attend based on the U.S. News law school rankings. Specifically, some law schools had a revealed preferences ranking that was much higher than their U.S. News ranking. In other words, some law students chose to attend law schools that U.S. News told them they shouldn't attend.

Why? The answer was unsurprising, but still interesting. Our revealed preferences ranking of law schools showed that at least some law students prefer law schools with a strong ideological brand. Law schools affiliated with a religious organization or associated with an ideological orientation tended to outperform their U.S. News rankings in our revealed preferences ranking. That is, some prospective law students have a strong preference for a sympathetic environment that can outweigh their preference for prestige.

III. THE U.S. NEWS RANKINGS SALIENCE STUDY

The purpose of our present study was to determine whether the U.S. News law school rankings are still salient to prospective law students. We expected that the U.S. News rankings would be highly salient to prospective law students, because their entire purpose is to give prospective law students useful information about law schools and help them decide which law school to attend. Or rather, the U.S. News "Best Law Schools" rankings are explicitly intended to tell prospective law students which law schools are the best, which law schools are the not so best, and which law schools are downright terrible.

In theory, changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking should be positively correlated—and perhaps strongly positively correlated—with changes in its revealed preferences ranking the following year. After all, the primary purpose of the U.S. News law school rankings is to help prospective law students decide which law school to attend. The U.S. News rankings are intended to provide information to prospective law students in a simple and easy to understand format. The higher a law school's U.S. News ranking, the "better" the school, and the lower the ranking, the "worse" the school, at least according to U.S. News. If a law school's U.S. News ranking increases, it should become more attractive to prospective law students, and if a law school's ranking decreases, it should become less attractive.

By contrast, our revealed preferences ranking methodology is designed to reflect the revealed preferences of prospective law students. Rather than tell prospective law

29. Ryan & Frye, *supra* note 20; see also Jerome M. Organ, *Article Review: What the Revealed-Preferences Ranking Fails to Reveal*, 7 BELMONT L. REV. 114 (2019). After we published our revealed preferences rankings of law schools, two scholars published an alternative revealed preferences ranking of law schools, based on a different methodology. Rothstein & Yoon, *supra* note 21.

students which law school they should attend, it ranks law schools based on which law school prospective law students actually choose to attend.

Like our original ranking system, the methodology of the study we describe in this article is also simple, but elegant. We wanted to know whether prospective law students care about the U.S. News law school rankings. Or rather, more technically, we wanted to determine whether the U.S. News law school rankings are salient to prospective law students and whether their salience has changed over time. So we asked whether changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking were correlated with changes in that law school's revealed preferences ranking the following year. If the U.S. News rankings are salient to prospective law students, then changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking should be strongly positively correlated with changes in its revealed preferences ranking the following year. If a law school's U.S. News ranking increases, then it should become more attractive to prospective law students, and if a law school's U.S. News ranking decreases, then it should become less attractive to prospective law students.

In order to run our study we had to create a decade of revealed preferences rankings of law schools, which we provide in an appendix for the interest and convenience of readers.³⁰ We encourage readers to use that data and our revealed preferences ranking methodology in their own research.

We then created a dataset that consisted of annual changes in law school U.S. News rankings and a dataset that consisted of annual changes in law school revealed preferences rankings. And finally, we ran a correlation function on annual changes in law school U.S. News rankings against annual changes in law school revealed preferences rankings the following year.

The results were surprising. We expected changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking to be strongly positively correlated with changes in its revealed preferences ranking, at least most of the time. But we found that for the last decade, changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking have never been strongly positively correlated with changes in its revealed preferences ranking. Sometimes, they have been weakly positively correlated, other times they have been weakly negatively correlated. More recently, the negative relationship between changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking and subsequent changes in a law school's revealed preferences ranking is maintaining a negative directionality and becoming even stronger.

In other words, changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking don't seem to affect the revealed preferences of prospective law students very much at all. In fact, changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking are apparently almost irrelevant to the revealed preferences of prospective law students. This is a surprising result, because it suggests that changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking at best weakly affect the preferences of prospective law students. If the U.S. News law school rankings are salient to prospective law students, they are at best weakly salient. And the positive correlation is so weak that it could easily be coincidental. In other words, maybe the U.S. News law school rankings are occasionally right about the relative prestige of law schools, but no one actually notices or cares.

