Examining the Relationship between Law School Rank and Student Engagement

Louis M. Rocconi, Ph.D., lrocconi@utk.edu, The University of Tennessee
Austin Boyd, aboyd26@vols.utk.edu, The University of Tennessee

Abstract

Law school rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report's* "Best Law Schools" dominate the conversation on quality in legal education. Potential law students frequently cite using rankings in their law school search process. In addition, rankings have been shown to influence the behavior and culture of law schools. Despite their popularity, the criteria used to rank schools often has little to do with the quality of the educational experience. If rankings are intended to demonstrate some level of collegiate quality, then these measures should be related with other measures of collegiate quality, such as student engagement. The current study investigated the relationship between law school rankings and student engagement using data from the Law School Survey of Student Engagement. Findings reveal no relationship between ranking and engagement, except for a modest, positive relationship between ranking and satisfaction.

Acknowledgment of Support and Disclaimer:

Introduction

Since their creation over thirty years ago, law school rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report's* (*U.S. News*) "Best Law Schools" have come to dominate the conversation on quality in legal education (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Heaton, 2018; Ryan, 2015; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Because of the difficulty in identifying quality in higher education (Morphew & Swanson, 2011), rankings provide prospective students and their families a seemingly objective measure of what constitutes quality in higher education. As such, prospective students frequently rely on rankings in their law school search process (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Ryan, 2015). Despite their popularity, scholars have questioned the validity and utility of higher education ranking schemes (e.g., Espeland & Sauder, 2007, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2011; Pike, 2004; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006; Zilvinskis & Rocconi, 2018), noting that they often have little to do with the quality of education students receive. One criticism of ranking schemes is that they focus too heavily on reputation, institutional resources, and the inputs of enrolled students and the outcomes associated with those inputs instead of the learning that takes place while attending college. Student engagement, on the other hand, represents an aspect of educational quality that should be considered important to prospective students because it describes what students will be doing when enrolled at the law school (O'Day & Kuh, 2006; Silver, Rocconi, Haeger, & Watkins, 2013). Moreover, student engagement has been linked with other desirable outcomes both at the undergraduate and law school level including academic performance (Silver et al., 2013), diverse interactions (Rocconi et al., 2019), and critical thinking (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Given the popularity of rankings with potential students, alumni, and employers, as well as the use of rankings in the law school search process, it is important to investigate whether rankings are related to beneficial aspects of law students' educational experience. If rankings are intended to demonstrate some level of collegiate quality, then these measures should be related to other important aspects of the law school experience, such as student engagement, which is considered a key indicator of a high-quality educational experience (McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013; O'Day & Kuh, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how rankings relate to various aspects of student engagement.

One approach to assessing the validity and utility of higher education ranking schemes has been to examine their relationship with student engagement, or the extent to which students are exposed to and participate in empirically supported educational practices. This study draws on the previous works of Pike (2004) and Zilvinskis and Rocconi (2018) both of which examined the relationship between institutional rankings for four-year colleges and levels of engagement in undergraduate education. Both studies demonstrated little to no relationship between institutional rankings and levels of engagement. These results raise concerns about whether rankings provide appropriate information for prospective students about the quality of the educational experience. Furthermore, these studies have important implications for institutional leaders. By focusing merely on increasing one's rank, institutional leaders may overlook other areas important to student success that are not captured by rankings. This study furthers Pike's and Zilvinskis and Rocconi's work by extending it into legal education. Examining the relationship between student engagement and law school rankings will help inform law schools, potential students, employers, and the public on other indicators of collegiate quality. This enhanced awareness will also

provide institutional leaders with direction on how they might more effectively allocate resources towards student experiences that enhance the educational quality of the law school.

Literature Review

Research on Law School Rankings

While the vast majority of research on higher education ranking schemes tends to focus on institutional rankings for four-year colleges (Hazelkorn, 2011; Locke, 2011), scholars have also examined the use and influence of rankings in legal education. Research on rankings in legal education has focused on analyzing and evaluating specific measures used in the rankings (e.g., Morriss & Henderson, 2008; Seto, 2007), understanding and critiquing the methodology (e.g., Ryan, 2015; Seto, 2007; Stake, 2006), and examining how students, law schools, and employers respond to rankings (e.g., Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Rankings have been shown to play a central role in the law school search process (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Ryan, 2015), which is often credited to the lack of other reliable, easy-to-use information on law schools (Crittenden & Dybis, 2010). In fact, the majority of law students report that *U.S. News* rankings were a major consideration in their decision to attend their current law school. Ryan (2015) found that *U.S. News* rankings were a primary factor when deciding to attend their current law school for 94% of students at an elite private law school, 77% of students at a public flagship law school, 58% of students at a public regional law school, and 61% of students at a new private law school. These findings illustrate the central role rankings play in the search process for students across different types of law schools.

Rankings are not only influential in the search process but research has also demonstrated that a law school's rank can influence the number and quality of applications a law school receives and its enrollment yield (Locke, 2011; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Law school rankings have also been shown to influence students' job placement after graduation with certain law firms preferring students from top-ranked law schools (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Ryan, 2015; Taylor, 2014). Espeland and Sauder (2016) document how one's law school pedigree can influence the geographic location for future employment. For example, attending a highly-ranked law school matters most for students who aspire to work at large, prominent firms and those in competitive markets like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. Given the role rankings play in legal education from the search process through employment, rankings have a direct link with access to legal education by providing guidance to potential students regarding the assumed educational quality of the law school and potential career opportunities.

