

BEST VALUE LAW SCHOOLS



University of Georgia takes the top spot again, but a host of schools are adding value as well. Several have managed to cut debt, an issue that's a major concern for students — and politicians.

By Mike Stetz

Finishing first back-to-back in anything is tough, be it the NFL, the Daytona 500, the World Series of Poker or the National Stone Skipping Contest. (Yes, it's a thing.)

You know what else is tough? Capturing the title of Best Value Law School two years in a row. Ever since the law school crisis hit and law schools suffered a barrage of criticism over cost and performance results, the quest to add more value to a legal education has intensified. And it has not ended, not by a long shot.

The nation's law schools continue to look for ways to improve affordability as well as academic and employment outcomes. Even if the worst is over when it comes to legal education's slide, the competition for students still remains fierce. And, what many of them want is no secret.

They want value.

University of Georgia School of Law continues to lead the nation's law schools in providing it. As it did last year, the Athens, Ga., school — acting like a certain New England football team — finished first in our annual ranking of Best Value Law Schools.

How? Well, how about this:

University of Georgia lowered its average student debt nearly \$5,000 from last year. This year's typical University of Georgia law grad owed \$77,269. The school also improved its ultimate bar passage rate to a nearly perfect 97%. Yes, tuition went up — by a whopping \$12.

"I feel our school has a clear sense of mission, and that is to create the best possible return on investment in legal educa-

tion," said Dean Peter "Bo" Rutledge. "And that's a mission that resonates with our faculty and staff, our alumni and our students and their families who are concerned about debt and getting jobs."

The school consistently looks at ways to reduce costs, he said, especially for students who come from challenging backgrounds, such as rural or underserved areas, as well as veterans and first-generation college graduates.

"This is why we do the work," he said, noting how rewarding it is to see such students thrive in his law school and knowing they'll be both employable and not drowning in debt upon graduation.

In this year's entering class, all first-generation college graduates are getting scholarship help. All veterans are getting scholar-

ship aid too.

University of Georgia was not alone in improving its value.

Seven schools on this year's list had six-figure student debt levels last year but knocked the amount below that much-hyped mark this year. Leading the way was Boston College Law School, which reduced its average student debt by nearly \$33,000 to \$80,000.

Indeed, only three schools on this year's list of 58 schools have student debt levels greater than \$100,000.

Georgia State University College of Law in Atlanta has the lowest debt of any school on the list. At \$50,902, it's nearly a \$6,000 drop from the year before.

New Jersey's Rutgers Law School saw the greatest percentage in debt decline, going from \$80,000 to \$55,023 for a 31% drop. Liberty University School of Law also saw a significant decrease, with debt falling from \$77,000 to \$61,295. That helped land the private law school, based in Lynchburg, Va., on the Best Value list for the first time, with an A- ranking.

In all, 13 of the top 25 schools on the list managed to cut debt. That's significant because students appear to be growing more debt averse all the time. They have heard the horror stories of how hard it can be to pay off big debts.

One poster on TopLawSchools.com wrote: "Massive debt can drastically impact mental health. There have been posts here over the years of people being depressed or even suicidal because of unemployment and debt. Even people who have jobs can be negatively affected by owing so much money."

Student debt is such a big issue that Democratic presidential candidates are addressing it. Some are calling for it be wiped out. Among law schools that have reduced their student average debt, most have done so by increasing scholarship offerings.

Employment up

Graduate employment rates, another key component in the Best Value ranking, are also up for most schools. Brigham Young University - J. Reuben Clark Law School in Provo, Utah, has traditionally performed well in Best Value, normally finishing in the top 20. But this year it reached No. 2, thanks in part to its employment rate, which climbed from

