

Where Do Partners Come From?

Theodore P. Seto

You are a hiring partner. You need to spend your recruiting dollars as efficiently as possible. Which law schools offer the largest pools of potential future partners for you and your firm to explore?

You are applying to law school. Your long-term ambition is to become a partner in a national law firm in a certain city. Which schools may increase your chances of realizing that ambition?

To date, no published study has attempted to answer the question: Which law schools produce the largest numbers of partners at national law firms? This article is intended to fill that gap. It reports the results of a study of the schools from which junior and mid-level partners (partners who graduated within the last 25 years) in the 100 largest U.S. firms (the NLJ 100) obtained their J.D. degrees. For hiring partners, the results may be relevant in deciding where to spend recruiting resources. For law school applicants interested in becoming big-firm partners, the study may be relevant in deciding where to enroll.

Before moving into law teaching 20 years ago, I was a hiring partner at a large Philadelphia law firm. We interviewed intermittently at Yale and Stanford. We tried interviewing at UCLA, but without success. Based on the results of the study reported in this article, I now understand why. In the past quarter century, UCLA has not produced a single graduate who is currently a partner in an NLJ 100 Philadelphia office; Stanford and Yale have each produced an average of one every dozen years—not a very encouraging yield.

As a professor, I often talk with applicants about how to realize their life goals. I recall one student in particular, who was attempting to choose between Vanderbilt and the school at which I teach—Loyola Los Angeles. His ambition was to become a big-firm partner in Los Angeles. As students often do, he chose the higher *U.S. News & World Report*-ranked school. When he graduated from Vanderbilt, he was unable even to get an interview in Los Angeles. Had he attended Loyola, his paper credentials and performance at Vanderbilt suggest that he would have graduated near the top of his class. If he had, his chances of getting an offer from a large Los Angeles firm would have been

Theodore Seto is Professor of Law and William M. Rains Fellow, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles. The author thanks Anna Barsegyan, Adam Besagno, John Dravinski, Robert Hernandez, Brian Hong, Gregory Hunt, Thomas Neptune, Richard Praseuth, Alice Tsai, and Michael Yeager for their careful research assistance.

quite high. Again, based on the results of the study reported in this article, I can explain why. Hiring by national law firms is astonishingly local. There are very few truly national law schools. Vanderbilt is not an established LA feeder school. Loyola is.

Part I of this article describes the study, the resulting database, and the methods used to compute the numbers reported herein. Part II and Appendix A report overall results—which schools have produced the most NLJ 100 partners nationwide over the past quarter century and which have produced relatively few. Part III reports results separately for each of the country's ten largest legal markets. Hiring and partnering by national law firms, it turns out, are predominantly local; national rank is much less important than location. Part IV, finally, identifies the few law schools that contribute significantly to more than one major legal market in more than one state. Harvard and Georgetown are standouts; Yale and Stanford are not.

I. Study and Method

Between June, 2010, and June, 2011, ten research assistants searched the Martindale-Hubbell online law directory site for each of the 250 largest U.S. law firms—specifically, the firms comprising the 2009 NLJ 250. Each partner's J.D. school, date of graduation or date of first bar admission and office or offices of practice were collected. Date of first bar admission was used as a proxy when date of graduation was not listed. Law firm websites were searched to fill in missing data. The result was a database of 48,103 partners nationwide.

All entries were then rechecked against Martindale-Hubbell to ensure data quality. Ambiguous listings (e.g., “University of California”) were allocated among possible law schools in proportion to their unambiguous listings. Graduates of Indiana, Missouri, Rutgers and Arkansas generally did not list the campus they attended. Graduates of Indiana and Missouri were allocated arbitrarily 60 percent-40 percent between the two relevant campuses, with the larger number allocated to the *U.S. News* higher-ranked campus. Graduates of Rutgers were allocated 50 percent-50 percent between Newark and Camden, which are currently ranked equally by *U.S. News*, graduates of Arkansas 50 percent-50 percent between Fayetteville and Little Rock.

Only J.D. graduates of U.S. law schools were included in the study. Partners for which neither date of graduation nor date of first bar admission were available were omitted, as were partners who graduated in 1985 or earlier. The result was a database of 26,973 partners who had graduated within the last 25 years and were currently listed as partners, shareholders, principals or the equivalent in one of the NLJ 250 firms.

The NLJ 100 and the NLJ 250 were both analyzed. Of the 26,973 partners in the relevant age cohort in the NLJ 250, 16,799 were partners in the 100 largest U.S. firms. Because hiring by smaller firms (the NLJ 101-250) was even more focused on local¹ law schools than that of larger firms, we decided to restrict

1. See discussion *infra* Part III.

the study to the 100 largest firms—those with a national focus. Except as noted, the results reported in this article are limited to those firms.