Not only are prospective law students using rankings to gauge a law school's worth, but law schools are also keenly aware of their ranking and actively seek to enhance their position relative to their peers (Ryan, 2015; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Sauder and Lancaster (2006) note that *U.S. News* rankings are an "obsessive concern of the law school community" (p. 105). Rankings have become so influential in legal education that they have affected the behavior and culture of law schools (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). In response to potential students, employers, and the public's embrace of rankings, law schools, as well as other higher education institutions, will "game" the system in an effort to obtain a favorable ranking. Espeland and Sauder (2016) describe policies and practices law schools have implemented in the past in order to enhance

their rankings. For example, law schools will offer merit scholarships to students with high test scores to increase their selectivity results while students with low scores are classified as part-time or probationary in order to exclude them from the ranking calculation. Career services personnel will expend tremendous effort to track down alumni's employment status, even at the expense of counseling current students or engaging with employers. Moreover, alumni employed in non-legal related jobs will often be classified as employed in order to increase job placement numbers. Law schools have even sent marketing brochures to peer institutions, lawyers, and judges in the profession in an effort to improve their reputational score. These examples illustrate the ubiquity of rankings in legal education and the influence rankings can have on resource allocation and educational mission. Espeland and Sauder (2016) note that "nearly every school engages in activities designed to manipulate their scores" (p. 200).

Despite the pervasiveness and popularity of rankings in legal education, few legal scholars and educators believe rankings adequately represent law school quality (e.g., Crittenden & Dybis, 2010; Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Heaton, 2018; Morris & Henderson, 2008; O'Day & Kuh, 2006; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006; Seto, 2007; Stake, 2006). In fact, the Law School Transparency organization recently stated that the *U.S. News* rankings "are neither meaningful nor effective" (McEntee & Fry, 2020, p. 14). The American Bar Association's (ABA) Commission on the Future of Legal Education notes that law school rankings are "counterproductive" (ABA, 2020, p. 8). O'Day and Kuh (2006) argue that rankings are flawed indicators of educational quality for three reasons: (1) rankings do not identify actions law schools can take to improve the educational experience for students, (2) reducing a law school to a single number does not adequately capture all the relevant features of the law school experience, and (3) test scores, institutional resources, and reputation are the wrong metrics to measure educational quality. Furthermore, LSAT scores and institutional resources such as per-student spending and library holdings are highly correlated with reputation (Sweitzer & Volkwein, 2009), which decades of higher education research (e.g., Kuh & Passarella, 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005) have shown that institutional resources and reputation have little to do with educational effectiveness and the quality of education a student receives.

Student Engagement

If rankings do not measure educational quality, what can be measured that represents important aspects of student learning and educational quality? Research has shown that student learning and educational quality are not determined by what an institution has acquired in terms of resources and reputation but the degree to which students *use* the school's resources for learning (McCormick et al., 2013; O'Day & Kuh, 2006). In other words, it is the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities that will add value to their education. Researchers have dubbed this concept: student engagement. An early impetus of the student engagement movement was that it would provide a new source of evidence on collegiate quality, one that was based on what students say about their college experience, in contrast to ranking schemes that focus primarily on resources and reputation (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009). Within the concept of student engagement, educationally effective

institutions are the ones that intentionally use policies and practices to encourage students to participate in educationally productive activities.

The concept of student engagement grew out of three established bodies of research on student success (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). First, student engagement builds on Pace's (1980) concept of "quality of effort" and the idea that the time and effort students expend on learning-centered activities will result in increased learning and development. The concept of student engagement also builds on Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement which proposes that the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to his or her studies is the main determinant of success in college. Third, student engagement incorporates Chickering & Gamson's (1987) seven principles of "good practice" in undergraduate education which emphasize things institutions, faculty, and staff can do to facilitate student learning (e.g., encouraging student-faculty contact, implementing active learning, communicating high expectations). Student engagement is a simple concept: what students do matters. For example, the more students study, the more they learn about a subject. Student engagement represents activities and behaviors associated with learning such as preparing for class, interacting with faculty, working collaboratively with other students, and participating in co-curricular activities such as moot court or the law journal. While these activities are valuable on their own; they are also indicators of educational effectiveness (McCormick et al., 2013; O'Day & Kuh, 2006).

Much attention has been directed towards student engagement because decades of research have shown that students benefit more from college when their efforts are directed at learning-centered activities both inside and outside the classroom (McCormick et al. 2013). Furthermore, numerous studies at both the undergraduate and law school levels have linked student engagement with important indicators of collegiate quality such as academic performance (Silver et al., 2013; Taylor, 2019; Webber et al., 2013), diverse interactions (Rocconi et al., 2019), critical thinking (Carini et al., 2006), professional identity (Silver, Garver, & Watkins, 2011), and satisfaction (Christensen & Deo, 2019; Florio & Hoffman, 2012). For instance, Silver et al. (2013) examined law students' assessment of their professional and academic development. In particular, they examined characteristics Shultz and Zedeck (2009) identified as effective lawyer attributes. Silver and colleagues found that law students perceived that their professional identity and academic development were enhanced the more they participated in educationally purposeful activities such as spending time preparing for class, interacting with faculty and peers, engaging in coursework that prepared them to think like a lawyer, feeling supported from their law school, and participating in co-curricular activities namely pro bono work and moot court. In a recent study, Rocconi et al. (2019) examined how engagement related with the frequency of diverse interaction in law school and found that student engagement (e.g., perceptions of a supportive law school environment, interactions with faculty, positive relationships with students) enhanced diverse interactions. Taylor (2019) studied how student engagement related with final law school GPA and bar passage rates at nineteen law schools and found that the quality of relationships between students and faculty had one of the largest influences on law school GPA, which in turn was the greatest predictor bar passage rate. These studies have linked student engagement with key indicators of educational quality and

factors that potential students should consider important when choosing a law school, yet little is known about how the student experience in law school relates with a law school's ranking.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which law school rankings are related with indicators of educational quality. Specifically, this study will explore the relationship *U.S. News* ranking has with various measures of student engagement as measured by the Law School Survey of Student Engagement. The primary research question guiding this study is: What is the relationship between law school rankings and student engagement? More specifically, when controlling for law school and student characteristics, to what extent, if any, is there a relationship between law school ranking and student engagement?

