

UP CLOSE | Tracing the elite law cycle



Photo by [Joy Chen](#)

Roughly 25 percent of Yale Law's class of 2013 received undergraduate degrees from either Harvard College or Yale College; nearly 50 percent of the class went to schools in the Ivy League or Stanford.

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It didn't take long for Olivia Luna LAW '13 to notice that something was a bit odd about the other first-years she met at Yale Law School this fall.

Luna — who studied history and anthropology at University of California, Berkeley in her undergraduate years — said she and her friends often joked that around half of their peers seemed to come from Harvard or Yale. Curiosity got the better of Luna, who said she set out to find whether the inside joke had some truth to it earlier this year.

Using her copy of the Yale Law School Facebook, Luna took a tally and found that Yale and Harvard graduates made up roughly 25 percent of her class. When graduates from Stanford and the other six Ivy League schools were factored in, the percentage reached 50 — but Luna said she was amazed the number was that low.



Photo by Joy Chen

“My friends and I were mostly just curious to see the actual numbers,” she said of her motivation for counting her classmates. “I was surprised that Harvard and Yale made up only 25 percent, because I felt like they dominated the class.”

Luna’s count, though far from official, seems consistent with an overall trend at YLS: Of the juris doctor candidates who are set to graduate next month, roughly 30 percent attended Harvard or Yale before matriculating at Yale Law.

For those students who didn’t attend Harvard or Yale — and especially for those who didn’t attend any Ivy League school — it can be difficult to adjust to Yale Law, said Kevin Love Hubbard LAW ’12, who earned his bachelor’s degree from Pennsylvania State University.

Making friends was trying at first, Hubbard said, as students from Yale and Harvard already seemed to know each other at the beginning of his first term. While Hubbard said undergraduate alma maters come to matter less as students spend more time at Yale Law, he still finds that his undergraduate pedigree has had an impact on him.

“I’ve had a sense that I’m always one step behind, that there’s something everyone else knows that I’m missing,” he said. “Whether that’s true or not, I don’t know.”

Whatever these students may feel they have missed out on, Yale Law school tends to equalize opportunity for its alumni regardless of their undergraduate educations. Most Yale Law students enter another exclusive world upon graduation, where they are heavily recruited by the nation’s top law firms and law schools and often go on to shape the nation’s politics and legal framework.



Photo by Joy Chen

SPEAKING UP AND SETTLING IN

Barrett Anderson LAW '12, a native Iowan and graduate of the University of Iowa, said he knew little about Yale Law before applying other than that it was a “great school.” He said he was encouraged to apply by two friends who were attending Yale Law at the time. Now that Anderson is enrolled, he said he thinks the Law School succeeds in selecting a diverse class composed of people from a variety of backgrounds.

“We give a good flavor to the class,” he said. “If Yale Law were all Ivy League, it would lack me walking around talking about how much I love Iowa. They do a great job of selecting classes here.”

This doesn't mean Anderson's transition to the school has been without bumps. Coming to Yale Law from a large state university, Anderson said he felt less comfortable than others when interacting with students in smaller class settings or meeting with professors during office hours.

Luna's friend, Zach Strassburger LAW '12, graduated from Wesleyan University — a private liberal arts institution just 30 miles away from Yale — with a degree in feminist, gender and sexuality studies. Strassburger said that while he comes from “a privileged background,” there is a difference between Ivy League students and others at YLS, and that difference is most noticeable in the classroom.

“Students from Harvard and Yale seem more comfortable speaking up in class,” Strassburger said. “Kids in the Ivy League are taught that their words are valuable even if they don't have much to say. Students who don't come from that background, including me, are less comfortable speaking up.”

Yale Law tries to accommodate students during their transition to law school, YLS Director of Public Affairs Janet Conroy said, ranging from small class sizes in the students' first years to student-student mentoring programs.

The school's effort to support students on an individual basis is apparent to some from the beginning. Luna said one of the biggest differences between Berkeley and Yale Law is how “hands-on” Yale Law administrators are — which she first noticed when Dean of Admissions Asha Rangappa LAW '00 attended a party for new students during the YLS admitted students weekend.

“It really made you feel like the faculty and staff really care about you as an individual, whereas at Berkeley I just felt like a face in the crowd,” Luna said.



Photo by Joy Chen

A DIVERSE CLASS

Despite the large proportion of students from Ivy League institutions, Yale Law School prides itself on the diversity of its admitted classes. In the 2009-'10 enrollment season, the student body came from 185 different institutions, 48 states and several other countries. Yale Law's diversity extends beyond its students' undergraduate institutions: About half of all J.D. students were female and about 28 percent were members of minority groups.

Conroy said that Rangappa reads each application before handing some off to faculty members for evaluation. Because about 60 different YLS faculty are involved in the admissions process, the significance of each student's qualifications and biography — including a student's undergraduate alma mater — varies.