II. Nationwide Results

Table 1 lists the top 50 feeder schools nationwide, ranked by number of partners in U.S. offices of the NLJ 100 who received their J.D. in 1986 or thereafter. Schools 51 through 150 are listed in Appendix A.

Table 1: Top 50 Feeder Schools Nationwide

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Harvard	946
2	Georgetown	729
3	NYU	543
4	Virginia	527
5	Columbia	516
6	George Washington	447
7	Michigan	444
8	Chicago	426
9	Texas	384
10	Northwestern	365
11	Pennsylvania	329
12	Boston University	317
13	Fordham	306
14	UC Berkeley	287
15	UCLA	257
16	Yale	253
17	Stanford	240
18	UC Hastings	233
19	Duke	219
20	Boston College	213
21	Cornell	204
22	Vanderbilt	186
23	Illinois	183
24	American	179
25	Loyola Los Angeles	162

26	Miami	160
26	Temple	160
28	Notre Dame	159
29	Florida	154
29	Loyola Chicago	154
31	Houston	153
32	USC	151
33	Washington St. Louis	149
34	Emory	148
35	Villanova	137
36	Catholic	135
37	DePaul	134
38	Southern Methodist	132
39	Minnesota	130
39	Pittsburgh	130
41	Tulane	125
42	St. John's	121
42	Wisconsin	121
44	Brooklyn	119
45	Chicago-Kent	111
46	North Carolina	109
47	Maryland	105
48	William & Mary	104
49	Georgia	99
50	Ohio State	96

Readers may find some of these numbers surprising. Over the past 25 years, Chicago has graduated far more students who have gone on to become and remain NLJ 100 partners than Yale or Stanford, despite the fact that the three are of comparable size. Georgetown, less than 30 percent larger than Texas (with which it is ranked equally by *U.S. News*), has produced almost twice as many NLJ 100 partners as the latter. Indeed, Georgetown has achieved the second largest big-firm footprint of any law school in the country, second only to Harvard. St. John's, a school only slightly larger than the U.S. average, outperforms its *U.S. News* ranking by an astonishing 53 places, Miami by 51 places, Villanova by 49, DePaul by 47, Catholic by 43, Loyola Chicago by 42.

What do these numbers mean? First, they tell us that not all schools produce national law firm partners at rates consistent with their *U.S. News* rank, even controlling for size. Some produce more, some less. The data do not tell us why. It may be that students interested in becoming big-firm partners tend to be attracted to a particular school. Or perhaps a school's admission practices favor such students. It may be that—because of the culture of the school—graduates who accept associate positions do so seriously, with the intention of trying to make partner, not just to “get some experience” before moving on. It may even be that some schools provide superior preparation for big-firm practice—that some schools teach law and/or practice skills more effectively than others. Whatever the reason, 25 years of data is probably enough to capture real differences, even if we cannot explain them.²

Second, not surprisingly, large schools generally produce more NLJ 100 partners than small schools. From an employer's perspective, size is relevant in deciding where to interview. How many Yale graduates are interested in practicing in Philadelphia each year? Precious few. How many Harvard graduates? The pool is broad and deep. Given scarce recruiting resources, where should a law firm look for new associates? The answer is obvious. As a result, roughly 500 firms interview on-campus at Harvard each year,³ 250 to 300 at Georgetown,⁴ only about 125 at Yale.⁵ The fact that Harvard is an established feeder school for many more firms in all parts of the country may be of interest to an applicant whose career objective is to become a partner at one of those firms.

Many rankings—*U.S. News*, among others—compare schools predominantly on a “per capita” or “per student” basis. The premise is that schools whose average students (or professors) are better should be ranked higher. This may make sense if one's goal is to establish a Platonic hierarchy. Theoretical rankings, however, are often of only indirect relevance to real-world decisions. Economies of scale exist in law firm hiring, as elsewhere. If employers cared solely about per capita outcomes, they would all interview at Yale (ranked No. 1 by *U.S. News*). They don't. For employers attempting to allocate scarce recruiting resources, aggregate numbers matter.

2. Results fluctuate significantly within the 25-year period studied, reflecting the fact that firms' decisions to grant partnership depend on the individual merits of the candidates who come up for partnership from year to year. The 25-year window attempts to eliminate this apparently random flutter from the results.
3. E-mail from Graham Sherr, Assistant Dean for Career Services, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, to author (July 20, 2011) (on file with author) (memorializing conversation with Harvard's career services office).
4. E-mail from Graham Sherr, Assistant Dean for Career Services, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, to author (July 7, 2011) (on file with author) (memorializing conversation with Georgetown's career services office).
5. E-mail from Graham Sherr, Assistant Dean for Career Services, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, to author (Mar. 12, 2011) (on file with author) (memorializing conversation with Yale's career services office).