Methods

Data Source

Data for this study came from two sources: the 2016 and 2017 administrations of the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) and 2017 law school rankings from *U.S. News and World Report* (*U.S. News*). LSSSE is an annual survey administered to law students and used to assess the extent to which law students are exposed to and participate in a variety of effective educational practices (O'Day & Kuh, 2006). The survey asks students about various aspects of their law school experience, such as the time and effort they invest in their studies, their discussions and interactions with peers and faculty members, perceptions of the law school environment, and other educationally purposeful activities. The full survey is available on the LSSSE website: lssse.indiana.edu. LSSSE enables law schools to compare results against peers and over time in order to implement policies and practices to improve the quality of the educational experience for students (O'Day & Kuh, 2006). The survey is administered during the spring semester and all enrolled students at the law school are invited to participate. Centralized, standardized sampling and administrative procedures ensure the comparability of results among participating law schools. Each year, around a third of all American Bar Association (ABA) approved law schools elect to administer the survey. LSSSE data were obtained and used with permission from the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

Every year, *U.S. News* publishes a ranking of the "best" law schools. These rankings are based on both empirical data (e.g., median LSAT, employment rates, bar passage rates) and subjective quality evaluations. The quality evaluations are assessments by both faculty within academia, such as law school deans, and professionals, such as lawyers and judges active in the profession (Morse, 2016). *U.S. News* assigns a weight to each element in the ranking scheme. For instance, the quality evaluations are weighted 40% of the total score whereas job placement is weighted 18% (see the Appendix for a complete list of measures that compose the *U.S. News* rankings). For this study, we used the 2017 edition of *U.S. News'* best law school rankings. To be included in this study, a law school must have participated in LSSSE in 2016 or 2017 and be ranked in the 2017 edition of *U.S. News*. In 2017, *U.S. News* ranked 149 law schools, the remaining law schools were not provided a rank by the organization. If a law school participated in LSSSE both years, we used data from their most recent year of participation. LSSSE data are

proprietary, and LSSSE does not provide researchers law school specific data. As such, LSSSE staff merged the *U.S. News* ranking scores with the requested years of LSSSE data. To ensure the data were not identifiable in terms of specific law schools, LSSSE staff applied a linear transformation to the raw ranking score, which preserved the relationship between ranking and LSSSE engagement measures but prevented possible identification of individual law schools. As such, we are unable to report specific information regarding the ranked law schools in our analysis.

We analyzed data on 17,653 students at 66 law schools, which included 45% of law schools ranked by *U.S. News*. The average law school response rate to LSSSE was 54%. The demographic makeup of the students and law schools compared with all law schools ranked by *U.S. News* and the national profile of ABA-approved law schools is presented in Table 1. For the most part, the demographic characteristics of the participants matched closely with the demographic characteristics of students at ranked law schools and all ABA-approved law schools. Approximately half of the participants were female. About 69% identified as White (not Hispanic), 7% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% as Black/African-American, 6% as Hispanic or Latinx, 7% as more than one race or ethnicity, and the remainder as another race or ethnicity (e.g., Native American). On the other hand, our sample of law schools contained a higher proportion of public law schools (56%) than *U.S. News'* ranked law schools (50%) or the ABA-approved law schools (42%). Additionally, our sample contained more small law schools (i.e., enrollments less than 500; 58%) than those ranked by *U.S. News* (48%).

Variables

The dependent variables used in this study were the four LSSSE Engagement Indicators – Learning to Think Like a Lawyer, Student-Faculty Interaction, Student Advising, Law School Environment – as well as measures of diverse interactions, perceived learning gains, and satisfaction with law school. The LSSSE Engagement Indicators were developed by LSSSE staff to represent four specific aspects of student engagement. The Learning to Think Like a Lawyer (LTTLL) indicator is based on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives and includes four items that focus on the extent to which students believe their coursework emphasizes critical and analytical thinking skills. The Student-Faculty Interaction (SFI) indicator consists of six items that ask students how often they have interacted with or sought counsel from their professors. The Student Advising (SA) indicator is composed of five items that ask students how satisfied they are with advising services at their law school. The Law School Environment (LSE) indicator includes six items that ask students about their law school's commitment to their academic and social success. Engagement Indicator scores were placed on a 50-point scale following procedures outlined by LSSSE (LSSSE, 2019). More information on the LSSSE Engagement Indicators can be found on the LSSSE website.

In addition to the LSSSE Engagement Indicators, this study explored the relationship law school rankings have with other measures of student development that have been used in prior student engagement research. We utilized the diverse interactions scale presented in Rocconi et al. (2019) that is derived from three items on LSSSE that ask students about their interactions and discussions with peers in law school. We also utilized two measures of perceived learning gains, academic and personal, presented in Silver et al. (2013) by combining items that ask

students how much their law school contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in a variety of areas identified by Shultz and Zedeck (2009) as effective lawyer attributes. These include writing clearly and effectively, thinking critically and analytically, and developing legal research skills. Finally, a scale measuring satisfaction with the law school experience was created from two items that ask students to rate their overall educational experience and whether students would attend the same law school if they could start over again. To be consistent with the LSSSE Engagement Indicators, these outcomes were also placed on a 50-point scale. Descriptions of the items that comprise each outcome as well as factor loadings for each item and ordinal alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients are presented in Table 2.

