



Message from the Dean

Dear Students,

This morning, we received the official news that our U.S. News ranking went from 70th to 82nd. This is not news that any Law School community wants to receive.

Many of you believe, as I do, in the quality of the education you receive at U.M. We know the amazing work that occurs in our clinics, our highly regarded litigation skills program, and the national success of our moot court teams. We know that we have a talented, diverse student body that rivals that of any in the country. We know that we have a faculty with an excellent national reputation. We know that the leading lawyers in south Florida are proud U.M. alumni, and that the number of alumni in leading positions throughout the country is growing. The President Elect of the American Bar Association, Carolyn Lamm, is a graduate of the School and our speaker at this year's graduation.

So, why did our U.S. News ranking decline?

This memo sets out to describe the likely explanation for why our ranking slipped. To do that, I will describe something of the U.S. News methodology. I will also tell you the steps that are already underway to address some of the factors that led to the lower rank.

It is tempting to begin with an explanation of the ways in which U.S. News fails to do what it implicitly sets out to do: provide accurate information about the quality of a school. It is tempting to revisit the problems with its methodology and the oft-repeated stories of schools who "fudge" their self-reported data – most especially job placement data. Those assessments are out there and you can read them if you are interested.¹

The truth is, regardless of the validity or reliability of U.S. News rankings, prospective students are persuaded (to some degree) by the rankings and some employers – though perhaps not as many as you may believe – are influenced by them, as well.

The first thing you should understand about the U.S. News ranking is that 25% of the overall rank is based on "selectivity" which is a combination of the median LSAT (12.5% of the rankings), median GPA (10% of the rankings) and the acceptance rate (2.5% of the ranking) for the first year class. U.S. News actually publishes the 75th and 25th percentiles for both LSAT and GPA rather than the medians, but they use the medians to determine the rankings. This small drop is not significant in terms of the abilities of the class. Without detailed information that is not available in what U.S. News publishes, we do not know if this one point drop impacted our

¹ An on-line search will find many such articles. See, for example, Theodore P. Seto, *Understanding the U.S. News Law School Rankings*, 60 SMU Law Rev. 493 (2007) available at <http://www.westlaw.com/find/default.wl?cite=60+smulrev+493&FindType=F&ForceAction=Y&SV=Full&RS=ITK3.0&VR=1.0> or https://www.lexis.com/research/retrieve?_m=7d60c9f6240c7800ee8567a9bbd89eba&csvc=le&cform=byCitation&fmtstr=FULL&docnum=1&startdoc=1&wchp=dGLbVlb-zSkAV&_md5=cea2fd8900db71e00322cd4b227b3e5e

ranking. We do know that as the national applicant pool has continued to get smaller, the competition for students with high credentials has intensified. Our median GPA remained essentially the same as last year.

The percent of applicants we admit (“acceptance rate”) is a problem for us, but it did not change much from last year to this year and it only counts for 2.5% of the rankings so it is unlikely that it was important to our drop in rank. It is a challenge for us because we receive a large number of excellent applicants whom we admit, but they are also admitted to many of the top 50 law schools in the nation. It would be foolish for us not to admit and recruit these students. What we must do is increase the number who enroll out of this group. **Studies conducted by the Law School Admission Council on how students select where they will enroll have found that placement information and visits to campus are more important factors than rankings.**

We are in the middle of recruiting our class for the fall, 2008. The most critical step to improving our ranking – and the most *immediate* step – is to recruit an academically strong class. We have admitted a group of highly qualified students, in smaller numbers than was true last year. Students play a critical role in recruiting these prospective students during their campus visits.

The second thing you should understand is that forty percent of the U.S. News ranking is based on reputation. The single most important factor in the U.S. News ranking is based on two surveys that ask respondents to rank all ABA accredited law schools. The major one (25% of the ranking) is sent to academics. U.S. News surveys law school deans, academic associate deans, the chair of the faculty appointments committee and the most recently tenured faculty member. Among those who are surveyed, this group is probably in the best position to know something about the 184 ABA accredited law schools that they are asked to rank. If the respondents do not know enough about a school, they may mark “don’t know.” This survey has a 70% response rate. **If this variable was the only basis for the rankings, we would be among a group of schools ranked 50th.**

Even though this group is in the best position to know something about law schools, the methodology is questionable. I am asked to fill it out every year and even after serving on the ABA Accreditation Committee and the Governing Council of the ABA Section on Legal Education, I can not honestly say that I know much about the quality of education offered by more than 15 of the 184 law schools I am asked to rank. Consequently, the results of this survey tend to reflect each respondent’s views of the quality of the faculty’s scholarship and whether the respondent often reads articles published by the school’s law reviews rather than reflecting information about the quality of the education the school offers its students.

