

Best Value Law Schools

University of Georgia, Wisconsin and Alabama top our list of schools that graduate students with low debt and a bright job outlook. But while public schools dominate the list, several private schools are making inroads.

By Mike Stetz

Could it be ... Might it be ... Dare we even say it ...

... that law school – which has seen an avalanche of challenges in recent years, from dropping admissions to faculty layoffs to outright school closures – is becoming hip again?

While it may not be as popular as Fortnite – really, what is? – law school seems to be on the uptick. Applications

are finally up – increasing 8 percent for this academic year – and the number of prospective students taking the Law School Admission Test also has jumped.

Some say the Trump presidency is causing more people to consider a career in law. The so-called Trump Bump is spurring young people to take action against some of his more controversial policies, particularly those regarding immigration. Plus, at long last, it seems the effects of the recession are dimming. Employment is improving.

While law school is looking sporty again, preLaw magazine offers this advice for prospective students: Choose wisely.

The last thing you want to do is enroll in a school that will load you down with

a ton of debt and not prepare you sufficiently to pass the bar. If it's your dream to fight Trump's immigration policies, you're going to have to have manageable debt and a law license.

And we can help you plan for that with our annual ranking of Best Value Law Schools, which is devised by looking at a host of key variables, such as tuition costs, bar-passage rates and employment success. It's a no-nonsense evaluation of the nation's law schools and their ability to deliver a solid education and job readiness without costing a fortune. (See page 33 for methodology.)

For instance, you might want to think twice – or 198,962 times – before enrolling in Thomas Jefferson School of Law



"If there were a term for our vision, it would be that we're the school that offers the best return on investment in legal education in the country."

—Peter B. "Bo" Rutledge, dean, University of Georgia School of Law



$$\begin{array}{c} \$/\text{employment} \\ + \\ \text{bar exam} \\ = \text{value} \end{array}$$

in San Diego. That second figure? That's the average number of dollars of debt a Thomas Jefferson School of Law student accumulates, and it's the highest in the nation.

It'll take 11 years to pay it off – if you can manage to pay \$2,200 a month, that

Best Value Methodology

Our Best Value Law Schools ranking is designed to recognize the schools where graduates have excellent chances of passing the bar and getting a legal job without taking on a ton of debt.

We rank the schools using this formula: ultimate bar pass rating and two-year pass rate (15 percent of study); employment rate (35 percent); tuition (25 percent); cost of living (10 percent); and average indebtedness upon graduation (15 percent).

All data comes from the ABA with the exception of indebtedness, which comes from U.S. News & World Report. For employment, we used a weighted employment number, which gives more weight to full-time, bar-passage required jobs. The formula is available at iaals.du.edu/educating-tomorrows-lawyers/projects/numbers/calculator-tool-researchers-and-media.

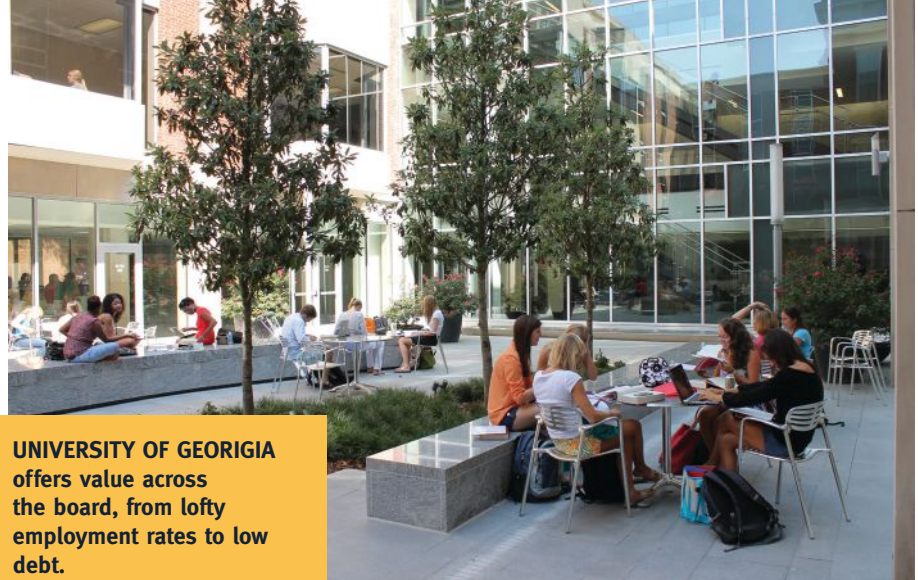
The ABA's ultimate bar passage is the aggregate rate of the Class of 2015. This was the first time this statistic was available. We also used the first-time pass rate for the Classes of 2016 and 2017.