"I imagine that some take note of [where a student attended college] while others might focus more on the personal statement, or the recommendations, or some other aspect," Conroy said. "We think that our admissions process, while time-consuming on our end, helps to build a very well qualified, interesting and diverse class."

Yale Law makes an effort to attract students from an array of schools, said Conroy, who described Yale Law's recruiting schedule as "very active." This year, the Admissions Office team gave more than 40 presentations at recruitment fairs and schools and online "webinars." Many of these programs were targeted at non-Ivy League schools, such as New York University, Claremont McKenna College and Georgetown University.

Yale Law's online presence and its website also helps democratize the admissions process, Conroy added, as it is accessible to students regardless of the college they attend.

The fact that many students at Yale Law come from Harvard or Yale does not necessarily mean that such students are not diverse, Conroy said. Ivy League institutions in general have been successful in increasing the diversity of their own student bodies, she added.



Yale College Dean of Admissions Jeff Brenzel '75 said in an email to the News April 16 that Yale aims for both socioeconomic and racial diversity in its admissions process. According to statistics given by Brenzel, the number of students receiving Pell Grants at Yale has increased from about 10 percent to about 14 percent over the past two years, noting that this was also partly because of increased eligibility for the grants.

COMING FROM 'A LIFE OF PRIVILEGE'

Still, no orientation program could minimize the shock Luna said she felt when she learned more about Yale College; specifically, about how pampered students at Yale College are.

"I was a little bit horrified to find that they have so many things taken care of for them in the residential college unit," she said.

Luna said she considers the libraries, dining halls and academic support services that are available to undergraduates parts of "a life of privilege."

Additionally, access to these resources is not granted to many Yale Law or graduate students — unless they attended Yale College as undergraduates.

Strassburger said that law students who hail from Yale College are more connected to the benefits of campus life; some, she said, still use the gyms in their previous residential colleges.

Students who are not from Yale do not always know how to access these resources, she added, which can feel unfair.

Alison Frick '07 LAW '12 and Aaron Zelinsky '06 LAW '10 said that their alumni status made them feel more connected to the campus as a whole. Students who come from Yale College are better acclimated to the residential college system, Zelinsky said, and often already know many people in the community.

Frick added that she spends much of her time in her residential college, Davenport, as a graduate affiliate and called that position "an enormous benefit."

"[It's] not just the food and the access to the gym," Frick said, "but the physical break from the Law School community."

Luna said the amenities granted to Yale students are a far cry from what students had at Berkeley, adding that attending Yale Law has inspired "a fierce pride in coming from a public school and not an Ivy."

Video

Roundtable: From UC Berkeley to Yale Law



THE TOP OF THE TOP

In the end, all five non-Ivy League law students interviewed agreed that their undergraduate backgrounds

eventually became less central to their experiences at YLS.

These students have much in common with their peers from the Ancient Eight: All were accepted at Yale Law, they said, and are striving towards similar paths after that.

The exclusivity of the legal profession is reinforced at top law firms, according to a study by Lauren Rivera '00 published this year, an assistant professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Rivera interviewed roughly 40 professionals involved in law firm recruitment and hiring, and found that these people give particular preference to candidates from Harvard, Yale or Stanford law schools when reviewing job applications.

Although many recruiters actually believed that graduates of non-elite law schools were more prepared for the practical aspects of being a lawyer, they still preferred to hire from super-elite schools because of the prestige associated with them.

Some of the country's most prestigious law firms have significant concentrations of Yale Law and Harvard Law graduates. For example, 105 of roughly 500 lawyers at Cravath, Swaine & Moore — the second-ranked law firm in this year's Vault rankings, which were compiled from a survey of 15,000 attorneys at 165 firms — graduated from Yale or Harvard Law. By contrast, the firm has six lawyers from the George Washington University Law School, two from the University of Notre Dame Law School and one from Emory University Law School.

Representatives from Cravath, Swaine & Moore did not respond to requests for comment.

Andrew Thomas LAW '09, who attended the University of Iowa before Yale Law and now works at the Patton Boggs law firm in Manhattan, said that the disproportionate number of recruits from top law schools creates an atmosphere of competition.

"At top law firms, you deal with people who are used to measuring you against a group, or others against themselves," he said. "The culture is of a people who are still gauging each other based on the law school they went to, and, after a while, based on the law firm they work for."

TARGETING WHO?

For students, Anderson said, this targeted recruiting has benefits and drawbacks. While his classmates are well-qualified for these jobs, he said, the law firms' selective bias overlooks other candidates — such as his friends at the University of Iowa Law School — who may be just as qualified.

The shrinking legal job market has been widely publicized in the media, most notably in a New York Times article titled "Is Law School a Losing Game?" in January. But in interviews with the News that month, Yale Law administrators emphasized that their employment rates have held steady.