Whether and when per capita data should be relevant to applicants is a more complex question. The single most important determinant of how schools perform on most outcome measures (bar passage, hiring, big-firm partnership, etc.) is the quality of the students they attract.⁶ In significant part, therefore, per capita outcome measures are merely proxies for student quality. Unfortunately, applicants commonly misread such measures as reflecting the value added by attending one school rather than another. (“I am more likely to pass the bar if I go here rather than there, because the bar passage rate here is higher.”) Unless a measure controls for student quality, however, it says nothing about the value likely to be added to a particular student by a particular school. The fact that students at highly ranked schools almost always pass the bar is largely a function of the native ability of the students themselves. It does not necessarily mean that such schools do anything to prepare students for the bar—indeed, the fact that students at more selective schools are likely to pass the bar in any event may even reduce pressure on such schools to pay attention to bar preparation.

Analysis of the value added by particular schools with respect to particular output measures is a project beyond the scope of this article.⁷ I have not attempted any such analysis here. What I do offer are the raw numbers—which I believe are less likely to mislead.⁸

These aggregate data are not intended as, and should not be read as, measures of value added. They do, however, provide a plausible measure of feeder school status. A school that has placed large numbers of partners in

6. In trial runs, the Pearson correlation coefficient between median entering LSATs for a portion of the period studied and a preliminary partners-per-FTE (full-time equivalent students) index was 0.8462, suggesting that median entering LSATs account for 72 percent of the variance in partners per FTE.
7. The only universal measure of student quality is entering LSAT scores. Undergraduate GPAs vary quite widely among undergraduate schools. GPAs at public schools are systematically lower than at private schools. Schools also differ in the amount of grade inflation they are willing to tolerate. A law school’s entering GPAs will depend in part on the mix of schools from which it recruits. Lower entering GPAs may merely mean that a school recruits more heavily from rigorous or public undergraduate institutions. But LSAT scores themselves only account for a small portion of the variance in first-year law school grades. In addition, for many schools entering LSATs have changed quite dramatically over the 25-year period studied. Ideally, value-added analysis would therefore be year-by-year—an expensive undertaking. In addition, at many schools, entering student credentials must be adjusted for attrition. Unfortunately, attrition data are not uniformly available. Some schools formally disqualify non-performing students. Some counsel them out. It can also be difficult to separate students who leave because they were not doing well from those who leave to transfer to a higher-ranked school. Finally, the relationship between student quality and NLJ 100 partnership appears to be nonlinear. A simple linear regression analysis therefore likely would make schools at the top and bottom appear to provide more value added than in fact they do, and schools in the middle appear to provide less. Nonlinear transformations, however, create serious interpretive problems.
8. Those so inclined can easily convert the aggregate data reported here into per capita numbers. Conversion from per capita to aggregate numbers, by contrast, is impossible unless the assumed denominators are also reported—rarely true.

the NLJ 100 over the last 25 years is likely to continue to attract NLJ 100 recruiters to its campus. Hiring committees in such firms, in turn, are likely to assume that hiring from that school is normal and will likely be productive. All else being equal, students who aspire to join such firms are more likely to have an opportunity to do so if they attend schools with established feeder relationships.

III. Results by City

The same data, sorted by legal market, suggest that legal hiring is markedly regional, and that most law schools are similarly regional. Tables 2 through 11 list the ten top feeder schools for each of the ten largest U.S. legal markets, ranked by number of legal job openings in 2009, as reported by the National Association for Law Placement (NALP).

Table 2: Top Feeder Schools: New York

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	NYU	364
2	Columbia	286
3	Harvard	259
4	Fordham	244
5	Georgetown	140
6	Pennsylvania	100
7	Brooklyn	88
8	St. John's	87
9	Boston University	85
10	Yale	82

Table 3: Top Feeder Schools: Washington, D.C.

