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# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT:

*Lessons Learned from the 2018 U.S. News Law School Rankings*

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# INTRODUCTION

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*The overall ranking of law schools in the annual U.S. News Graduate School issue make all the headlines, but deans and law school communicators can gain valuable insights from data in the academic peer reputation ranking and the “bench and bar” reputation ranking that are hidden-in-plain-sight.*

Since U.S. News does not compile or release both these reputational rankings publicly, Kivvit conducted an analysis of the 2018 rankings to inform communicators of potential strategies to improve their ranking in 2019. Kivvit’s higher education practice specializes in reputation management and enrollment strategies.

The results provide interesting contrasts with the overall rankings, as well as insight into trends that schools can take advantage of. These findings are significant because these two reputational assessments determine 40% of a school’s overall U.S. News score.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE 2018 RANKINGS:

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- Reputational scores do not change dramatically from year-to-year. On average, scores remained the same as last year. Schools must take a long-term approach to improving their reputation.
- When ranked by reputation, more than twenty schools are 10 positions lower than their overall U.S. News ranking—a “reputational deficit.” These schools have an opportunity to achieve their full reputational potential through strategic marketing.
- B&B scores are typically higher than academic scores, especially among schools located in smaller markets and with lower reputational rankings.
- The three-year average used to calculate Bench & Bar scores gives a longer lifespan to controversies. Immediate crisis management when a school incurs a reputational risk is critical to prevent or reset a school’s reputation.
- Relationships are a powerful driver of reputation. Schools can use peer-to-peer faculty marketing to engage fellow academics as well as lawyers, recruiters and judges in their markets.
- Agree or disagree with the U.S. News methodology, reputational scores and rankings provide a definitive perspective on a school’s position among its peers and within the broader legal industry.

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## Reputation Is a Long-Term Asset

Schools should not expect dramatic changes year-to-year in either reputation or B&B scores. On average, both academic and B&B scores did not change from last year. The average academic score stands at 3.1, while the average B&B score remained at 2.7.

The most positive movement of any school in either reputation category was just 0.2 points, but this was a rarity. Only five schools had a 0.2 increase in academic reputation and only two had a similar increase in B&B score.

Of the two, the B&B category proved harder to improve. Only 15% of schools improved their B&B score, over half of schools remained flat and one third had a negative outcome. In contrast, 42% of schools increased their academic reputation over last year, 54% remained flat and far fewer (4%) had a negative outcome.

CHANGE IN SCHOOL (% OF SCHOOLS)	ACADEMIC REPUTATION SCORE	B&B REPUTATION SCORE
Improved	42%	15%
Remained Flat	54%	52%
Decreased	4%	33%

## Reputational Deficits and Surpluses

A school's standing in the overall U.S. News ranking is rarely the same as its ranking in the reputational categories. When a school's overall ranking is higher than its reputational ranking it has a reputational deficit. Conversely, when a school's overall ranking is lower than its reputational ranking then the school has a reputational bonus.

The most dramatic examples of reputational deficits are Penn State—Carlisle, which has an academic reputational deficit of 56 positions, and the University of Nevada—Las Vegas, which has a B&B reputational deficit of 55 positions.

	PENNSYLVANIA STATE U.—CARLISLE (DICKINSON)		UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA—LAS VEGAS
2018 Academic Reputation Rank	121	2018 B&B Reputation Rank	117
2018 Overall Rank	65	2018 Overall Rank	62
Academic Reputation Deficit	<b>-56</b>	B&B Reputation Deficit	<b>-55</b>

These schools are not alone. Twenty-seven schools or 18% of all schools had an academic reputation deficit of at least 10 positions. Thirty-three schools – or 22% of all schools – had a B&B reputation deficit of 10 positions or more.

The fact that such disparity can exist reinforces why law school communicators should take into account a school's reputational rank in addition to its overall standing. Doing so will allow a school to better understand its relative position among peers and set realistic benchmarks for future reputation building.

## Relationships as Drivers of Reputation

How can a school build a reputational surplus? The University of Hawaii Richardson School of Law offers a case in point. Hawaii ranks 71<sup>st</sup> in the academic reputation rankings, which is 29 places above its overall U.S. News rank of 100<sup>th</sup>.

What explains the disparity? One potential reason is that since 2005, Hawaii has attracted dozens of faculty from the mainland to teach specialized mini-courses during the school's January Term. Cultivating personal relationships between faculty are powerful drivers of perception and are logical opportunities to enhance academic reputation, because in the end, faculty vote on other faculty when scoring academic reputation. Over time, you can expect a program like this to pay off, as more and more faculty escape wintry January for some Hawaii sun, share their experiences with colleagues – and potentially give higher marks come voting time.

