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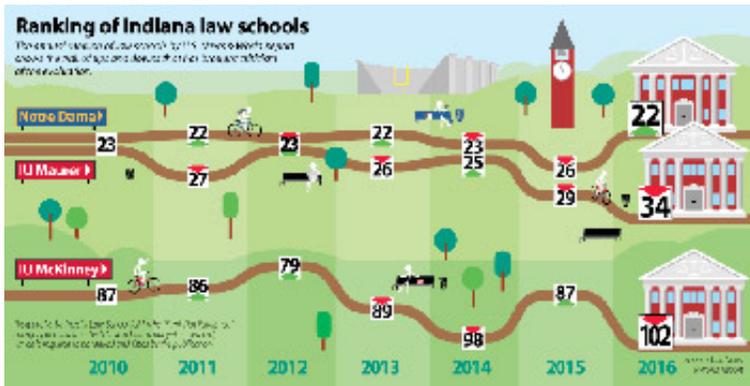
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INDIANA UNIVERSITY
Maurer School of Law
Bloomington



Indiana schools rise and fall in recent national law school rankings

Marilyn Odendahl March 25, 2015

For law schools not occupying the front seats in the U.S. News & World Report's national ranking, this year's release of the annual "how prestigious is my school" evaluation brought another twist to the rollercoaster ride the assessment has come to resemble.

Volatility is a hallmark of the rankings. The recent publication of the 2016 Best Law Schools survey continued the trend of law schools making wild climbs up and down the list from one year to the next, inciting a fresh round of criticism along with cheers or tears – depending on the result – from law school deans.

Schools listed in the Top 14 see relative little movement compared to the rankings of their colleagues below that mark. Those schools outside of the Top 14 surge and plunge year to year for seemingly little reason.

Two Hoosier law schools – Indiana University Maurer School of Law and Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law – declined in the just-released 2016 rankings while the state's highest-ranked school – Notre Dame Law School – improved its position.

The 2016 rankings returned the Notre Dame Law School to its former 22nd ranking. For several years, the private school has hovered between Nos. 22 and 23, but in the 2015 rankings it slipped to 26th place.

Deans of the IU law schools said the recent survey results did not reflect the quality of education and support that the students receive. They also pointed to U.S. News' higher rankings of their focused programs in areas such as tax law and health care law.

EXTRA

[Click here](#) to see how Indiana law schools fared in the latest U.S. News & World Report law school rankings.

“U.S. News has created a system where very small changes in any category can have an impact on the overall number,” IU McKinney Dean Andrew Klein said.



Klein

The Indianapolis law school has posted big swings in recent years. IU McKinney was ranked as No. 98 in the 2014 survey and rose to No. 89 in the 2015 listing before tumbling to its current No. 102 rank.

IU Maurer fell to No. 34 in the 2016 survey, down from No. 29 in the prior evaluation. However, over a longer period, the Bloomington school has experienced broad movements in the rankings. IU Maurer was ranked at No. 39 in the 2000 survey then, following a dip to No. 42, the school began a fairly steady climb after 2006 into the high 20s.

U.S. News director of data research Robert Morse was not available for an interview.

Brian Leiter, director of the Center for Law, Philosophy and Human Values at the University of Chicago Law School, has researched the criteria and calculations that U.S. News uses and concluded the overall rank is a “nonsense number.”

Questioning the methodology

Leiter in his blog has been critical of the publication's methodology, calling the rankings inexplicable and arguing there is no rationale for the weighting of the different categories measured.

Echoing Klein's contention, Leiter pointed to the change of factoring the cost of living into the per capita expenditure by law schools. This recalculation, he said, greatly helped the University of Alabama climb to a mid-20s ranking.

“In general, a significant move up or a significant move down usually is not correlated to anything in the real world,” Leiter said.