To account for differences in engagement by student and law school characteristics, we included factors that have been shown to be related to engagement in both the undergraduate and law school literature. Student characteristics included gender, race-ethnicity, class-level (i.e., 1L, 2L, 3L), age, first-generation status (i.e., neither parent/guardian holds at least a bachelor's degree), and transfer status. Law school characteristics included sector (i.e., public/private), enrollment size, and law school response rate. In order to examine the relationship *U.S. News* rank has with different facets of engagement, we included a law school's numeric score on the ranking scheme. Thus, a higher score equates to a more prestigious ranking for the law school. The numeric score was used since it has a more interval scale of measurement while rank has an ordinal scale. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 3.

Data Analysis

Given that the rankings are based on data derived at the law school level and the data on student engagement are derived from individual students within each law school, a multilevel modeling process was used to explore the relationship law school rankings have with the different facets of engagement measured by the LSSSE. The multilevel model more accurately models the relationship between rank (a law school-level variable) and engagement (a student-level variable) by incorporating a unique random effect for each law school into the statistical model (Hox, 2010; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In addition, multilevel models protect against inflated standard errors that can arise due to the nested nature of the data (i.e., students nested within law schools).

First, missing data issues were addressed. For students that did not indicate their gender or race-ethnicity, we substituted the gender or race-ethnicity reported to LSSSE by their law school. Other missing values were imputed using multiple imputation via chained equations. A total of 20 imputations were created for each missing value, and predictive mean matching was used to impute variables (van Buuren, 2018). Next, we estimated base models, with no predictors at either level, to calculate intraclass correlation coefficients, which represent the variability in the engagement outcome that is due to differences among law schools.

The following statistical model was estimated for each outcome:

$$\hat{Y}_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{qj}\mathbf{X}_{qij} + \gamma_{(q+1)j}\text{Rank}_{(q+1)j} + r_{ij} + u_{0j}$$

where $\hat{Y}_{ij}$ is the predicted outcome of student i in law school j;
γ_{00} is the intercept, or constant, and represents the mean outcome score for law school j;
$\mathbf{X}_{qij}$ is a vector of student and law school control variables and γ_{qj} represents the effect of each of these characteristics on the outcome;
$\gamma_{(q+1)j}\text{Rank}_{(q+1)j}$ is the effect of law school rank on the outcome;
r_{ij} is the random student-level residual; and
u_{0j} is the random law school-level residual.

Since we were mainly interested in a law school characteristic (i.e., ranking) controlling for student characteristics and other law school characteristics, we grand-mean centered the student and law school characteristics as recommended by Enders and Tofighi (2007). We followed procedures outlined in Raudenbush and Bryk (2002) and Hox (2010) for estimating and assessing the adequacy of multilevel models. We also compared model-based standard errors and robust standard errors to identify possible misspecification of the distribution of random effects (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The application of this statistical model provided empirical evidence depicting the extent to which there is a relationship between law school rank and levels of student engagement.

Limitations

As with all research, this study is not without its limitations. Care should be taken not to overgeneralize the results of this study. While the sample includes a wide cross-section of ranked law schools and around a third of all ABA-approved law schools participate in LSSSE each year, our sample was a convenience sample in which law schools self-selected to participate in LSSSE. Law schools elect to participate in LSSSE for a variety of reasons, mainly for self-examination and improvement, which may affect the context of the student experience. The results are also limited by the fact that students self-selected to participate in the survey, which is a form of engagement in itself; thus, results may not generalize to all law students. It is important to note that LSSSE measures only certain aspects of student engagement; therefore, readers should be cautious not to extend the findings beyond this instrument. Even so, student engagement can be an indicator of collegiate quality (McCormick et al., 2013; O'Day & Kuh, 2006). It is also important to acknowledge that there is a debate within the higher education community regarding the validity of survey data, which includes concerns regarding social desirability bias (Bowman, 2011), psychometric properties (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011), and subjectivity of self-reporting (Porter, 2011). However, other research has demonstrated that social desirability bias does not play a major role in students' self-reports of basic academic behaviors (Miller, 2012). In addition, the psychometric properties of the LSSSE measures used in this study were examined and have been documented in other published research (e.g., Rocconi et al., 2019; Silver et al., 2013). While survey data may reflect a respondent's perception, these data still offer valuable information regarding the student experience that should be incorporated in institutional decision-making and policy creation (Gonyea & Miller, 2011; Pike, 2013). Despite these limitations, this study still provides useful information in contributing to the conversation regarding quality in legal education.

Results

The first step in our modeling process involved partitioning the variability in the engagement outcomes into variability due to differences among students and variability due to differences among law schools. Results from these baseline models revealed intraclass correlations between .02 and .07, indicating that between 2% and 7% of the variance in the engagement outcomes were due to differences among law schools. The design effects, which quantify the effect of independence violations on standard error estimates (Peugh, 2010), ranged from 6.5 to 18.9. Design effects greater than two indicate a need for multilevel modeling (Hox, 2010; Peugh, 2010).

Since the focus of this study was on the relationship between student engagement and law school rank, we present standardized coefficients for *U.S. News* rank in Table 4. A presentation of results for all variables is presented in the Appendix. After accounting for differences in student and law school characteristics, results demonstrated that *U.S. News* ranking was not significantly related with the four LSSSE Engagement Indicators (i.e., Learning to Think Like a Lawyer, Student-Faculty Interaction, Student Advising, and Law School Environment), diverse interactions, perceived academic learning gains, or perceived personal gains. However, we did find a small but statistically significant, positive relationship between law school rank and satisfaction ($\gamma = .079$). In other words, students at higher-ranked law schools reported greater satisfaction with their law school experience than otherwise similar students at lower-ranked law schools.