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Georgetown	286
2	George Washington	215
3	Harvard	190
4	Virginia	176
5	American	93
6	Catholic	78
7	Yale	66
8	Chicago	63
9	Michigan	61
10	Columbia	58

Table 4: Top Feeder Schools: Chicago

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Northwestern	203
2	Chicago	165
3	Michigan	145
4	Illinois	141
5	Loyola Chicago	124
6	Harvard	108
7	DePaul	104
8	Chicago-Kent	91
9	John Marshall	59
10	Georgetown	42

Table 5: Top Feeder Schools: Los Angeles

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	UCLA	128
2	Loyola Los Angeles	111
3	USC	82
4	UC Berkeley	67
5	Harvard	63
6	UC Hastings	50
7	Georgetown	42
8	Southwestern	40
9	Columbia	36
10	Stanford	31

Table 6: Top Feeder Schools: Boston

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Boston College	120
2	Boston University	93
2	Harvard	93
4	Suffolk	60
5	Georgetown	26
5	Northeastern	26
7	Cornell	25
8	Virginia	21
9	Columbia	18
9	NYU	18

Table 7: Top Feeder Schools: Houston

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Texas	112
2	Houston	99
3	South Texas	44
4	Harvard	21
5	Tulane	16
6	Baylor	13
6	Southern Methodist	13
8	Vanderbilt	12
9	Georgetown	9
9	Louisiana State	9

Table 8: Top Feeder Schools: San Francisco

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	UC Hastings	88
2	UC Berkeley	80
3	Harvard	52
4	San Francisco	50
5	Georgetown	30
6	Santa Clara	26
7	UCLA	25
8	Stanford	23
9	Columbia	17
9	Michigan	17
9	UC Davis	17

Table 9: Top Feeder Schools: Atlanta

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Georgia	72
2	Emory	55
3	Georgia State	40
4	Vanderbilt	39
5	Virginia	28
6	Harvard	21
7	North Carolina	19
8	Duke	16
9	Florida	16
10	Mercer	15

Table 10: Top Feeder Schools: Dallas

Rank		1986–Partners in the NLJ 100
1	Texas	110
2	Southern Methodist	93
3	Baylor	25
4	Houston	19
5	Texas Tech	18
6	Harvard	16
7	Virginia	13
8	Tulane	11
9	Michigan	9
10	Chicago	8
10	Vanderbilt	8

Table 11: Top Feeder Schools: San Diego

Rank		1986—Partners in the NLJ 100
1	San Diego	36
2	UC Berkeley	19
3	California Western	13
4	UCLA	11
5	Harvard	10
5	Stanford	10
7	UC Hastings	9
8	Georgetown	7
9	Michigan	6
10	UC Davis	5
10	USC	5

Local schools dominate the lists: NYU and Columbia in New York; Georgetown and George Washington in D.C.; Northwestern and Chicago in Chicago; UCLA and Loyola Los Angeles in LA; BC, BU and Harvard in Boston. The fact that a school places at or near the top of the *U.S. News* rankings does not necessarily mean it is a strong feeder to law firms nationwide. Yale appears on just two lists, New York (tenth) and Washington (seventh); Stanford only on the California lists, Los Angeles (tenth), San Francisco (eighth) and San Diego (fifth). Stanford's relatively poor showing in San Francisco is particularly surprising.

Adding the next 150 largest firms to the analysis—that is, using the full NLJ 250—generally accentuates this local hiring and partnering bias. In New York, Fordham passes Harvard to move into third place; Brooklyn and St. John's pass the University of Pennsylvania. In Los Angeles, Southwestern passes Georgetown and Stanford passes Columbia. (But Harvard passes UC Berkeley.)

IV. National Schools

Are there any schools that are significant feeders in all ten of the largest U.S. markets? Only one: Harvard.

If we assign ten points for each first-place finish in one of the ten largest U.S. markets, one point for each tenth-place finish, and corresponding points in between, we can compute a national impact score for each school. The following table omits schools that make top ten lists in only one state and ranks the nine schools with the highest national impact scores.

Table 12: National Impact Scores

		Score	Markets
1	Harvard	66	All ten
2	Georgetown	38	All except Atlanta and Dallas
3	Virginia	20	DC, Boston, Atlanta, Dallas
4	Columbia	16	NY, DC, Boston, LA, SF
5	Michigan	15	DC, Chicago, SF, Dallas, San Diego
6	Chicago	13	DC, Chicago, Dallas
7	Boston U.	11	NY, Boston
7	NYU	11	NY, Boston
7	Vanderbilt	11	Houston, Atlanta, Dallas

Georgetown is the big surprise. Ranked only fourteenth by *U.S. News*, it makes the top ten feeder school lists for eight of the ten largest U.S. legal markets, emerging as Harvard's closest competitor for national status.⁹ NYU is a bit of a surprise in the opposite direction. Given its size and reputation, one might expect a more national footprint. Its graduates, however, are dominant only in New York. Finally, at least in the production of partners at national law firm offices in the ten largest U.S. legal markets, Yale and Stanford perform in a manner inconsistent with their *U.S. News* rankings.¹⁰ The data do not tell us why.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is not to supplant or critique existing rankings. It is rather to provide information not otherwise available that employers and law school applicants may find useful in making the practical choices they inevitably must make. Employers may find schools' track records in producing graduates who ultimately become and remain partners relevant to devising cost-effective recruiting strategies. Applicants may find the data interesting as well. Not all students aim to become big-firm partners. Indeed, many other rewarding career paths can be pursued in the law. Nevertheless, much of the law school applicant pool is likely to view schools' big-firm feeder-school status as material—one pertinent fact among many. The study's most important conclusion is that hiring and partnering, even by national law firms, is remarkably local. *U.S. News* rank is often a poor predictor of partner placement records.