	A	Tuition	Cost of living	Debt	NALP Employment	Modified Employment	Ultimate Bar Pass
1	University of Georgia	19,696	15,200	82,191	93.30%	90.39%	95.19%
2	University of Wisconsin	22,496	20,350	68,050	93.71%	85.38%	100.00%
3	University of Alabama	23,720	18,254	75,373	93.13%	90.86%	90.71%
4	University of Iowa	26,456	15,936	73,230	90.51%	88.32%	98.50%
5	University of Tulsa	25,254	20,110	73,987	94.19%	91.06%	94.44%
6	University of Nebraska	15,645	17,942	57,992	92.31%	86.70%	89.26%
7	University of Missouri	21,407	19,610	66,944	92.08%	86.60%	97.58%
8	University of Florida	22,299	17,200	88,409	87.96%	88.37%	98.03%
9	University of Kentucky	23,783	16,700	82,905	94.69%	90.90%	92.74%
10	University of Oklahoma	20,903	21,234	84,057	93.59%	88.26%	97.30%
11	University of Montana	12,562	15,874	71,604	91.36%	84.36%	90.79%
12	Georgia State University	17,050	16,730	56,710	92.93%	83.06%	87.77%
13	University of Tennessee	19,638	21,092	65,107	94.95%	86.36%	90.27%
14	Ohio State University	30,264	19,928	90,638	90.30%	87.16%	97.53%
15	University of Utah	26,641	19,802	79,813	95.73%	87.69%	92.31%
16	University of Kansas	21,996	15,536	72,617	85.83%	81.50%	97.67%
17	Florida International U	21,806	17,348	10,6596	90.91%	84.58%	97.87%
18	University of Cincinnati	24,010	19,268	67,028	82.86%	80.87%	97.03%
19	Louisiana State U	23,083	21,158	85,703	92.53%	86.59%	92.13%
20	Temple University	26,103	22,488	73,589	91.24%	86.50%	90.12%
21	U Nevada, Las Vegas	26,973	14,814	84,386	90.70%	86.11%	91.11%
22	Arizona State University	27,388	21,710	87,612	92.42%	86.09%	93.40%
23	Wake Forest University	45,110	22,700	77,712	95.45%	87.74%	94.12%
24	UNM School of Law	17,147	16,150	79,199	86.67%	82.57%	91.51%
25	UMKC	19,040	15,450	97,419	93.33%	83.93%	93.85%

is. If you finish law school at age 28, you'll be pushing 40 by the time you're clear.

Big shock: Thomas Jefferson School of Law did not make our Best Value list. Neither did Savannah School of Law in Georgia, but it's kind of hard to make the list once you cease to exist. A branch of Atlanta's John Marshall Law School, Savannah became the latest law school to close, partly because it could not attract enough students. Its yearly tuition of nearly \$43,000 probably didn't help.

But another Georgia school, University



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debt.



TOP 5

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— *National Jurist* —

TOP 20

MOST INNOVATIVE LAW SCHOOL

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of Georgia School of Law in Athens, topped the Best Value list. About 90 percent of its graduates pass the bar on their first try. Students graduate with about \$82,000 in debt, and 90 percent of grads get jobs.

"If there were a term for our vision, it would be that we're the school that offers the best return on investment in legal education in the country," said Dean Peter B. "Bo" Rutledge.

It keeps costs low. From 2015 to 2017, tuition went up only \$232. Currently, 68 percent of students get some sort of financial scholarship.

Meanwhile, the school pours resources into bar prep and professional development, Rutledge said. The art of legal writing is stressed. Clinical and experiential learning options abound. The law school, which is one of the oldest in the nation, seeks help from its alumni, who are generous. Last year, more than \$11 million in donations were raised – the most ever.