Given that non-statistically significant results do not provide evidence of no effect, we computed equivalence tests (Dixon et al., 2018; Lakens et al., 2018), also known as two one-sided tests, to investigate whether our results were statistically different than the smallest effect size (i.e., standardized coefficient) that would be considered meaningful. The idea behind equivalence tests is to provide evidence for the absence of a meaningful or practical effect. In essence, the null hypothesis of no difference (i.e., 0) is replaced with the smallest effect size that would be considered meaningful. The procedure is used to statistically reject the presence of an effect large enough to be considered meaningful. Thus, if the equivalence test is statistically significant, the null hypothesis that the effect is as large as the smallest meaningful effect is rejected, and the difference can be considered equivalent to zero (i.e., no effect) (Dixon et al. 2018; Lakens et al., 2018). For example, if we consider a standardized coefficient less than |.06| to indicate no meaningful relationship[1], results for Learning to Think Like a Lawyer, Student Advising, Law School Environment, diverse interactions, and perceived academic gains can all be considered equivalent to no effect. Figure 1 presents the standardized coefficient estimates and equivalence bounds based on the two one-sided tests procedure (i.e., 90% confidence interval) to indicate the region of standardized coefficients that are compatible with the observed effect for *U.S. News* ranking.

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[1] Mayhew et al. (2016) provide recommendations on effect size interpretation in higher education research. They argue that standardized regression coefficients of .06 represent a "small" effect, .12 a "medium" effect, and .2 a "large" effect.

Discussion

Overall, our findings show little to no relationship between law school rank and student engagement. If rankings are intended to represent the quality of the education a potential student will receive, then these measures should be related to other important aspects of the law school experience, such as student engagement. The lack of a relationship between rank and engagement indicates that the quality of a student's education is not dependent on the rank of the law school. These results contradict the notion that higher-ranked law schools provide a superior educational experience. In fact, educational quality, as measured by the LSSSE, seems to have little to do with law school rank. These findings raise questions about the validity of law school rankings as indicators of academic quality and corroborate others in the undergraduate literature (e.g., Pike, 2004; Zilvinskis & Rocconi, 2018) who have also found little relationship between four-year colleges and universities' ranking and student engagement.

We did find a modest, positive relationship between student satisfaction and rank, indicating students attending higher-ranked law schools were more satisfied with their educational experience than students at lower-ranked schools. The relationship between rank and satisfaction is interesting. One explanation for this relationship could be simply a self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., I'm happy because I'm attending a highly ranked law school). Also playing into the self-fulfilling prophecy is the idea that by attending a higher-ranked school, a student has access to a more influential alumni network and a greater likelihood of obtaining a prestigious internship or clerkship. Moreover, law school rank has been shown to influence the types of jobs (i.e., big vs small law firms), the geographic location of potential jobs (i.e., attending a lower-ranked state school might limit alumni to jobs in the local market), and the number and types of law firms that attend a law school's career fair (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Taylor, 2014). All of these factors may play into the relationship between satisfaction and rank. It is also interesting to note that while we found a relationship between rank and satisfaction with the law school, we found no relationship between rank and the Student Advising LSSSE Engagement Indicator which asked students about their satisfaction with various support services at the law school (e.g., academic advising, career counseling, job search help).

Prospective students should be aware that a high rank does not automatically translate into a superior educational experience. While organizing and making sense of information on a school's history, academic culture, test scores, library resources, job placement rates, and application process is a daunting task, simplifying these attributes to a single number leads potential students away from a more thorough search process (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; O'Day & Kuh, 2006). The absence of important information on classroom learning, diversity, and effective teaching in ranking schemes can mislead potential students. Asking students to decipher various statistics and qualities on numerous law schools requires a lot from potential students when the stress and anxiety during the search process are already high, but rank alone does not provide a complete picture of the law school experience (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Stake, 2006). Moreover, simply gathering enough information to make an informed choice can be a challenging task for prospective students, and many students may not know what information to seek out during their application process (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). As a result, students may default to utilizing a school's ranking as the sole indicator of a law school's worth,

even without knowing the basis for calculating the ranks (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). This results in students making their decision based on an incomplete picture of the law school experience.

Rankings, especially *U.S. News*, are so pervasive in legal education (Espeland & Sauder, 2016), that countering their influence will not be an easy feat. As Wellen (2003, p. 6) indicated, "Who cared if Temple offered its students riveting lectures from accomplished professors, a diverse curriculum, and hundreds of international programs, legal clinics, and internships? None of this improved the *U.S. News* ranking." Therefore the impetus is on law schools and other supporting organizations (e.g., American Bar Association, Law School Admission Council, AccessLex, Law School Transparency) to report and promote information on important aspects of the student experience in law school and assist potential students through the search process. For example, law schools can include information on the substantive aspects of the educational experience in their communications with potential students. This information should also be communicated to employers in the legal profession to educate them on the importance of the quality of the educational experience. For instance, law school rank was not associated with LSSSE's Learning to Think like a Lawyer scale or the academic or personal attributes Shultz and Zedeck (2009) claim lawyers should exhibit. By considering ranking as a factor in their hiring decisions over other important characteristics of effective law school graduates, potential employers discredit equally capable applicants simply based on perceived prestige.

While student engagement and consideration of the student experience in law school is something potential students should consider important when evaluating potential law schools, it is not the only aspect that they should consider. Ranking schemes, like *U.S. News*, do provide useful information that potential students should care about including employment figures and bar passage rates; however, these outcomes are weighted relatively low in the ranking scheme (i.e., half of what reputation is weighted). While reputation is an important asset in the legal field, it is not the only thing that should be considered important in legal education. Ranking schemes, as the name implies, provide a ranking of schools, but they also provide other rich data on potential schools that should be considered in the search process. While entering LSAT scores and GPAs can give students an idea of their chances of acceptance, measures such as bar passage rates and employment statistics give students valuable information on important outcomes of legal education. Although bar passage and job placement rates are key outcomes of legal education, these aspects are given weights of 2% and 18% respectively, in the *U.S. News* ranking calculation whereas reputation and selectivity (i.e., LSAT scores, undergraduate GPA, acceptance rate) are given weights of 40% and 25% respectively.