Luna said that the recruiting system reinforces the system of class privilege, in which richer students are more likely to attend good high schools, get into elite colleges and professional schools, and then score jobs at top-ranked firms.

Although she is only in her first year at Yale Law, Luna said she already has a summer job at one of the top firms in Seattle — a job she feels she may not have gotten if she attended a different law school.

But this is not always the case, said Hedy Aponte, director of attorney recruiting and development at the prestigious Kirkland & Ellis firm's Washington D.C. Office. Aponte said her firm sometimes chooses

recruitment targets based on geographic proximity to the firm rather than elite status.

“We like to hire diverse students from a number of different schools,” she said. “And while we think Harvard, Yale and Stanford are we great, we like to hire more broadly.”

Kirkland & Ellis focuses on schools ranging from Yale to University of Virginia to George Washington University, she added.

When asked to provide data on how many Kirkland & Ellis lawyers were hired from Harvard, Yale and Stanford, Aponte declined.

TRACING IVY HERITAGE

Long before Harvard and Yale undergraduates enter the legal profession themselves, many are taught by alumni of the same schools — and schools of thought — while pursuing their JDs.

Brian Leiter, professor of law at the University of Chicago Law School, published a study showing that a disproportionate number of professors are taught at Yale and Harvard law schools.

Focusing on those that had graduated since 1995, he found that of 7,000 faculty from across 43 leading law schools, roughly 1,700 went to Harvard or Yale Law Schools — again, nearly 25 percent. He added that if one were to consider graduates of University of Chicago, Columbia, Stanford and University of Michigan law schools as well, the percentage would increase to 40.

In an email to the News Apr. 13, Leiter said he finds it troubling that just six schools control so much of the legal academic world.

“It is not a healthy situation, and no doubt accounts for a lot of what ails legal scholarship and explains the legal academy’s susceptibility to intellectual fads,” he said. “As long as the fad takes hold at a couple of feeder schools to legal academia, it’s guaranteed to spread.”

For example, he said, Critical Legal Studies — a field that criticizes the dominant legal ideology of modern Western society — emerged from Harvard in the 1970s and 1980s, and swept many schools before dying out about 20 years ago.

In “Schools for Misrule: Legal Academia and an Overlawyered America,” released this March, Walter Olson ’75 also takes issue with the influence elite law schools have on legal education. Olson, senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies, said in an interview with the News that professors trained at elite law schools tend to value theory more than practice, which leaves students out of touch with the rest of society.

“Harvard and Yale graduates like complicated law more than the general public,” he said. “Legal academics like these complications because they are intellectually stimulating, but most lawyers just want to be able to advise their clients to either do or avoid doing something.”

This perceived educational homogeneity extends at its highest level to political leaders and even to the United States Supreme Court: The New York Times reported in July 2010 that since 1956, there have never been fewer than three justices from Harvard or Yale sitting on the court at any given time.

ONE OF OUR OWN

For better or for worse, Yale Law welcomes many of its own alumni back to campus as professors to train new generations of lawyers, politicians and scholars.

About 25 percent of these students hail from Harvard or Yale, and an overwhelming majority of their professors share similar backgrounds. Judging by the Faculty page on the Yale Law School website, roughly 80 percent of Yale Law School faculty attended either Yale or Harvard at some point during their educational careers.

Yale Librarian and Professor S. Blair Kauffman suggested that administrators at Yale Law may be more comfortable hiring students who attended the school because they are familiar with their work and can verify the rigor of their academic experience.

“Yale is especially good at teaching people how to teach — it’s sort of a niche this law school has,” Kauffman said. “It gets to be self-professing, as students decide to come to Yale because they have a career in academia in mind before ever coming here, which creates a certain dynamic. I don’t think that law schools exclusively try to recruit their professors from Yale.”

Rangappa noted in a YLS admissions blog that alumni seeking law teaching positions at top schools were four times as successful as graduates of Harvard, Stanford and Chicago law schools at landing law teaching positions at the top 18 law schools over the past 15 years.

But while Harvard and Yale may be the norm for many top legal professionals, lawyers and legal scholars can still find their way to the top without the help of an Ivy League pedigree.

Kauffman, for example, never attended an Ivy League institution before coming to teach at Yale.

“I’m an odd duck here, but I think that’s also because I’m the librarian — that’s my niche,” he said. “There aren’t very many of us [from state schools], so I think we are the exceptions that prove the rule that most professors do come from elite schools.”

With bachelors and law degrees from University of Missouri, Kauffman worked as a professor and librarian at the University of Wisconsin Law School in Madison before coming to Yale.

Kauffman said that he has never felt alienated or uncomfortable about his educational background at Yale Law, where he assumed his post in 1994.

“My colleagues here are just incredibly nice and pleasant and open, and they never make me feel I’m not good enough because I didn’t go to a Harvard or a Yale,” he said. “Everyone realizes that getting here itself is the achievement.”