	TOP 25	Tuition	Cost of Living	Debt	Employment	2-year Bar	Ultimate Bar Pass
1	University of Georgia	\$19,708	\$15,472	\$77,269	90.8%	86.4%	96.8%
2	Brigham Young University	\$13,060	\$21,336	\$56,903	88.5%	87.2%	95.0%
3	University of Wisconsin	\$23,517	\$20,928	\$79,455	89.5%	100.0%	100.0%
4	University of Nebraska	\$16,078	\$17,490	\$59,442	91.0%	87.9%	86.8%
5	University of Kentucky	\$24,046	\$18,054	\$78,275	93.4%	81.2%	92.3%
6	University of Iowa	\$27,344	\$16,278	\$72,465	93.7%	86.6%	88.7%
7	Georgia State University	\$17,050	\$16,730	\$50,902	83.6%	83.4%	94.4%
8	Florida State University	\$20,693	\$19,412	\$72,534	86.3%	84.6%	94.5%
9	University of Alabama	\$23,920	\$18,772	\$81,738	86.8%	90.8%	98.6%
10	University of Montana	\$13,177	\$16,448	\$78,056	86.4%	82.2%	92.6%
11	University of Illinois	\$38,118	\$19,789	\$76,405	90.7%	86.9%	97.6%
12	Louisiana State University	\$23,660	\$21,880	\$83,026	91.0%	86.0%	92.5%
13	Texas Tech University School of Law	\$26,840	\$15,392	\$78,800	87.5%	85.7%	94.4%
14	University of Arkansas, Fayetteville	\$16,188	\$17,124	\$66,659	83.2%	76.5%	96.9%
15	Florida International University	\$21,806	\$17,450	\$96,767	86.7%	87.5%	95.4%
16	University of Florida	\$21,803	\$17,410	\$94,390	90.1%	73.6%	92.4%
17	University of Oklahoma	\$20,903	\$21,878	\$81,042	86.5%	88.4%	95.0%
18	University of Texas	\$35,715	\$21,281	\$91,978	92.3%	90.2%	92.0%
19	Rutgers Law	\$28,359	\$19,471	\$55,023	87.6%	71.8%	89.8%
20	Ohio State University	\$30,854	\$19,928	\$92,993	89.5%	87.1%	94.6%
21	University of Missouri	\$19,440	\$18,978	\$69,462	85.4%	87.5%	88.2%
22	University of Tulsa	\$25,254	\$21,010	\$75,861	86.0%	87.5%	93.0%
23	University of Connecticut	\$30,338	\$18,276	\$84,379	88.1%	75.9%	94.4%
24	Penn State University - Dickinson Law	\$50,582	\$21,238	\$73,445	90.5%	85.8%	97.0%
25	Temple University	\$27,103	\$22,488	\$78,725	85.2%	81.8%	97.5%

Best Value Methodology

Our Best Value Law Schools ranking is designed to recognize 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 rate and two-year pass rate (15% of study); employment rate (35%); tuition (25%); cost of living (10%); and average indebtedness upon graduation (15%).

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 ABA's ultimate bar passage is the aggregate rate of the Class of 2016. We also used the first-time pass rate for the Classes of 2017 and 2018 to arrive at the two-year bar pass percentage.

75% to more than 88%.

Texas Tech University School of Law saw its best finish in four years, coming in at No. 13. The Lubbock, Texas, school's employment rate went from 80% to more than 87%.

An improved employment rate helped put another Texas school on the list for the first time. Texas A&M University School of Law saw employment rise from 75% to 84%. The Fort Worth school earned a B+ for value.

No law school did better in employment than The University of Iowa College of Law. It had a 93.7% employment rate, up from 88% last year. The Iowa City school

came in at No. 6 on the Best Value list.

In addition to debt and employment, preLaw looks at several other variables to determine Best Value. They included bar passage rates, tuition and cost of living. This year, we added one more variable, which was whether schools have a tuition guarantee that freezes tuition for the period during which a student is enrolled.

That's not a huge thing, just yet. Only three schools on our list freeze tuition. They are: University of Illinois College of Law in Champaign, Ill., (No. 11), The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law in Columbus, Ohio, (No. 20) and Indiana University Mauer School of Law -

Bloomington (B+).

One might wonder why many of the nation's top schools, such as Harvard, Yale and Stanford, are not on this list. Yes, they most certainly provide opportunity, and many of their graduates go on to land prestigious legal jobs. But students at these schools rack up big debt.

The Best Value list is designed to identify schools that graduate students with

low debt and a high chance of passing the bar and getting a legal job. These schools give students a better chance of entering any legal field they may choose, including lower-paying jobs in small towns or government positions, because with less debt, they can afford to do so.

Here you'll find schools such as Alexander Blewett III School of Law at University of Montana, which has the low-

est tuition of all schools on our list, with the exception of Brigham Young University, which offers a lower tuition to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

University of Montana's tuition is \$13,177, lower than the average tuition for private high schools.

You'll also find University of Nebraska College of Law, which previously topped our list in two consecutive years, finishing first in 2015 and 2016. This year, it came in fourth. While these schools have a strong focus on value, they are hardly vanilla institutions. Nebraska Law has the nation's first and only Space, Cyber and Telecommunications Law program.

