

In Law Schools, Grades Go Up, Just Like That

Samuel Liu, right, of Loyola Law School Los Angeles, which is adding 0.333 to every grade.

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One day next month every student at Loyola Law School Los Angeles will awake to a higher grade point average.

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A Dallas law firm will be paid for employing Zachary Burd, who graduated from Southern Methodist University's law school.

But it's not because they are all working harder.

The school is retroactively inflating its grades, tacking on 0.333 to every grade recorded in the last few years. The goal is to make its students look more attractive in a competitive job market.

In the last two years, at least 10 law schools have deliberately changed their grading systems to make them more lenient. These include [law schools](#) like [New York University](#) and [Georgetown](#), as well as [Golden Gate University](#) and [Tulane University](#), which just announced the change this month. Some recruiters at law firms keep track of these changes and consider them when interviewing, and some do not.

Law schools seem to view higher grades as one way to rescue their students from the tough economic climate — and perhaps more to the point, to protect their own reputations and rankings. Once able to practically guarantee gainful employment to thousands of students every year, the schools are now fielding complaints from more and more unemployed graduates, frequently drowning in student debt.

They have come up with a number of strategic responses. Besides the usual career counseling measures, many top schools have bumped up their on-campus interview weeks from the autumn to August, before the school year even starts, because they

want their students to have a chance to nab a job slot before their counterparts at other schools do.

Others, like [Duke](#) and the [University of Texas at Austin](#), offer stipends for students to take unpaid public interest internships. [Southern Methodist University's](#) Dedman School of Law even recently began [paying profit-making law firms to hire its students](#).

“For people like me who have good grades but are not in the super-elite, there are not as many options for getting a job in advance,” said Zachary Burd, 35, who just graduated from Southern Methodist University. A Dallas family law firm will receive \$3,500 to “test drive” him this August.

“They’ll get me for a month or two, for free, to try me out,” he said. “It’s safer for them, and it’s a good foot in the door for me.”

But the tactic getting the most attention — and the most controversy — is the sudden, deliberate and dubiously effective grade inflation, which had begun even before the legal job market softened.

“If somebody’s paying \$150,000 for a law school degree, you don’t want to call them a loser at the end,” says Stuart Rojstaczer, a former geophysics professor at Duke who now studies [grade inflation](#). “So you artificially call every student a success.”

Unlike undergraduate grading, which has drifted northward over the years because most undergraduate campuses do not strictly regulate the schoolwide distribution of As and Bs, law schools have long employed clean, crisp, bell-shaped grading curves. Many law schools even use computers to mathematically determine cutoffs between a B+ and a B, based on exam points.

The process schools refer to as grade reform takes many forms. Some schools bump up everyone’s grades, some just allow for more As and others all but eliminate the once-gentlemanly C.

[Harvard](#) and [Stanford](#), two of the top-ranked law schools, recently eliminated traditional grading altogether. Like [Yale](#) and the [University of California, Berkeley](#), they now use a modified pass/fail system, reducing the pressure that law schools are notorious for. This new grading system also makes it harder for employers to distinguish the wheat from the chaff, which means more students can get a shot at a competitive interview.

Students and faculty say they are merely trying to stay competitive with their peer schools, which have more merciful grading curves. Loyola, for example, had a mean first-year grade of 2.667; the norm for other accredited California schools is generally a 3.0 or higher.

“That put our students at an unfair disadvantage, especially if you factor in the current economic environment,” says Samuel Liu, 26, president of the school’s Student Bar Association and the leader of the grading change efforts. He also says many Loyola students are ineligible for coveted clerkships that have strict G.P.A. cutoffs.

“We just wanted to match what other schools that are comparably ranked were already doing,” he said.

Nearby [University of California, Los Angeles](#), made its grading curve more lenient in the fall of 2005, in part to keep up with “nationwide shifts in grading,” said Elizabeth Cheadle, the dean of students at U.C.L.A.’s law school.

The [University of Southern California](#) and the [University of California Hastings College of the Law](#) responded by increasing their own curves last school year.

What’s more, U.S.C.’s law school dean, Robert K. Rasmussen, said he was partly inspired by the school where he previously worked, [Vanderbilt University](#) Law School, which had also changed its curve a few years ago.

These moves can create a vicious cycle like that seen in chief [executive pay](#): if every school in the bottom half of the distribution raises its marks to enter the top half of the distribution, or even just to become average, the average creeps up. This puts pressure on schools to keep raising their grades further.

Loyola Law School’s dean, Victor J. Gold, said he had already received a plea for advice from a student group at Chapman University School of Law, which will have the toughest grading curve in California after Loyola acts.

One notable school has managed to maintain the integrity of its grades through an idiosyncratic grading rubric. The [University of Chicago](#) Law School grades its students on a [scale of 155-186](#), a system so bizarre that employers are unlikely to try to match it against the 4.0 scale or letter grades used almost everywhere else.

It is unclear whether grade inflation is particularly effective at helping students get jobs, especially because many large firms adjust their expectations accordingly.

Many hiring partners say they read [Above the Law](#), a legal blog, that gleefully reports (and mocks) grade changing efforts — from leaked student memos — even when schools themselves don't announce the changes.

Employers say they also press law schools for rankings, or some indication of G.P.A.'s for the top echelon of the class. And if the school will not release that information — many do not — other accolades like honors and law journal participation provide clues to a student's relative rank.

“Every year we do our homework,” says Helen Long, the legal recruiting director at [Ropes & Gray](#), a firm with more than 1,000 lawyers. “And besides, if a school had a remarkable jump in its G.P.A.'s from one year to the next, we receive a big enough group of résumés every year that we'd probably notice.”

Smaller firms, however, may not have the resources to research every school's curve, and may see too few students from any given school to track changes from year to year.

James Wagner, the hiring partner at the 29-lawyer Boston firm Conn Kavanaugh Rosenthal Peisch & Ford, said he hadn't noticed any grade inflation in the last couple of years. But he has noticed something else new from applicants.

“About a third to half of the résumés I've been getting now profess a love of the Red Sox,” he chuckles, wondering if the students had been coached by their schools.

“But I'll bet that if you compared résumés for those same candidates,” he says, “when they apply to New York firms they love the Yankees, and for Chicago firms, it's the Cubs.”