"Where people saw challenge, we saw opportunity," Rutledge said. "The decisions we have made reflect our commitment to keeping legal education affordable to people from all walks of life."

It also allows students to pursue their passions. They won't be drowning in debt and forced to take jobs to keep lenders off of their backs.

It's not just the institution that's affordable. Living in Athens – a quaint, quirky college town – is also easy on the bank account. The cost of living is \$15,200, the lowest among the top 20 schools on our list. The only school with a lower cost of living was University of Nevada, Las Vegas, William S. Boyd School of Law, at \$14,814. It finished 21st.



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*First attempt, July 2017 Illinois Bar

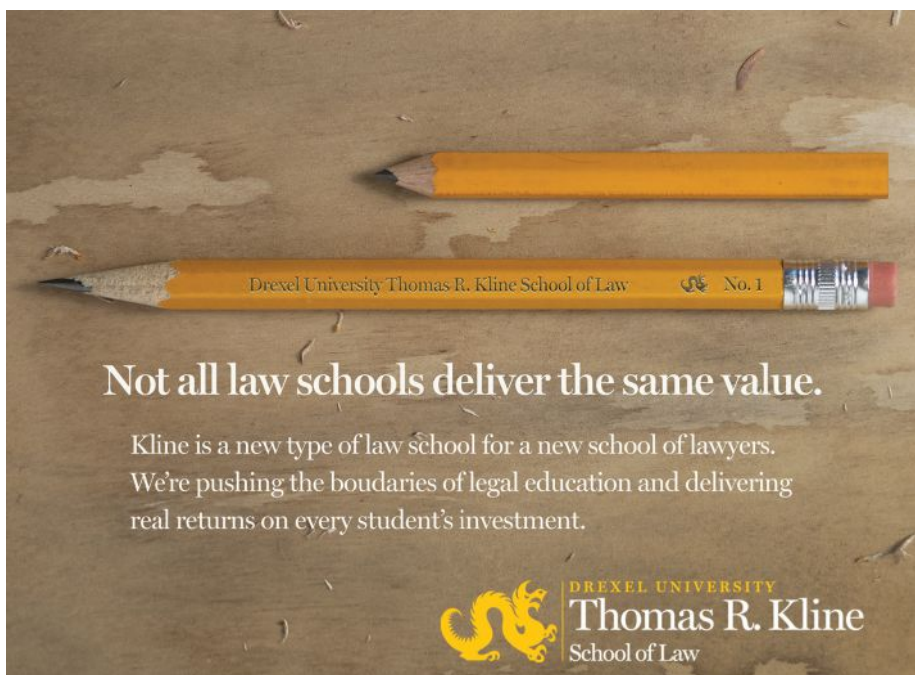
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Ultimate bar-pass rate

University of Georgia is no outlier. Far from it. Fifty-seven schools earned a showing on the list, which was actually a bit tougher to make this year. We added the schools' ultimate bar-passage rates to this year's formula because, for the first time, that data is available.

It comes from the American Bar Association, which asked schools to show how many of their 2015 graduates passed the bar exam – not just on the first try but in the two years following graduation. These aggregate scores show how many graduates ultimately passed the bar. First-year results could be misleading, particularly if later test-takers do well and drive up rates.

However, those schools that did not perform well got hurt – in some cases substantially so. The University of South Dakota School of Law finished sixth in last year's ranking. This year the Vermillion, S.D., school fell off the list because its ultimate bar-passage rate was only 72 percent. And even though its debt and employment figures are strong, the school is flailing in what's a pretty key metric, given the importance of passing the bar.

While some schools suffered, others saw gains. The University of Tulsa College of Law in Oklahoma made our list last year, earning a B+. This year it finished among the leaders, coming in fifth. One of the reasons for its rise is that its ultimate bar-passage rate was 94.4 percent.

Florida International University College of Law, based in Miami, has had a recent string of stellar bar performances, leading all Florida schools. It did so again in February, when 85 percent passed. It finished 17th on the list, due in part to its ultimate bar-passage rate of 97.87 percent – the highest in our top 20.