The survey of lawyers and judges makes up 15% of the rankings. This survey is sent to a set of hiring partners in firms, state attorneys general and selected federal and state judges. They are likely to have even less personal familiarity with the 184 schools they are ranking. U.S. News does not release information regarding how these respondents are chosen, and only 26% of those surveyed completed the survey. The responses from this group are likely to be based on impressions resulting from graduates the firm has recently hired, from interviewing at the school, from working with a graduate as a judicial clerk, from interviewing applicants for clerkships, and from seeing faculty speak at bench and bar conferences.

Our ranking by academics has remained constant over the past two years at the 2.8 level. Our ranking by lawyers and judges dropped from a 3.0 to a 2.9 ranking. That one tenth of a point

decline on that variable dropped us from 63 in the lawyers' and judges' ranking to 71st. We are addressing this decline by improving our assistance to students seeking judicial clerkships and increasing the assistance we provide students seeking placement outside of the South Florida area.

Placement of students is a major concern for all of us. Our primary mission is to educate lawyers to take positions of responsibility in the legal profession. Our success in this mission is demonstrated by the recent Law Dragon ranking which placed the Law School at 18th among all law schools in the number of graduates included among the top 500 lawyers in the country.

The U.S. News ranking includes two placement measures: placement at graduation for 4% of the rankings and placement nine months after graduation for 14%. Bar pass is also 2% of the "Placement Success" variable; the combined total of these three measures equals 20% of the ranking. We improved our rate of placement at graduation from 70.5% to 72.4%, but we suffered a slight drop in our placement rate nine months after graduation from 93.1% to 90.7%. We understand how critical this factor is to our students. Through a combination of on campus interviewing, student externships, and students working with firms part time, our student body has been very successful in finding legal jobs in the South Florida area.

Out of state placement is more of a challenge. We have strong alumni networks in D.C., New York and New Jersey, Chicago, and Los Angeles. We have smaller alumni networks in almost all major metropolitan areas other than the Northwest. We are working to improve our use of these networks for student placement through coordination between our alumni office and Career Services. To help achieve this, we have increased staffing in Career Services to work with students seeking out of state employment. We are also working to expand the number of externship opportunities outside of the South Florida area. We are increasing faculty involvement with the placement of students in federal and state court clerkships. Please let us know when you find employment after graduation. Each year we loose touch with students who leave the area. They find employment, but fail to let us know and that counts against us in U.S. News.

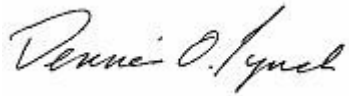
The Bar Pass variable is based on the difference between a school's bar pass rate for first time test takers in July and February and the state-wide pass rate for first time test takers. Our combined rate for July 2006 and February 2007 was 84.4% compared to a state-wide average of 74%. We rank relatively high on this variable. The only school in Florida ahead of us was Florida State with an 88.1% combined pass rate.

The final variable is made up of "Faculty Resources". This is a combination of expenditure per student for instruction, faculty resources and library (7.75% of the ranking), student faculty ratio (3%) and library resources (.75%). We rank high on our library resources, but that matters very little since it is less than 1% of the ranking. Our student faculty ratio went up slightly from 18.2 to 19.1 as a result of our larger first year class. To improve our student-faculty ratio and to better ensure a quality education, we engaged in aggressive faculty recruiting this year. As a result, we were able to hire three new outstanding tenure track faculty members. To address the needs of the larger rising 2L class, we are adding additional sections of most of the multi-section "core" classes. In addition, thirteen outstanding visiting faculty will join us next year. As a result, our student-faculty ratio reported to U.S. News will improve and our expenditures per student – another U.S. News variable – will improve, as well. Six of the thirteen visiting faculty are foreign scholars, thereby enriching our offerings in the areas of international and comparative law.

In summary, our overall score on the rankings dropped from a 43 in 2007 to a 42 this year. This small change moved us from the group of schools ranked 70th to the group ranked 82nd. Since our reputation survey scores by both academics and lawyers and judges are stronger than many schools ranked above us, we are posed to move back up in the rankings. We must concentrate our efforts on recruiting more great students and on improving our placement of students.

We are proud of our work here. Our strength lies in our highly capable student body, our dedicated and nationally recognized faculty, and our accomplished alumni. If we work together as a community, we can improve our performance on the variables that have had a negative impact on our U.S. News ranking this year and situate the School to stay on an upward trajectory in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennis O. Lynch". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Dennis O. Lynch
Dean