9. Georgetown ranks 12th in Atlanta and 14th in Dallas.

10. Yale's national impact score, thus computed, is 5. Stanford's, earned entirely within California, is 10.

Appendix A: Feeder Schools 51 through 150 Nationwide

Rank		1986--Partners in the NLJ 100
51	San Diego	94
52	Santa Clara	93
53	Iowa	91
54	Hofstra	89
55	Kansas	87
56	Case Western Reserve	86
57	Indiana Bloomington	85 ¹¹
58	Suffolk	81
58	Syracuse	81
60	Rutgers Newark	80 ¹²
60	Rutgers Camden	80 ¹³
62	New York Law	78
63	Cardozo	77
64	George Mason	76
64	Missouri Columbia	76 ¹⁴
64	San Francisco	76
67	St. Louis	75
67	Washington & Lee	75
69	John Marshall	74
70	Widener	71
71	Pepperdine	66
72	Seton Hall	65
73	South Texas	62
73	Wake Forest	62

11. Indiana graduates generally do not indicate the campus from which they graduate; Indiana's total of 142 is arbitrarily allocated between the two campuses: Bloomington 85, Indianapolis 57, reflecting their respective U.S. News ranks.
12. Rutgers graduates generally do not indicate the campus from which they graduate. Rutgers' total of 159 is arbitrarily allocated equally between the two campuses, reflecting their respective U.S. News ranks.
13. *See supra* note 12.
14. Missouri graduates generally do not indicate the campus from which they graduate. Missouri's total of 126 is arbitrarily allocated between the two campuses: Columbia 76, Kansas City 50, reflecting their respective U.S. News ranks.

75	Albany	61
75	UC Davis	61
75	University of Washington	61
78	Indiana Indianapolis	57 ¹⁵
78	Pennsylvania State	57
80	Southwestern	56
81	Pace	51
81	Richmond	51
83	Missouri Kansas City	50 ¹⁶
84	Baylor	49
85	Duquesne	48
85	Georgia State	48
85	South Carolina	48
88	Florida State	47
89	Denver	46
90	McGeorge	44
90	SUNY Buffalo	44
92	Colorado	43
93	Brigham Young	41
94	Tennessee	40
95	Alabama	39
96	Baltimore	38
96	Northeastern	38
98	Arizona State	37
99	Seattle	35
100	Stetson	34
101	Connecticut	33
102	New England	32
103	Texas Tech	30
103	William Mitchell	30
105	Arizona	28
105	Louisiana State	28
105	Utah	28

15. *See supra* note 11.16. *See supra* note 14.

108	Cincinnati	27
108	Lewis & Clark	27
110	California Western	26
110	Franklin Pierce	26
110	Mississippi	26
110	Oklahoma	26
110	Washburn	26
115	Mercer	25
115	Oregon	25
117	Valparaiso	24
118	Cleveland-Marshall	23
118	Creighton	23
118	Kentucky	23
118	Vermont	23
122	Memphis State	22
123	Marquette	21
123	Nova Southeastern	21
125	Nebraska	20
125	Quinnipiac	20
127	Drake	19
127	Southern Illinois	19
127	St. Mary's	19
127	Whittier	19
131	Samford	18
132	Golden Gate	17
132	Gonzaga	17
132	Loyola New Orleans	17
135	Campbell	16
135	Capital	16
137	Detroit Mercy	15
138	Akron	14
138	Dayton	14
138	Touro	14
141	St. Thomas	13
141	Thomas M. Cooley	13

141	Toledo	13
141	Tulsa	13
141	West Virginia	13
146	Ohio Northern	12
146	Western New England	12
148	Arkansas Fayetteville	11 ¹⁷
148	Arkansas Little Rock	11 ¹⁸
148	Wayne State	11
148	Willamette	11

17. Arkansas graduates generally do not indicate the campus from which they graduate. Arkansas' total of 22 is arbitrarily allocated equally between the two campuses, reflecting their respective U.S. News ranks.

18. *See supra* note 17.