How important is value?

If law schools don't provide value, they could be forced to close. The American Bar Association (ABA) has been toughening standards. Today, in order to maintain accreditation, schools must show that 75% of their students who sit for the bar pass it within two years of graduation. They used to have five years to meet that mark.

The ABA stripped two schools of accreditation recently for poor performance — or lack of value, as we like to put it. How many times has the ABA done that before?

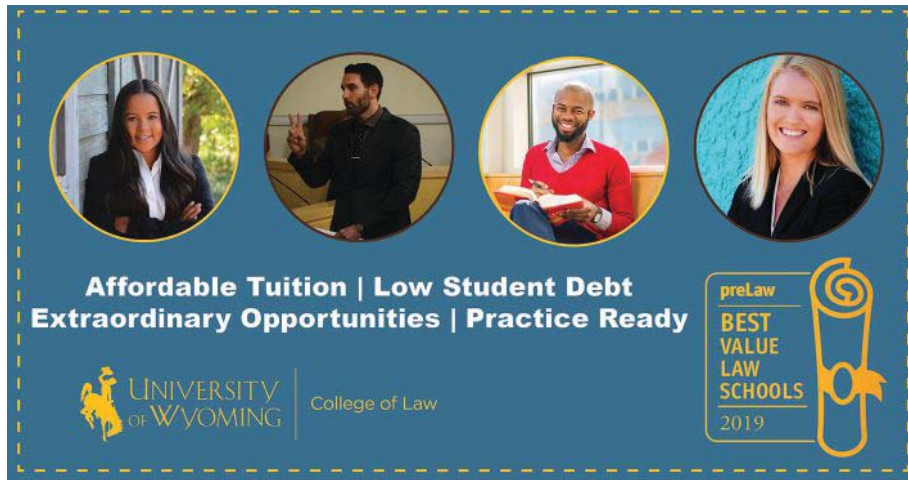
Try zero.

Arizona Summit Law School in Phoenix is closing because of the ABA's action. Its students graduated with about \$180,000 in debt. Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego is appealing its loss of accreditation.

But most schools have improved their value since applications to law school began to drop in 2011.

Take Cleveland State University's Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, which hasn't been on the list for the past four years. This year, it earned an A-, finishing just outside the top 25. It climbed for a number of reasons. It improved not only its employment rate, which went from 67% to 85.1%, but also its ultimate bar passage rate, which rose above 92%. Its average student debt load fell by more than \$8,000, to \$76,448.

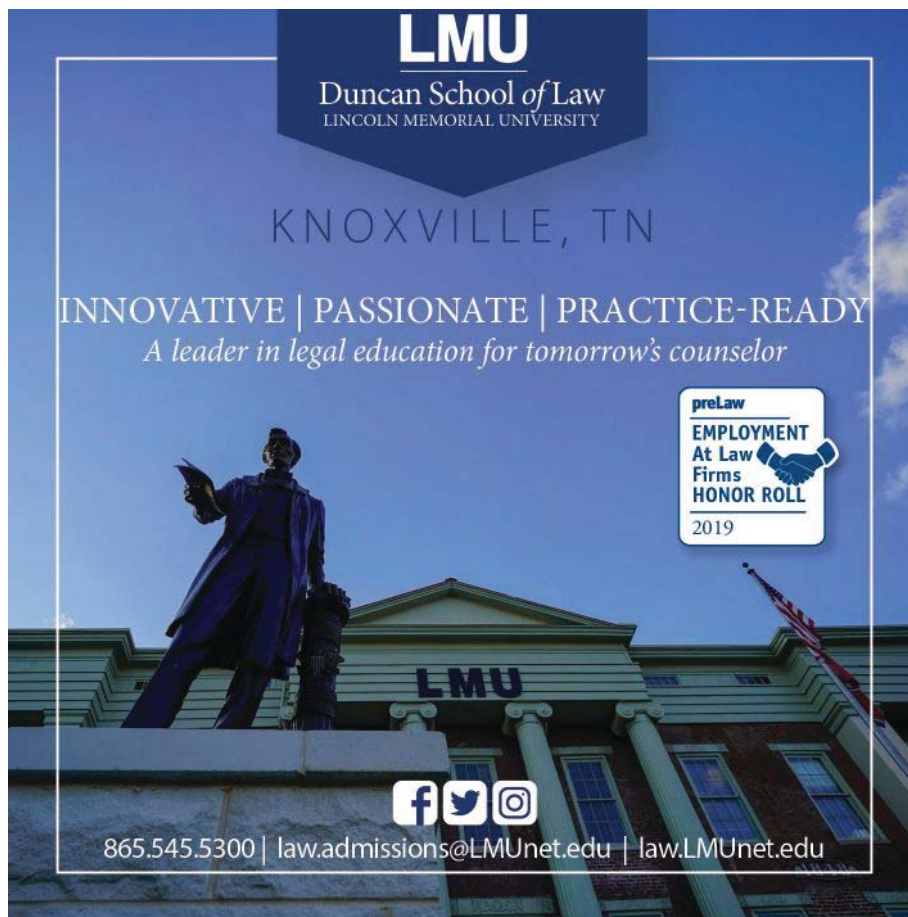
That's important, given the school is in Ohio. There are nine law schools in the state, so you'd better provide value, said Dean Lee Fisher.