Even worse, in several years, our study shows that changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking are negatively correlated with changes in that law school's revealed

30. Appendix available on the *Indiana Law Journal Supplement* website.

preferences ranking, and in recent years, changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking are more strongly negatively correlated with changes in that law school's revealed preferences ranking. This is an extremely surprising result. If changes in a law school's U.S. News ranking are negatively correlated with changes in that law school's revealed preferences ranking the following year, it suggests that the U.S. News rankings are not at all salient to prospective law students. In fact, it suggests that prospective law students are ignoring the U.S. News rankings.

In a nutshell, our study shows that the U.S. News law school rankings have been largely irrelevant to prospective law students for a decade, and have recently become entirely irrelevant. U.S. News is ranking law schools, but prospective law students don't care about its rankings, and are making decisions about which law school to attend based on other factors.

That's a problem for U.S. News, because the entire premise of its law school ranking system is that it provides useful information to prospective law students. At least in theory, prospective law students care about the U.S. News rankings because they provide useful and timely information about the relative prestige of law schools. Accordingly, law schools should care about the U.S. News rankings, because prospective law students care about them, and law schools want to matriculate the most competitive law students possible, in order to increase their U.S. News ranking and outcompete their peer law schools. But our study suggests that prospective law students don't actually care about the U.S. News rankings, or at least don't take them very seriously anymore. And if prospective law students don't care about the U.S. News rankings, then law schools shouldn't care about them either, which spells trouble in the capital city for U.S. News.

What factors are salient to prospective law students and what kind of information do they want? That's a great question. It's one of the reasons we created our revealed preferences rankings in the first place, to investigate whether the U.S. News law school rankings actually reflected the preferences of prospective law students. And we think it's a question that deserves further study. From a purely cynical perspective, if law schools want to outperform their peers, they could do worse than to ask what prospective law students actually want. Of course, it's also possible that prospective law students are misinformed and want the wrong things. That possibility also suggests arbitrage opportunities. Law schools could compete for the most desirable students by offering what those students wrongly think they want. Or law schools could try to sell students what they don't know they want yet. And many people can provide law school rankings that are actually useful to prospective law students.

IV. DATA, METHODS, AND RESULTS

A. Data

As with our previous forays into ranking law schools using the revealed preferences approach, we utilized data furnished by the American Bar Association's Standard 509 disclosure reports. In this study, we leveraged a decade's worth of data—from 2014 to 2023—sourced from these reports. We note that the 2023 data were the most recent data the ABA provided when we conducted our study. Specifically, we analyzed the metrics associated with the credentials of a given first

year class in a given year, to wit: the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile measures of the class's LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs. We also used the U.S. News rankings of law schools over the same time period.

B. Limitations

As a preliminary matter, we note that these are the best publicly available data for conducting our study. In an ideal world, we would have more granular data that probably only the LSAC can provide (but won't). Notwithstanding this fact, our sources of data are optimal for our study; yet, there are notable limitations with each datasource. With respect to the latter source (U.S. News rankings), at times, the publication has ranked law schools non-numerically. That is, they have placed some law schools in a "Tier 2" or "Unranked" status. This is problematic for any ordinal ranking system that relies on numbers to differentiate between schools. So to correct this issue, we imputed a ranking of these schools based on their peer reputational scores for the same year.³¹

Additionally, and more problematically, several law schools have merged, disaggregated, wound up, or chosen not to report data in a given year to the ABA. The first two of these behaviors make the analysis we intended to perform nearly impossible over a decade panel of data. As such, we elected to drop from analysis a number of schools that fit these particular modes of operation in order to more closely compare the law schools that remain over this time period.³²

C. Methods

Methodologically, we went back to our roots to account only for the entry-level law student market in this study. That is, we assigned each law school in each year of observation an index score summed from weighted and scaled values of a law school's reported entering class credentials. We first scaled the three undergraduate GPA inputs (25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles) by four and the three LSAT inputs (25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles) by 180, before standardizing them (*i.e.*, z-scored them). Then, we weighted each of these standardized inputs by one-sixth, and we

31. We defend this practice on the basis that the U.S. News methodology has long privileged peer reputation in its methodology, accounting for some 40 percent of its overall methodology in some form or fashion over much of the time period we studied. *See, e.g.*, Paul Caron, *2024 U.S. News Law School Peer Reputation Rankings (and Overall Rankings)*, TAXPROF BLOG (May 11, 2023), https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2023/05/2024-us-news-law-school-peer-reputation-rankings-and-overall-rankings.html.