Ranking schemes can play a useful role in the law school search process by providing potential students with easy-to-use information on the law school; however, as Espeland and Sauder (2016, p. 198) assert "useful is not the same as good". In their book *Engines of Anxiety*, Espeland and Sauder demonstrate how law school rankings have produced many unintended consequences for legal education. Law school administrators worry tirelessly over the next release of the rankings and whether "others are finding new ways to game them" (p. 199). The rankings have redefined what is considered valuable in legal education by narrowing the focus on input characteristics of students (e.g., LSAT score, undergraduate GPA), institutional resources (e.g., the number of books in the law library), and the reputation of the law school with

other academics and professionals. Rankings create an environment where limited law school resources, such as scholarships, go towards improving metrics that the rankers care about, such as LSAT scores, as opposed to criteria the law school might find important including improving the racial or socio-economic diversity of the student body. Rankings create a choice for law school leaders between doing what is most useful in the short term to improve one's rank or investing in resources to improve the long term educational experience for students. If increasing student engagement is a goal, law school leaders should exercise caution using rankings to guide law school behavior. Legal educators, scholars, students and other professionals in the field, not a magazine or website, should decide what is a quality legal education.

Directions for Future Research

As noted earlier, student engagement is only one indicator of collegiate quality, and we only examined this at one point in time. Future research should investigate whether rankings are related with other indicators of educational quality such as student learning or faculty teaching. Future research could also examine law school alumni to explore whether the relationships uncovered hold steady. When alumni look back at their educational experience in law school, how has that shaped the lawyer they are today? How do alumni view the role rankings played in their career? Qualitative interviews with alumni or extending the LSSSE survey to alumni could shed light in these areas. Researchers should also investigate the validity of the specialty rankings within *U.S. News*. For instance, *U.S. News* ranks law schools in specific areas such as health care law, environmental law, tax law, and clinical training. These rankings are based solely on peer nominations by other law school academics. It is important to also understand the validity of these specialty rankings. Our study only looked at *U.S. News'* law school rankings. While *U.S. News* is the dominant ranking scheme in legal education (Espeland & Sauder, 2016), other outlets provide information and rankings on law schools that might be relevant to the student experience in law school. For instance, *The Princeton Review* provides fourteen different rankings including "Toughest to Get Into," "Best Career Prospects," and "Best Classroom Experience." Perhaps, some of these rankings are more aligned with the law school experience.

Conclusion

In the past thirty years, *U.S. News'* rankings of the "best" law schools have changed the landscape of legal education. Rankings are now one of the most important ingredients in both the law school search process and one of the most important assets legal employers look for (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Taylor, 2014). Our findings demonstrate that for the most part *U.S. News* rank is not related with educational quality, as measured by student engagement. These results raise concerns about the validity of the rankings and whether law school rankings provide appropriate information to prospective students about the quality of the educational experience during law school. Rather than relying solely on a single-number rank to gauge a law school's worth, prospective students, law school leaders, employers, and the media should focus on a variety of indicators that better represent what students are doing in law school and the experiences and opportunities law school provide to help make students the best lawyers they can be. Rather than asking "What is the best law school?" potential students should ask themselves "What does 'best' mean to me?"

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Table 1.

Participant demographic characteristics and law school characteristics compared with all law schools ranked by *U.S. News* and all ABA-approved law schools

	LSSSE %	Ranked %	ABA %
Student demographics			
Female	52	50	51
Male	48	50	49
African-American	6	6	8
Asian/Pacific Islander	7	7	6
Hispanic or Latinx	6	10	13
White	69	64	61
Multiracial	7	3	3
Other	2	<1	<1
No Response	3	5	5
International Student	4	4	3
Law school characteristics			
Public law school	56	50	42
Private law school	44	50	58
Fewer than 500 students	58	48	53
500-900 students	32	38	35
More than 900 students	10	14	12

Note: *Ranked* refers to all law schools ranked in the 2017 edition of *U.S. News* Best Law Schools. *ABA* refers to all ABA-approved law schools in the U.S. Percentages for Ranked and all-ABA law schools are based on 2017 enrollment information provided by ABA and retrieved from http://www.abarequireddisclosures.org.

Table 2.
Items comprising each outcomes, factor loadings, and ordinal reliability alpha (α)

Name	Survey item	Loading	α
Learning to Think Like a Lawyer	Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth, and considering its components	.80	.89
	Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretation and relationships	.88	
	Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions	.79	
	Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	.82	
Student-Faculty Interaction	Talked about career plans or job search activities with a faculty member or advisor	.75	.85
	Discussed assignments with a faculty member	.84	
	Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class	.74	
	Used e-mail to communicate with a faculty member	.70	
	Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	.56	
	Received prompt feedback (written or oral) from faculty on your academic performance	.57	
Student Advising	Satisfaction: Academic advising and planning	.71	.91
	Satisfaction: Career counseling	.92	
	Satisfaction: Personal counseling	.73	
	Satisfaction: Job search help	.92	
	School emphasized: Providing the support you need to succeed in your employment search	.83	
Law School Environment	School emphasized: Providing support you need to thrive socially	.84	.88
	School emphasized: Helping you cope with nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	.84	
	School emphasized: Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, sexual orientation, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	.69	