At IU Maurer, Dean Austen Parrish was surprised by his school's 2016 placement. The law school has improved in every category measured with the exception of the admission criteria, he said. But even there, the institution only lowered its LSAT acceptance from the 85th percentile to the 84th or 83rd percentile which accounts for roughly a drop of one number in the raw score.



Factors considered in ranking

The methodology U.S. News & World Report uses to rank each law school relies on select sets of weighted criteria, listed below with the amount of weight given to each factor in the parentheses.

Quality Assessment (0.40)

- Peer assessment score (0.25)
- Assessment score by lawyers/judges (0.15)

Selectivity (0.25)

- Median LSAT scores (0.125)
- Median undergraduate GPA (0.10)
- Acceptance rate (0.025)

Placement Success (0.20)

- Employment rates at graduation (0.04)
- Employment rates nine months post-graduation (0.14)
- Bar passage rate (0.02)

Faculty Resources (0.15)

- Expenditures per student (0.0975)
average instruction, library and supporting services
- All other items (0.015)
including financial aid
- Student-faculty ratio (0.03)
- Library resources (0.0075)

Source: U.S. News & World Report

Bloomington's drop might be a reflection of the change in leadership and focus, Leiter said. The school's decline might be an indication that either the schools ranked higher than it engaged in more puffery in reporting their data than usual or IU Maurer was too honest about its data for its own good, he said.

For IU McKinney, Leiter said the concern is greater. Slipping from the 80s or 90s could reinforce any negative perceptions of the school and might dissuade students from enrolling, he explained.

Klein criticized the U.S. News system as being strongly weighted toward inputs like entering students' LSAT scores and GPAs, and toward expenditures. These elements do not provide a picture of the outcomes or what the school is doing to educate students, he said.

He then pointed to other surveys where IU McKinney captured a better position. For example, the U.S. News ranking of yield rates found the Indianapolis school was the eighth highest in the country with 49.9 percent of applicants accepting offers for admittance. Also, graduateprograms.com ranked IU McKinney as 25th in the nation in terms of how students rated their experience at the school.

Klein is proud of his law school, the support of the alumni and the work of the faculty. He has no plans to bring about changes because of the U.S. News ranking.

"This law school does not exist to compete in rankings," Klein said. "We exist to provide a good education for people who are going to be leaders and serve this community for many, many years."

Notre Dame Dean Nell Jessup Newton was unavailable to comment for this article.

Can't ignore the rankings

Alfred Brophy, professor at the University of North Carolina School of Law, has also studied the U.S. News methodology. He maintains the volatility is not related to changes in quality, noting that a system where some schools change places by as much as 20 points in a single year says more about how the rankings are calculated than it says about the law schools.

In a 2014 published paper, Brophy ranked law schools based on three elements: the median LSAT scores of the class entering in 2013; the percentage of students in the class graduating in 2013 who had full-time, permanent, J.D.-required jobs nine months after graduation; and the number of citations to each school's main law review.

His analysis ranked Notre Dame at No. 22 while IU Maurer placed at No. 33.5 and IU McKinney at No. 117.5. Also, he listed Valparaiso University Law School, a school which U.S. News lists in its unranked category, at No. 166 out of 194 schools.

Despite the objections to the U.S. News rankings, law school deans cannot ignore them. College presidents are paying attention. Interviewing and hiring decisions by law firms of a school's graduates may be impacted. In addition, students considering a career in the law give strong credence to the rankings and sometimes turn down better scholarship offers in order to attend a higher-ranked school.

"If it matters to prospective students, it has to matter to deans," Brophy said.

Since becoming dean, Parrish has established partnerships with prestigious undergraduate colleges to identify and recruit the best students for IU Maurer. He expects in two years this move, which is

designed to bring quality applicants to Bloomington, will raise the school's ranking.

Still, he noted, if U.S. News changes its criteria, the initiatives to enroll well-qualified students and to help graduates find jobs may not bring much upward momentum. The school wants to improve its ranking, Parrish said, but it also does not want the tail to wag the dog. •