32. An example of law schools that reported data as different institutions in some years and in the aggregate in others, Penn State (Dickinson and University Park) and Rutgers (Camden and Newark) had to be dropped from our observation. Mitchell Hamline is an example of two law schools that merged (William Mitchell and Hamline), but because its current incarnation is different than when it operated as two separate law schools, we felt that it was inappropriate to impute the data from each law school when separated to create a proxy for it operating as one institution. Many schools wound up, including: Arizona Summit, Charlotte, Concordia, Florida Coastal, Thomas Jefferson, Valparaiso, and Whittier. These schools were removed from observation.

summed the results to comprise a given law school's performance index in a given year. The value this yields, which we have termed a performance index, is roughly interpretable as a law school's standardized deviation from any mean in a given year. We then ranked each law school, based on this performance index, for every year in our study.

We were interested, however, in how these rankings changed year over year in our decade-long sample. So, we calculated a measure of a law school's change in rank from year t to year $t+1$. In other words, we used subtraction to measure this change, subtracting the year t ranking from the year $t+1$ ranking to assign an interpretable value for this change. We then measured the same change that a given law school exhibited in the immediately prior set of years (i.e., years $t-1$ and t) in the U.S. News rankings to compare these differentials across time.

The purpose of this inquiry was to assess whether positive (or negative) changes in a law school's position in the U.S. News rankings result in the law school matriculating a better (or worse) class in the immediately following year, all else being equal. If law students were paying attention to the U.S. News rankings, which are largely based on reputational prestige, we would expect to see related changes in the entering student credentials reflected in the revealed preferences rankings of the immediately subsequent years. Yet, we do not. In fact, in the section that follows, we observe no real discernible correlation between our two measures of interest.

D. Results

Using a correlation function, we compared the change in a law school's position in two consecutive years (e.g. 2014-2015) with its change in position in the revealed preferences rankings in the immediately consecutive years (e.g., 2015-2016). The results are surprising. At no point do the values we compared exhibit a strong correlation in either direction, as we might have expected, a priori.³³ The correlation coefficients this comparison produced are all in the range of weakly to very weakly correlated. More surprisingly, they are often inversely (or negatively) correlated, meaning that as U.S. News rankings change in one direction for a school, they move in the opposite direction in terms of the revealed preferences change in rankings in the subsequent year. We take this to mean three things.

Primarily, our takeaway is that U.S. News has lost its relevance. Entering law students are not responding to the publication's rankings in any economically rational-maximizing sense, to the extent that they ever did; law students that maximize on reputational prestige have continued to do so (as our rankings proffered in the Appendix suggest)—just not on the same measure of prestige that U.S. News has been peddling all these years. In fact, it seems that every time U.S. News tinkers with its methodology,³⁴ it loses a little more of its target audience.

33. Mathematically speaking: a very strong correlation tends to begin with a correlation coefficient achieving a value of 0.8 (or -0.8, if inversely correlated) to 1.0 (or -1.0); strong correlation coefficients tend to be in the range of 0.6 (or -0.6) to 0.8 (or -0.8); moderate correlation coefficients often range from 0.4 (or -0.4) to 0.6 (or -0.6); weak correlation coefficients fall between 0.2 (or -0.2) and 0.4 (or -0.4); and very weak coefficients span the last range from 0.0 to 0.2 (or -0.2).

34. As it did in 2014, 2020, and 2023. It bears noting that the most recent change to

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients for Lagged USNWR Rank Change and RP Rank Change								
	USNWR Rank Change 2014-15	USNWR Rank Change 2015-16	USNWR Rank Change 2016-17	USNWR Rank Change 2017-18	USNWR Rank Change 2018-19	USNWR Rank Change 2019-20	USNWR Rank Change 2020-21	USNWR Rank Change 2021-22
RP Rank Change 2015-16	-0.1167							
RP Rank Change 2016-17		0.0586						
RP Rank Change 2017-18			0.0588					
RP Rank Change 2018-19				0.0436				
RP Rank Change 2019-20					-0.0594			
RP Rank Change 2020-21						-0.0540		
RP Rank Change							0.0921	

the U.S. News methodology, in 2023, weighted outcome variables—like bar passage and employment measures—more strongly than it ever had in previous iterations of its rankings methodology. In fact, these outcome variables now constitute over half of a law school’s composite index in the U.S. News rankings. Arguably, these factors should be more salient to prospective law students than a ranking based almost purely on prestige. Yet, our data do not allow us to fully assess the impact of its latest methodology change, because it lies beyond the scope of the years of the data we collected. Finally, one of us argued for such a weighting of these outcome variables and proposed it years before U.S. News changed its methodology. See Ryan, *supra* note 18.