"FIU Law is a leader in providing quality legal education, and these results evidence our students' diligence and faculty's excellence in teaching," said Acting Dean Tawia Ansah.

University of Wisconsin Law School has a 100 bar-passage percent rate, but the vast majority of its graduates earn a "diploma privilege," excusing them from taking the bar. While that helped the Madison, Wis., school land at second place on our list, the school also stands out for its low student debt – an average



DEAN RICHARD MOBERLY of the University of Nebraska fights to keep debt low so students can have greater career options.

One of its strengths is employment. More than 90 percent of its grads got jobs.

And University of Nebraska College of Law should take a bow. Once again, the Lincoln, Neb., school had one of the lowest debt figures at \$57,992. And the remarkable thing is that this amount is lower than its figure from last year, \$62,888.

Low debt remains a point of pride for the school, which is able to keep tuition low because of the support it receives from the state, its alumni and its flagship university, said Dean Richard Moberly. The law school also works to keep tuition costs down by keeping expenses low, he said. Keeping debt low is a key part of the school's mission. "Graduates will be able to take jobs that might have lower wages, such as county prosecutors, public defenders and public-interest advocates, in order to work on important issues in Nebraska," Moberly said.

of \$68,050 – and an employment rate of 85 percent.

Ultimate bar-passage rates notwithstanding, a number of schools continue

to shine year after year. The University of Alabama School of Law finished third this year, the kind of showing that's become routine for the Tuscaloosa, Ala., school.

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Why debt matters

No matter what the reason for the spike in law school interest, prospective students need to understand just how costly a law school education can be. Some students may be seeing red over Trump’s policies, but they could be seeing a lot more red in the coming years if they leap into law school without caution.

The average debt is about \$120,000. No school on our list has a debt load that high; only three surpass \$100,000.

But it’s important to be sure law school is for you, and it’s also important to understand which schools offer the best opportunity to enter your career from a position of strength.

Some argue that students who have a clear direction in mind before entering law school have an advantage because they’re motivated. So if Trump has you fired up, then that’s a good thing, said Paula Lustbader, executive director of the Robert’s Fund Civility Center for Law at Seattle University School of Law.

“The best students are the ones with a fire in their bellies. We have of a lot of people in law school who don’t even know why they are there.”

—Paula Lustbader,
executive director,
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University School of Law

University of Missouri

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“The best students are the ones with a fire in their bellies,” she said. “We have of a lot of people in law school who don’t even know why they are there.”

Alison Monahan is founder of The Girl’s Guide to Law School, a leading resource for women (and some men) embarking on a legal career. She agrees that it can be a positive if a student is

A-	Tuition	Cost of living	Debt	NALP Employment	Modified Employment	Ultimate Bar Pass
Baylor University	60,050	17,925	91,679	92.97%	88.68%	100.00%
Brigham Young University	12,680	20,784	53,237	79.23%	74.88%	91.79%
Florida State University	20,683	17,212	75,899	89.55%	82.06%	81.86%
Rutgers Law	27,492	19,252	80,000	91.51%	85.73%	90.46%
Texas Tech University School of Law	22,996	16,059	82,355	84.26%	80.47%	93.94%
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville	16,117	16,596	68,924	90.18%	81.32%	86.15%
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	15,732	15,604	71,969	88.03%	76.42%	88.39%
University of Colorado	31,989	19,826	104,338	88.02%	83.17%	96.08%
University of Connecticut	29,410	18,986	75,383	89.33%	78.60%	97.83%
University of Houston	31,021	14,406	92,899	87.01%	80.22%	92.52%
University of Illinois	38,098	18,600	87,559	88.73%	86.07%	91.12%
University of Louisville	21,392	18,918	86,110	93.15%	83.01%	94.35%
University of Memphis	19,197	17,735	79,363	86.87%	79.48%	91.51%
University of Minnesota	44,066	18,004	97,910	91.58%	88.02%	90.13%
University of New Hampshire	37,401	20,899	95,312	95.08%	85.90%	89.71%
Washington University	55,423	23,787	93,141	91.73%	92.90%	95.43%
West Virginia University	22,878	15,290	82,542	86.79%	82.75%	88.00%



Baylor University

enthralled with the idea of gaining a law degree to do social good.

