Do Elite Law Grads Disdain Longtime BigLaw Work? Stats Suggest Lower-Tier ‘Strivers’ Stick Around
By Debra Cassens Weiss
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It’s more difficult for grads of lower-ranked schools to land a job in a large law firm, but those who do may outperform their elite counterparts by achieving partnerships in greater percentages.

That’s the conclusion of Indiana University law professor William Henderson, who looked at BigLaw partnership data from the National Law Journal, the Careerist reports.

Henderson found that graduates from Loyola University Chicago School of Law are six times more likely to make partner than University of Chicago grads. He compared associate hires to new partners, and found the ratio was .85 for Loyola (it produced 11 first-year associates and 13 new partners at firms this year) compared to 5.12 for Chicago (it produced 87 first-year associates and 17 new partners.)

Elite schools with worse ratios than Chicago included Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, the story says. Lower-ranked schools with good ratios included the Universities of Houston, Illinois and Minnesota.

Henderson acknowledges he didn’t account for the “time lag” in comparing associate and partner hires, but says the data still give “a reasonable approximation of associate to partner odds.”

Henderson offers a possible reason for his findings. "The strivers tend to be more concentrated in the regional law schools," he tells the Careerist. "Face it, being a lawyer is a service job—it's cleaning up other people's problems, and a lot of people who go to elite schools don't want to do that."

In a post for The Legal Whiteboard, Henderson cautions that he was looking at a statistical snapshot in time, and such snapshots can be affected by random variability. “So, to be crystal clear, we cannot draw the inference that Chicago-Loyola is a better partnership bet than University of Chicago,” he says. “To draw stronger, more reliable inferences, we would need to average across multiple years.”

But a reliable statistical pattern does emerge when the 2011 statistics are pooled for elite and nonelite schools, Henderson writes. At some point before partnership, associates from the top-ranked 14 law schools “tend to get off the train in disproportionately high numbers,” he concludes.

More specifically, associates from the top 14 schools represented 53.7 percent of those hired in 2011, but only 29.4 percent of those promoted to partnership.

Henderson offers five theories why grads from the top 14 schools are not dominating the BigLaw partnership ranks. They are:
1) The top law grads at non-elite schools are being pitted against any grad at a top-14 school. “It is unlikely that factors such as personality and motivation are identical in these two populations,” Henderson says. Also, grads from the elite law schools may not have “a burning passion to do technical, often times repetitive legal work for the Fortune 500.”

2) Elite law school grads are more likely to come from affluent families. “When mom and dad are both lawyers, and grandpa owned a factory, maybe it's time to focus on art and travel,” Henderson writes. “In effect, one's inheritance becomes one's safety net.”

3) Law school admissions committees are becoming more focused on undergraduate grades and the Law School Admission Test. “This has fundamentally altered the BigLaw pipeline with students who are (excessively?) academic and lack significant brushes with real world adversity—not ideal grooming for a high stress professional service job,” Henderson says.

4) Elite grads tend to go to the most elite firms where the wash-out rates are higher. Still, the evidence suggests that those who leave the elite firms are moving out of BigLaw, rather than moving down to a less elite firm.

5) No matter what the school, grads all go on to a broad assortment of legal careers.