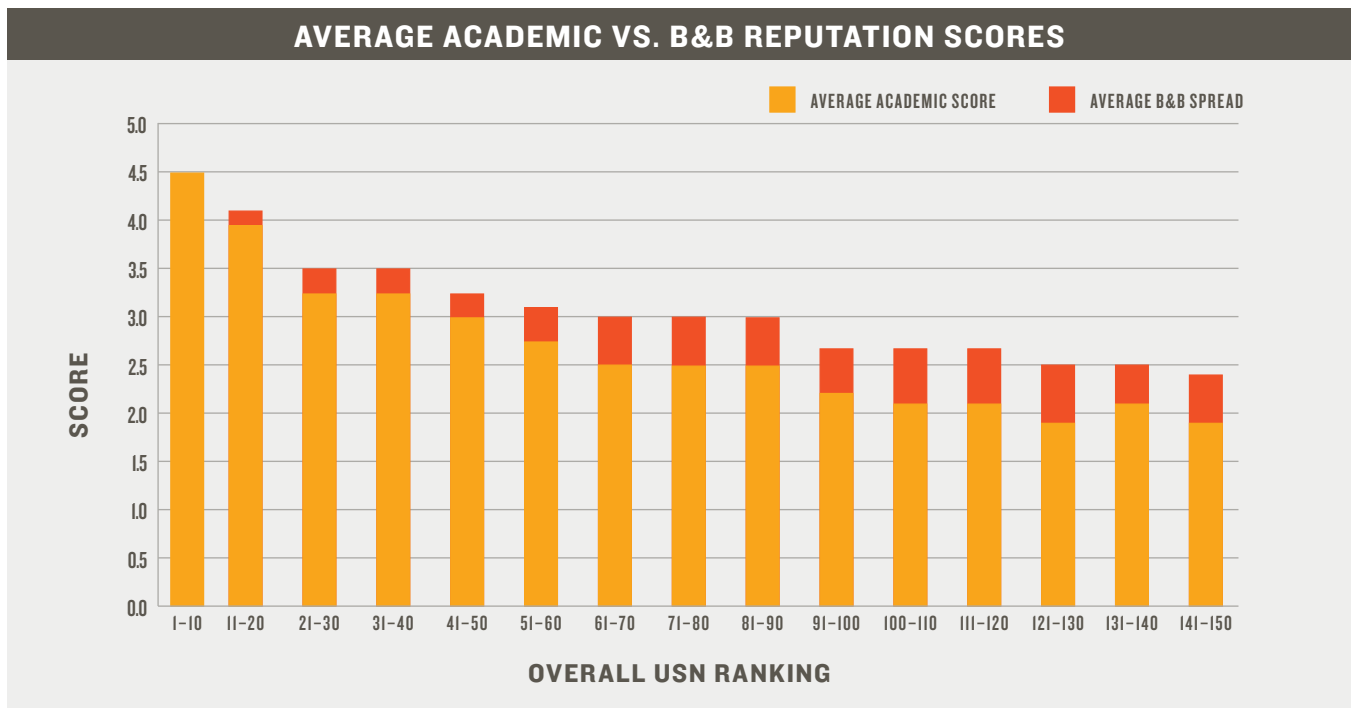
## The Long Memory of B&B Scores

Unlike academic reputation, which is based entirely on survey results from the preceding fall, B&B scores reflect a three-year average of responses. This has long-term implications for schools that face controversy because the B&B sample can still reflect a negative hangover from an event years after the headlines are over. However, the longer memory of B&B scores can also be advantageous for these schools in the short-term.

Take the University of California at Berkeley for example. The resignation of UC Berkeley's dean last May was among the top law school controversies of 2016. A likely short-term effect is that UC Berkeley was one of just six schools that had a decrease in academic reputation score this year. However, UC Berkeley's B&B score remained flat, which means that the scandal's longer term impact may yet to be seen. Regardless, the imperative for UC Berkeley should be to reset its reputation before U.S. News surveys are distributed this fall. Otherwise, lower B&B scores may prolong the impact of last year's events through the 2020 U.S. News rankings.

## Academic vs. B&B Reputations

On average, a school's B&B reputation score is 0.4 points higher than its academic reputation score. This spread becomes more pronounced as you move further down the overall rankings.



In the most extreme cases, academic and B&B scores were a full point apart for the same school. Notably, these schools tended to be located in smaller markets. A likely explanation of the spread is that lawyers, judges and recruiters in these markets are much more familiar with the graduates of local institutions (and more than a few will be alums) and hold them in higher esteem than academic peers that hail from larger, more urban schools. Schools in similar positions should take note that they can gain an edge by nurturing these B&B audiences.

'18 OVERALL RANKING	SCHOOL	'18 Academic Score	'18 B&B Score	B&B. VS ACADEMIC SPREAD
51	Baylor University (TX)	2.4	3.4	1
120	Creighton University (NE)	2	3	1
118	Texas Tech University	1.9	2.9	1
142	Loyola University New Orleans	2.1	3	0.9
112	Gonzaga University (WA)	2.1	3	0.9
65	Pennsylvania State U.-Carlisle (Dickinson)	2	2.9	0.9
106	Drake University (IA)	1.9	2.8	0.9

### *Top 30 Schools by Reputation*

The T-30 schools are no exception to the trends observed across the U.S. News rankings. Only one T-30 school, the University of Chicago, has the same ranking (4<sup>th</sup>) in the overall, academic reputation and B&B categories. Yale, the nation's top law school in the U.S. News overall ranking, is locked in a three-way tie for highest academic reputation, but drops to 3<sup>rd</sup> place when ranked by B&B reputation.