	School emphasized: Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural events, symposia, etc.)	.63	
	School emphasized: Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	.76	
	School emphasized: Providing the financial counseling you need to afford your education	.67	
Diverse Interactions	Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	.89	.74
	Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	.82	
	Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, sexual orientations, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments	.42	
Perceived Academic Gains	Writing clearly and effectively	.83	.90
	Speaking clearly and effectively	.77	
	Thinking critically and analytically	.85	
	Developing legal research skills	.70	
	Learning effectively on your own	.63	
	Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	.74	
	Acquiring a broad legal education	.70	
Perceived Personal Gains	Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	.78	.87
	Developing a personal code of values and ethics	.87	
	Contributing to the welfare of your community	.80	
	Understanding yourself	.71	
Satisfaction	How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at your law school?	.86	.85
	If you could start over again, would you attend the same law school you are now?	.86	

Table 3

Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Engagement Outcomes				
Learning to Think Like a Lawyer	37.90	10.36	0	50
Student-Faculty Interaction	24.50	9.96	0	50
Student Advising	28.70	12.10	0	50
Law School Environment	25.02	11.45	0	50
Diverse Interactions	29.97	12.06	0	50
Perceived Academic Gains	36.31	9.75	0	50
Perceived Personal Gains	26.98	13.30	0	50
Satisfaction	37.25	11.74	0	50
Student Characteristics				
Female	0.52	0.50	0	1
Asian	0.07	0.26	0	1
Black	0.06	0.24	0	1
Hispanic	0.06	0.23	0	1
Multiracial	0.07	0.26	0	1
Other	0.03	0.18	0	1
White*	0.70	0.46	0	1
1L	0.36	0.48	0	1
2L	0.31	0.46	0	1
3L*	0.32	0.47	0	1
First-generation student	0.24	0.43	0	1
Transfer student	0.05	0.22	0	1
Age	26.94	5.56	16	83
Law School Characteristics				
Less than 500 students	0.44	0.50	0	1
500-900 students	0.36	0.48	0	1
Greater than 900 students*	0.20	0.40	0	1
Public law school	0.53	0.50	0	1
Response Rate	0.54	0.12	0.26	0.88
U.S. News Rank Score	128.02	14.34	106	157

*Reference group

Table 4

Standardized coefficient estimates for the relationship between *U.S. News* ranking and engagement outcomes

Outcome	*U.S. News* Standardized Coefficient
Learning to Think Like a Lawyer	.015
Student-Faculty Interaction	-.026
Student Advising	.002
Law School Environment	-.013
Diverse Interaction	-.002
Perceived Academic Gain	-.012
Perceived Personal Gain	-.030
Satisfaction	.079**

**p<.01

Figure 1
Equivalence bounds for each outcome.
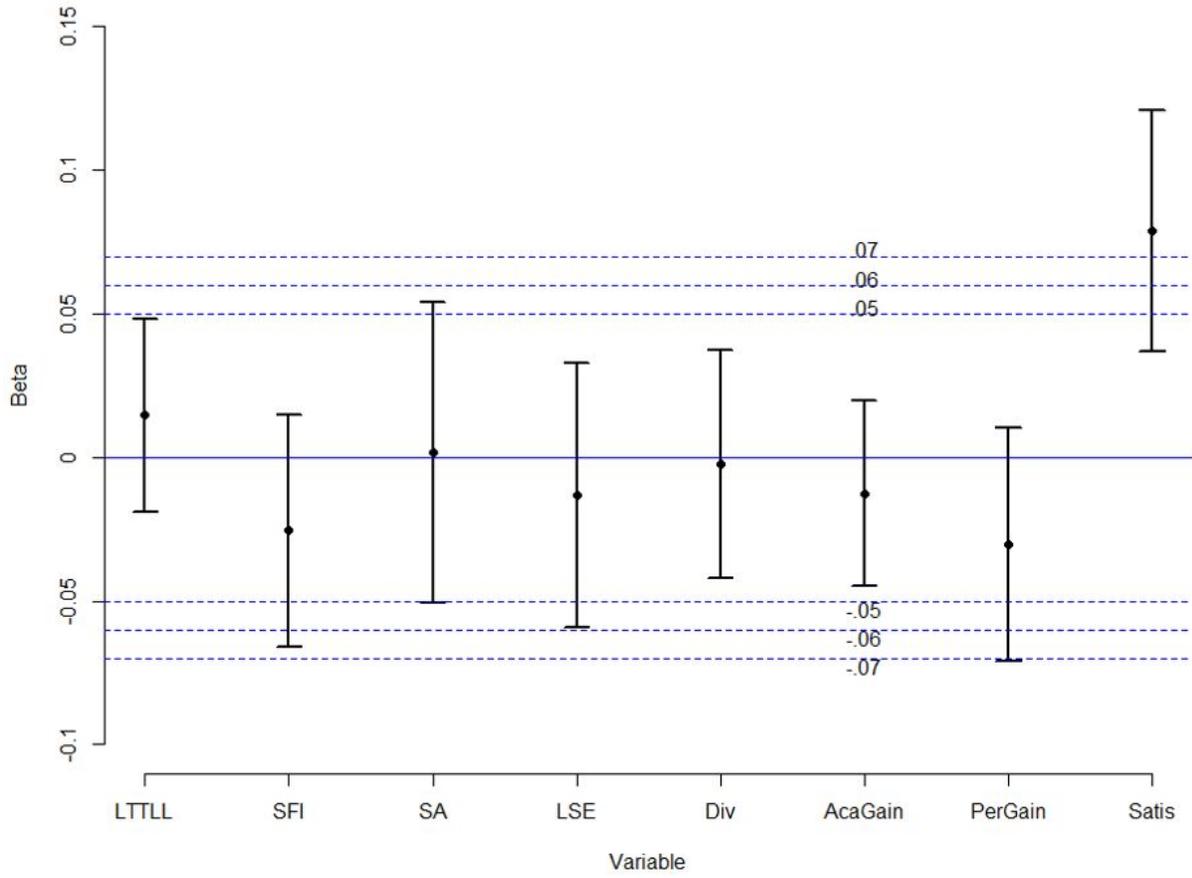
Appendix. Table A1.
Composition of *U.S. News* ranking and weight of each measure.