However, students also need to understand the types of employment opportunities that are available.

“You need to look very carefully at what kind of jobs you’re going to get,” she said.

Public service pays about \$35,000 to

\$40,000 annually, and there’s competition for such work, Monahan said.

Many young law students don’t really understand how challenging debt can be. The difference between \$75,000 and \$150,000 is not immediately clear to them. To them, debt is debt.

“They’re going to be lawyers, so they think they’re going to make a lot of

money,” she said.

Plus, they have yet to see how much of their paychecks will go to state and federal taxes and Medicare and Social Security funding.

One tool Monahan recommends is a debt calculator. Once prospective law students see how large a monthly nut they will be responsible for, they begin to

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preLaw

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VALUE
LAW
SCHOOLS**

2018

90%

**BAR PASSAGE
RATE IN IDAHO**

(7/2017 & 2/2018)

#1

**RANKING FOR HIGHEST
PERFORMING LAW
SCHOOL GRADUATE
EMPLOYMENT**

(PRE-LAW JOURNAL, FALL 2018)

#4

**AVERAGE TUITION PER YEAR FOR
THE CLASS OF 2020**

\$19,000

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HAVE TAKEN THE
BAR EXAM AND ARE
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PRACTICE LAW**

94%

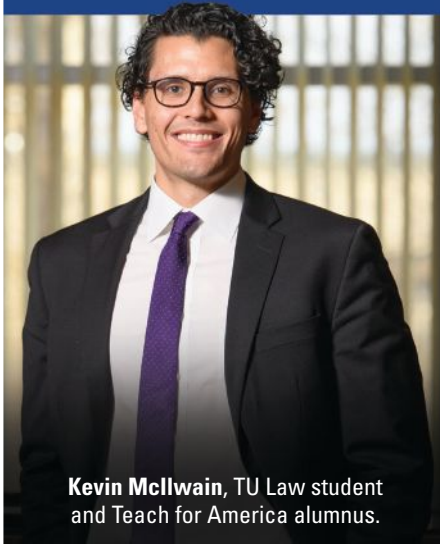
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	Tuition	Cost of living	Debt	NALP Employment	Modified Employment	Ultimate Bar Pass
Concordia University	30,343	16,034	90,607	91.67%	77.08%	91.67%
CUNY School of Law	15,113	20,379	76,302	86.17%	77.42%	87.96%
Drexel University Kline School of Law	44,340	22,980	91,744	90.32%	83.83%	94.49%
George Mason University	25,351	24,862	106,642	90.79%	79.21%	96.48%
Saint Louis University School of Law	41,025	20,734	112,142	94.77%	85.39%	92.11%
University of Arizona	25,826	21,350	85,519	89.76%	81.29%	86.49%
University of Mississippi	15,882	17,260	64,644	78.99%	73.33%	88.89%
University of South Carolina	28,858	18,567	99,862	91.09%	82.49%	89.11%
University of Texas	35,015	20,579	100,312	88.99%	85.83%	85.50%
University of Washington	34,311	19,437	107,975	90.34%	79.66%	98.95%
Villanova Law	45,195	22,732	87,786	88.05%	82.58%	92.31%
Washburn University	21,588	16,576	78,287	83.16%	76.49%	90.52%
Washington and Lee University	48,375	18,125	98,512	86.87%	84.59%	92.49%
Wayne State University	31,956	21,955	77,993	86.73%	75.71%	96.00%
William & Mary Law School	32,964	18,700	103,318	90.78%	83.00%	84.85%

understand how hard it will be to pay that in addition to perhaps a car payment.

Many prospective students remain convinced that a higher-tier school is their best bet, even if the cost is far above that of a closer, more affordable school.

"I'm not sure you can overcome that," she said, noting how ingrained that thinking has become.

And prospective lawyers often don't put enough stock in other key variables, such as a school's bar-passage rate. They're smart students who are used to being among the top of their classes.

"They think to themselves, 'Of course, I'll pass the bar. I've always been successful at school,'" she said.

The reality? Monahan has tutored many smart law graduates who have failed the bar several times.