One-in-five T-30 schools have reputational deficits. For instance, Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor School of Law ranks 25th overall, but ranks 35th in academic reputation and 50th in B&B reputation, reflecting reputational deficits of 10 and 25 places.

*A breakdown of the top 30 schools by Academic and B&B Reputation is featured on the next page.*



## Top 30 Schools by Academic Reputation

SCHOOL	'18 OVERALL RANK	ACADEMIC SCORE	ACADEMIC REPUTATION RANK
Yale University (CT)	1	4.8	1
Stanford University (CA)	2	4.8	1
Harvard University (MA)	3	4.8	1
University of Chicago (IL)	4	4.6	4
Columbia University (NY)	5	4.6	4
New York University	6	4.5	6
University of Virginia	8	4.4	7
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor	8	4.4	7
University of California–Berkeley	12	4.4	7
University of Pennsylvania	7	4.3	10
Duke University (NC)	10	4.2	11
Northwestern University (Pritzker) (IL)	10	4.2	11
Cornell University (NY)	13	4.2	11
University of Texas–Austin	14	4.1	14
Georgetown University (DC)	15	4.1	14
University of California–Los Angeles	15	3.9	16
Vanderbilt University (TN)	17	3.9	16
Washington University in St. Louis (MO)	18	3.6	18
University of Southern California (Gould)	19	3.5	19
University of Notre Dame (IN)	20	3.5	19
Emory University (GA)	22	3.5	19
University of Minnesota	23	3.5	19
University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	39	3.5	19
University of Iowa	20	3.4	24
Boston University (MA)	23	3.4	24
George Washington University (DC)	30	3.4	24
University of Wisconsin–Madison	30	3.4	24
University of California–Davis	39	3.4	24
Boston College (MA)	26	3.3	29
University of California–Irvine	28	3.3	29
Indiana University–Bloomington (Maurer)	30	3.3	29
Ohio State University (Moritz)	30	3.3	29
Fordham University (NY)	36	3.3	29
University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign	44	3.3	29

## Top 30 Schools by B&B Reputation

SCHOOL	'18 OVERALL RANK	'18 B&B SCORE	18 B&B RANK
Stanford University (CA)	2	4.8	1
Harvard University (MA)	3	4.8	1
Yale University (CT)	1	4.7	3
University of Chicago (IL)	4	4.6	4
Columbia University (NY)	5	4.6	4
University of Virginia	8	4.5	6
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor	8	4.5	6
University of California–Berkeley	12	4.5	6
New York University	6	4.4	9
University of Pennsylvania	7	4.4	9
Duke University (NC)	10	4.4	9
Northwestern University (Pritzker) (IL)	10	4.3	12
Cornell University (NY)	13	4.3	12
Georgetown University (DC)	15	4.3	12
University of Texas–Austin	14	4.1	15
University of California–Los Angeles	15	4.1	15
Vanderbilt University (TN)	17	4.1	15
Washington University in St. Louis (MO)	18	3.9	18
University of Notre Dame (IN)	20	3.9	18
University of Southern California (Gould)	19	3.8	20
Emory University (GA)	22	3.8	20
University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	39	3.8	20
University of Minnesota	23	3.7	23
George Washington University (DC)	30	3.7	23
Boston College (MA)	26	3.7	23
Washington and Lee University (VA)	28	3.7	23
University of Iowa	20	3.6	27
University of Wisconsin–Madison	30	3.6	27
University of California–Davis	39	3.6	27
Indiana University–Bloomington (Maurer)	30	3.6	27
Col. of William and Mary (Marshall-Wythe) (VA)	41	3.6	27
University of California (Hastings)	54	3.6	27

# CONCLUSION

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*There are undoubtedly those in the industry who take issue with the U.S. News methodology. When it comes to scoring reputation however, there are benefits to factoring the US News approach into your reputation management planning.*

First, there are not many opportunities that rival U.S. News as a barometer of the U.S. law school industry. U.S. News reported a 66% response rate this year for its academic reputation survey (out of approximately 750 peer voters) and had similar levels of participation last year.

We will never know all of the lawyers, recruiters and judges that U.S. News polls to gauge B&B reputation, but schools can still use this rating as both a starting point and a guidepost to assess their reputation in the broader legal space.

At a minimum, U.S. News acts as public polling. For those deans eyeing a national profile for their school, and the reputational benefits that come with an improved U.S. News score — including enhanced enrollment, alumni engagement, pride and faculty recruitment — it is critically important to pay attention to these “hidden-in-plain-sight” surveys of law school deans and faculty and the judges, lawyers and recruiters that comprise 40% of your overall “headline” score.