Measure	Weight
Quality assessment	**.400**
Peer assessment score	.250
Assessment score by lawyers and judges	.150
Selectivity	**.250**
Median LSAT scores	.125
Median undergraduate GPA	.100
Acceptance rate	.025
Placement success	**.200**
Employment at graduation	.040
Employment 10 months after graduation	.140
Bar passage rate	.020
Faculty resources	**.150**
Expenditures per student - library and supporting services	.0975
Expenditures per student - other	.015
Student-faculty ratio	.030
Library resources	.0075

Note: To be ranked by *U.S. News* a law school must be accredited and fully approved by the American Bar Association.

Appendix. Table A2.
Intercept and random effects from baseline/null models

Outcome	Intercept (γ_{00})	Within (σ^2)	Between (τ)	AIC
Learning to Think Like a Lawyer	37.90	105.26	2.08	138425
Student-Faculty Interaction	24.78	95.92	3.43	130477
Student Advising	28.87	137.44	9.15	140745
Law School Environment	25.05	125.15	6.32	141433
Diverse Interactions	29.83	142.07	3.77	144231
Perceived Academic Gains	36.35	92.84	2.31	135823
Perceived Personal Gains	27.05	171.94	5.63	147253
Satisfaction	37.28	130.74	6.63	142285

Appendix. Table A3.
Unstandardized coefficient estimates, standard errors, and random effects from full multilevel model

Variable	LTTLL	SFI	SA	LSE	DIV	AcaGain	PerGain	Satisfaction
U.S. News	**.01**	**-.02**	**.001**	**-.01**	**-.002**	**-.009**	**-.03**	**.06****
	(.015)	**(.017)**	**(.027)**	**(.022)**	**(.020)**	**(.013)**	**(.023)**	**(.021)**
Female	.89***	-.04	-1.08***	-1.66***	-.26	-.37*	.57**	.17
	(.159)	(.153)	(.182)	(.179)	(.185)	(.159)	(.210)	(.182)
Asian	-.53	.23	-.51	-1.01**	-3.03***	-.81**	1.29**	-3.08***
	(.317)	(.303)	(.358)	(.348)	(.366)	(.310)	(.426)	(.360)
Black	.62	2.76***	.43	-1.38**	.003	.28	.008	-2.85***
	(.351)	(.343)	(.391)	(.398)	(.409)	(.335)	(.459)	(.403)
Hispanic / Latinix	-.26	.81*	-.25	-.77*	.006	-.07	.82	-1.40**
	(.353)	(.339)	(.422)	(.391)	(.406)	(.330)	(.452)	(.410)
Multiracial	-.27	.55	-.08	-.53	1.94***	-.57	-.34	-1.25***
	(.309)	(.293)	(.355)	(.339)	(.353)	(.293)	(.402)	(.353)
Other	-.60	1.57***	-1.30*	-1.29**	.02	-1.80***	-1.23*	-3.49***
	(.449)	(.425)	(.510)	(.478)	(.513)	(.426)	(.577)	(.494)
1L	2.99***	-1.83***	6.10***	3.06***	.33	.69***	.23	2.40***
	(.194)	(.185)	(.224)	(.210)	(.225)	(.185)	(.258)	(.226)
2L	.60**	-.39*	2.44***	.62**	.58*	-.16	-.32	.96***
	(.198)	(.190)	(.227)	(.217)	(.231)	(.193)	(.262)	(.226)
First Gen	.22	-.21	.15	-.26	.72**	-.04	.32	-.54*
	(.203)	(.190)	(.227)	(.214)	(.233)	(.191)	(.264)	(.222)
Transfer	.12	.50	1.72***	1.01*	-.97*	-.06	2.10***	.20
	(.391)	(.371)	(.437)	(.423)	(.452)	(.385)	(.496)	(.447)
Age	-.11***	-.11***	.07***	-.13***	-.06**	-.09***	-.20***	.12***
	(.015)	(.015)	(.018)	(.017)	(.018)	(.015)	(.020)	(.017)
Size <500	.56	2.00**	2.24	.83	-1.19	.66	.79	2.05*
	(.649)	(.748)	(1.188)	(.984)	(.892)	(.578)	(1.013)	(.915)
Size 500-900	.48	1.19	1.58	1.23	-.48	.81	.94	1.64
	(.624)	(.723)	(1.148)	(.952)	(.863)	(.555)	(.976)	(.884)
Public	-.53	-.44	-.32	.33	.37	-.63	-.68	.26
	(.393)	(.450)	(.705)	(.588)	(.538)	(.358)	(.609)	(.553)
Response Rate	4.23*	2.59	11.20***	10.60	3.87	7.01***	7.56**	9.62***
	(1.640)	(1.870)	(2.929)	(2.441)	(2.229)	(1.463)	(2.521)	(2.275)
Intercept	37.92	24.58	28.73	25.04	29.94	36.34	27.03	37.24
	(.191)	(.221)	(.349)	(.290)	(.263)	(.171)	(.299)	(.270)
Random Effects and AIC								
Within (σ^2)	102.681	94.6069	130.644	121.803	140.792	92.192	170.206	128.085
Between (τ)	1.735	2.464	6.477	4.365	3.487	1.341	4.472	3.691
AIC	136879	129128	139068	140043	142776	134886	146216	141048

*$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$