2021-22								
RP Rank Change 2022-23								-0.1531

Second, it may well be the case that the stasis inherent in U.S. News's peer reputation surveys, which has always comprised a significant proportion of its methodology, contributes to the disjunction between the U.S. News changes and the revealed preferences ranking changes in a subsequent year. The revealed preferences rankings are fairly dynamic and responsive to the distribution of a law school's entering class relative to other law schools' entering classes in any given year. By contrast, the U.S. News rankings only ever seem to change considerably when its rankings methodology is reconfigured.

Finally, and relatedly, it may well be the case that the disjunction between U.S. News rankings changes and revealed preferences rankings changes are observed in periods longer than immediately subsequent years. Deans and admissions directors may reshape the profile of their entering class in response to dips in the U.S. News rankings, but because of the stasis built into the U.S. News methodology, by virtue of the weight of the peer reputational survey, the changes in the revealed preferences rankings might actually presage future changes in the U.S. News rankings—to the extent that peer raters consider them.

V. WHY DID THE U.S. NEWS LAW SCHOOL RANKINGS BECOME IRRELEVANT?

When you find a good angle, it's hard to let go. The U.S. News law school rankings were a genius angle. Prospective law students desperately needed information about law schools in order to decide which law school to attend. And as the market for legal education became increasingly national, rather than regional, that information became harder to find. The U.S. News law school rankings provided absolutely crucial information to prospective law students about law schools they had never heard of before and had no way to evaluate.

But things gradually began to change. First, other people began to realize that ranking law schools was a potentially profitable business, so U.S. News had to compete with them. That was relatively easy, especially because U.S. News had the first-mover advantage. After all, when you're ranking something based on prestige, you only have to convince the people you're ranking that your ranking matters. And it wasn't hard. Why do the U.S. News law school rankings exist? Because law schools wanted rankings, but it was embarrassing to rank themselves, so they needed someone else to do it.

It was a gift. U.S. News sold countless magazines to prospective law students with no other easy way to evaluate the relative prestige of law schools. Gradually, U.S. News effectively transitioned from the business of publishing news into the business of ranking educational institutions. Why not? Publishing news is a business

and ranking educational institutions is a business and frankly who cares what business you're in so long as it's profitable?

For several decades, the methodology of the U.S. News law school rankings was largely static. As a practical matter, the most important factor in a law school's U.S. News ranking was its reputation scores, which were very "sticky." The most dynamic factor in a law school's US News ranking was the GPAs and LSAT scores of its incoming class, so law schools that wanted to improve their U.S. News ranking focused on increasing the GPAs and LSAT scores of their incoming classes.

However, in recent years, U.S. News has made many changes to the methodology of its law school rankings. It has incorporated new factors and weighed those factors differently. As a consequence, the U.S. News law school rankings have become considerably more volatile over time, especially as the U.S. news methodology has deemphasized peer reputation. They are likely to become even more volatile if U.S. News retains its 2024 methodology, under which 58% of a law school's score was based on placement success and bar passage, 25% was based on peer reputation, 10% of a law school's score based on its selectivity, and 7% was based on faculty and library resources.³⁵ Indeed, the 2025 U.S. News rankings are wild, moving Harvard into sixth place. It's hard to believe many prospective law students will actually choose Virginia or Pennsylvania over Harvard, let alone consider Duke equivalent to Harvard. The less the U.S. News rankings depend on peer reputation, the less they reflect prestige, and the less useful they become to law students interested in knowing the relative prestige of law schools.

This study may be useful for law school administrators and faculty members making decisions about institutional priorities and the allocation of institutional resources. If the U.S. News rankings are decreasingly salient to prospective law students, law schools may wish to deemphasize the effect of the U.S. News rankings on institutional decision making.

Law schools may also consider alternative law school ranking systems in their decision making process. For example, law schools may consider our revealed preferences rankings, if they want to better understand what features of a law school are salient to prospective law students on the margins.

35. See Robert Morse & Eric Brooks, *Methodology: 2024 Best Law Schools Rankings*, *U.S. News & World Report* (April 8, 2024), <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles/law-schools-methodology>.