Prestige vs. value

The law school you ultimately choose may matter less than you think, said Andy Brink, an attorney who wrote the essay,

"The Myth of Law School Prestige."

His opinion:

"Once you are part of an organization and your goal is subsumed in their goal to make money for the larger body, details like alma mater really fade into oblivion. Lawyers from Harvard and Howard yuck it up across conference room tables, with not a hint of deference to the 'rank' of that person's law school alma mater. Once you're in, once you are on the market and part of the real world, the only thing that matters is the pedigree of your ideas and how they can affect your teammates, diploma be damned. I've seen this live and in living color."

Make no mistake. This list is about value. It is not about going to law school on the cheap.

Besides good value, another attribute that these schools share is strong academics.

Yes, a good number of the schools on our Best Value list are state schools, which look to produce well-trained, capable and ethical lawyers who help achieve fair and

Alexander Blewett III
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University of Tulsa



Wake Forest University

Top Private Schools

		Tuition	Cost of living	Debt	NALP employment	Modified Employment	Ultimate Bar Pass
1	University of Tulsa	25,254	20,110	73,987	94.2%	91.1%	94.4%
2	Wake Forest University	45,110	22,700	77,712	95.5%	87.7%	94.1%
3	Brigham Young University	12,680	20,784	53,237	79.2%	74.9%	91.8%
4	Washington University	55,423	23,787	93,141	91.7%	92.9%	95.4%
5	Baylor University	60,050	17,925	91,679	93.0%	88.7%	100.0%
6	Washington and Lee U	48,375	18,125	98,512	86.9%	84.6%	92.5%
7	Saint Louis University	41,025	20,734	112,142	94.8%	85.4%	92.1%
8	Drexel University Kline	44,340	22,980	91,744	90.3%	83.8%	94.5%
9	Villanova Law	45,195	22,732	87,786	88.1%	82.6%	92.3%
10	Concordia University	30,343	16,034	90,607	91.7%	77.1%	91.7%
11	Boston College	52,850	19,360	112,868	90.3%	86.0%	94.5%
12	Yale Law School	62,170	20,432	111,494	84.8%	83.9%	98.97%
13	University of Richmond	43,000	16,890	101,296	91.8%	81.3%	90.4%
14	Lincoln Memorial	35,340	19,860	83,526	82.4%	76.5%	89.5%
15	Liberty University	35,782	22,970	77,077	84.5%	72.6%	93.3%

impartial justice and keep society grounded in laws.

But going to a state school hardly stymies your potential. They've produced presidents. William Taft was a graduate of University of Cincinnati College of Law, No. 18 on our Best Value list. That school also produced a Nobel Peace Prize winner in Charles Dawes, who devised an economic plan to help Germany recover from World War I.

One of Time magazine's 2002 Persons of the Year, Coleen Rowley, is a graduate of The University of Iowa College of Law, which is fourth on our list. She was an FBI special agent who was critical of that agency for failing to investigate a suspected terrorist who was later involved in the Sept. 11 attacks. She was honored by the magazine along with two other female whistleblowers.

Look at University of Georgia. Its alumni include former governors, judges and state and federal legislators. Ertharin Cousin is a grad. She was executive director of the United Nations World Food Programme from 2012 to 2017 and was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Want to take on Trump? Sally Yates has. And she's a University of Georgia graduate as well. As acting U.S. Attorney General, she blocked Trump's travel ban that targeted mostly Muslim nations. She got canned for it. Since then, she's been a harsh critic of the president.

When Trump attacked the FBI last year, saying it was in "tatters," she fired back in a tweet: "The FBI is in 'tatters'? No. The only thing in tatters is the President's respect for the rule of law. The dedicated men and women of the FBI deserve better."

She gave the commencement speech at University of Georgia School of Law in 2016. She explained the school's value this way: "Not only do you get a top-notch education that will take you wherever you want to go but you also learn how to get there without being a jerk. You learn that someone else's failure is not your accomplishment, and you learn that the way you treat one another as colleagues defines what kind of lawyer you're going to be far more than does your GPA."

Value?

It's hard to beat that description.



The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.

— John Locke

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