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Arizona State University	\$27,584	\$21,710	\$93,524	86.2%	74.9%	92.8%
Cleveland-Marshall College of Law	\$27,209	\$19,988	\$76,448	85.1%	85.0%	92.1%
CUNY School of Law	\$15,563	\$20,512	\$68,355	77.7%	80.1%	97.1%
Liberty University School of Law	\$36,862	\$22,948	\$61,295	81.3%	88.3%	94.4%
UNC School of Law	\$24,172	\$24,792	\$86,019	89.1%	87.8%	80.9%
University of Cincinnati	\$24,010	\$17,768	\$63,728	78.5%	79.5%	95.0%
University of Colorado	\$31,898	\$20,546	\$98,290	88.1%	85.0%	94.9%
University of Houston	\$32,093	\$17,306	\$83,943	87.2%	82.1%	85.2%
University of Kansas	\$22,562	\$16,712	\$81,290	84.4%	87.1%	87.7%
University of Louisville	\$21,988	\$18,918	\$81,471	87.9%	74.4%	86.7%
University of Minnesota	\$44,919	\$18,478	\$99,510	91.4%	85.7%	94.9%
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	\$27,023	\$16,356	\$83,837	84.6%	75.8%	86.0%
University of New Hampshire	\$37,405	\$20,899	\$78,586	84.2%	88.5%	91.3%
University of Utah	\$28,354	\$19,352	\$90,488	89.3%	86.4%	91.7%
Washburn University	\$22,429	\$16,893	\$72,602	82.0%	72.4%	91.7%
Washington and Lee University	\$49,355	\$18,125	\$99,559	90.4%	87.0%	93.5%
Wayne State University	\$32,882	\$21,924	\$66,521	83.5%	76.3%	91.4%
William & Mary Law School	\$34,000	\$19,100	\$98,850	89.7%	91.9%	91.8%

“Students have never been more aware of the cost of law school than today,” he said. “If you’re not able to show results, you’ll have a hard time attracting them.”

His school is helped by alumni who want to “pay it forward,” he said. Many have successful careers and want to help the next generation. Much of the money they contribute is targeted toward scholarships. Sixty-four percent of students get grants, the 50th percentile of which is \$13,680.

Improving academics is yet another focus of Cleveland-Marshall College of Law. In 2012, the school started a partnership with Barbri, the test prep company. Students

get benefits as soon as they walk through the door. During orientation, they enroll with Barbri and get access to supplemental course material and online study aids. When they graduate, they don’t have to worry about the cost of bar prep. It’s already

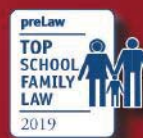
paid for.

The school also assigns a faculty mentor to each student. The mentor monitors the student throughout the final two years of law school to make sure the student is doing adequate bar prep. An alumni men-

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tor is assigned to each student as well. They offer advice on all matters, from law school success to career development.

It's paying off. In the July 2018 bar exam, Cleveland-Marshall's passage rate for first-time test takers was 93%, compared to the state average of 79%. It led all Ohio schools.

"I realize you have to be successful on multiple fronts," Fisher said, "and that's what we aim for."

Pennsylvania State University, Dickinson Law in Carlisle, Pa., made it into the Top 25 this year. It had made the list only once in the past four years, earning a B+ in 2017. This year, it reduced debt by \$8,000 to \$73,445. Employment climbed from 79% to 90.5%. And its ultimate bar passage rate rose from 90% to nearly 97%.

That success was the result of a number of strategic moves, including keeping classes small, said Dean Danielle Conway.

By keeping classes to between 75 and 80 students, you keep operating costs down, she said.

The school didn't pull off this feat alone. It needed investment and support from Penn State University leaders, she said. Additional financial help came from school alumni, creating what she calls an "affordability matrix."

The small cohort also allows the school to forge deeper relationships with students, which helps when it comes to academics, career services and bar prep, Conway said. The career services personnel are not relegated to a back office, she said. They are adjunct professors who also teach classes.

Third-year students can take a two-credit bar prep course taught by a faculty member. That signals to students the importance of the course, Conway said. In addition, students can take a supplemental bar prep class during the summer leading up to the bar.

The school is on a mission to help make law school affordable to students from all backgrounds, because creating more diversity in the profession is vital, Conway said. It's not just about making law school reachable for people of color, but for those from all socioeconomic backgrounds, she said.

If legal representation isn't broad, people won't have faith in the system, Conway said. She wants her school to be one of those institutions that helps, and it can do that by making legal education affordable and dynamic.

"We have to rebuild and enhance people's trust in the legal system," she said.

Battling for students

University of Georgia is such a value that it's been attracting students from other states, such as South Carolina. Indeed, the flight of students from that state forced the South Carolina General Assembly to pump more money into higher education, leading to lower law school tuition.

The University of South Carolina School of Law slashed tuition for in-state residents by 17% to try and retain them. That's the kind of intrastate rivalry that helps students in the long run.

University of Georgia remains laser-focused on offering both value and return on investment, Dean Rutledge said. Not only does he want students to have manage-

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Boston College	\$54,750	\$20,760	\$80,113	88.0%	88.1%	95.4%
Duquesne University	\$44,944		\$103,925	83.4%	85.8%	96.7%
George Mason University	\$25,354	\$26,050	\$98,996	84.7%	85.2%	94.1%
IU Bloomington (Maurer)	\$35,588	\$21,808	\$92,800	82.9%	80.7%	93.6%
Penn State Law	\$50,984		\$85,056	84.3%	90.0%	93.3%
Saint Louis University	\$42,154	\$21,238	\$91,149	85.9%	90.3%	92.5%
Texas A&M Law	\$31,000		\$94,447	84.0%	81.3%	93.9%
University of Arizona	\$25,826	\$21,350	\$75,558	78.2%	68.7%	92.2%
University of South Carolina	\$29,608	\$18,963	\$99,118	86.2%	77.5%	88.8%
University of Tennessee	\$19,674	\$20,412	\$70,934	79.9%	80.3%	82.2%
University of Washington	\$35,988	\$20,868	\$101,913	86.7%	88.0%	94.5%
University of Wyoming	\$16,775	\$16,943	\$107,891	81.5%	66.6%	91.9%
UNM School of Law	\$17,349	\$16,488	\$84,164	78.6%	87.2%	86.2%
Wake Forest University	\$46,409	\$21,246	\$96,244	85.4%	87.2%	94.7%
Washington University	\$57,445	\$23,973	\$98,058	93.7%	87.0%	91.0%

able debt but also he wants them to receive an education that positions them advantageously in today's job market. And he wants them to land the kinds of legal jobs that fuel them.

"I want them to take a job based on passion, not their pockets," he said.

The school's fundraising efforts are focused on how they will benefit students, he said. For instance, an ongoing campaign has resulted in \$54 million coming to the law school, with 90% of that going to financial aid for students, Rutledge said.

Of late, the law school has focused on what can be done to reduce non-tuition

costs. These can include everything from bar prep to obtaining professional attire, all of which is not cheap. The school created a working group that is chaired by student affairs staff and includes members of the student body.

Bar prep is becoming more costly for students, Rutledge noted. In the past, large law firms helped pay for it, but legal

hiring is shifting. More small and mid-size firms are doing the hiring, and they may not have the resources to pay. So the school earmarked \$25,000 for those students in the most need of assistance. Once the alumni heard some of the students' stories, they rallied for a total of \$45,000, he said.

Having students involved in these dis-

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The key to cost-of-living issues? Think small

If you're going to a law school away from home, you'll likely have to rent a place to live. You could buy and hope for a sweet return on your investment in three years. But we're guessing your money will be tied up in other things.

Such as tuition, books, Tums . . .

So which law schools are located in the most and least affordable places? In our Best Value Law School analysis, the most affordable places to live tended to be the smaller college towns.

While that's hardly surprising, moving to one of those towns could be a culture shock for those who are from big cities.

University of Georgia School of Law, which finished first in our Best Value analysis, is in Athens, Ga., and has the lowest cost of living among nearly all schools, at \$15,472. That figure comes from the American Bar Association, which requires schools to estimate living expenses, which includes food and housing.

We went to Apartments.com, searched for Athens and found one-bedroom apartments for as low as \$520 a month. We thought we were in a time warp. We were not.

Athens is not exactly isolated, either. You're only 70 miles from Atlanta.



Athens, Ga., home to University of Georgia School of Law, has the lowest cost of living at \$15,472.

The school with the lowest cost of living (which counted for 10% in our Best Value analysis) was Texas Tech University School of Law in Lubbock. One-bedroom apartments there can be had for as low as \$490 a month.

Our Best Value list includes a number of schools based in larger cities, such as University of Nevada, Las Vegas, William S. Boyd School of Law and University of Houston Law Center. The cost of living in such cities is actually pretty affordable, with both coming in well below \$20,000.

However, big city living can be quite expensive. The website RentCafe.com did an analysis of rental prices near the nation's top 100 universities. Not all have law schools, but if they do, the law schools are usually located either on campus or nearby. So it's apples to apples for the most part.

New York University School of Law in the New York neighborhood of Greenwich Village was the most expensive, with an average rent for an apartment within a mile of the university campus going for \$4,463. That's more than \$50,000 for a year's rent.

Columbia Law School, another New York-based school, was second, with an average rent of \$4,217.

USC and UCLA are the other universities with law schools where nearby rents are considerably pricey, at \$3,604 and \$3,541 respectively, according to the RentCafe.com analysis. But you won't need money for winter clothes, so that pretty much evens things out, no?

Here's the problem. A good number of universities — and law schools — are located in desirable places, some of which have seen housing shortages and hence higher rents. That's the story in coastal California, most certainly. And in some cases, law school students have to compete with tech workers for housing. Good luck with that.

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	Top 10	Tuition	Cost of Living	Debt	Employment	2-year bar	Ultimate Bar Pass
1	Brigham Young University	\$13,060	\$21,336	\$56,903	88.5%	87.2%	94.96%
2	University of Tulsa	\$25,254	\$21,010	\$75,861	86.0%	87.5%	92.96%
3	Liberty University School of Law	\$36,862	\$22,948	\$61,295	81.3%	88.3%	94.44%
4	Washington and Lee University	\$49,355	\$18,125	\$99,559	90.4%	87.0%	93.48%
5	Boston College	\$54,750	\$20,760	\$80,113	88.0%	88.1%	95.43%
6	Saint Louis University	\$42,154	\$21,238	\$91,149	85.9%	90.3%	92.48%
7	Wake Forest University	\$46,409	\$21,246	\$96,244	85.4%	87.2%	94.74%
8	Washington University	\$57,445	\$23,973	\$98,058	93.7%	87.0%	91.04%
9	Seton Hall University	\$54,090	\$22,498	\$117,034	93.6%	82.8%	93.08%
10	Belmont University College of Law	\$44,470	\$25,325	\$125,489	91.0%	92.9%	94.29%
10	Drexel University Kline School of Law	\$44,195	\$22,980	\$81,575	84.6%	76.3%	88.82%

Continued from page 27

cussions is key, Rutledge said. School leaders get a clearer picture of students' challenges and help craft messages to garner support.

Textbooks are a good example. In 2016, law students at University of Georgia spent up to \$2,000 a year on them, or \$1.2 million collectively. If the faculty is made aware of how these costs affect students, they may be more judicious in their material requirements.

"If you just chip away and reduce it by 25%, that's \$300,000 back in the students'

pockets," Rutledge said.

Students today are indeed looking for value and a return on their investment, he said.

"Students are sophisticated consumers," he said, "and I think it's a good thing they are sophisticated consumers."

Rutledge is not concerned about University of South Carolina School of Law

and its effort to woo South Carolina residents to stay in state by lowering tuition, even if it could affect his school.

"I'm not surprised, and I'm happy to see it," Rutledge said. "I've spoken with a number of deans, and I've always said I believe we have a moral obligation to make legal education affordable. Whether it's a competing school or not, I welcome it." ■

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