2026
LAW SCHOOL HIRING REPORT

Recruiting Trends, Retention, and the Future of Legal Talent

SurePoint

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Executive Summary

The U.S. legal talent pipeline is packed, with the highest levels of law school applications, admissions, and graduates in more than a decade.

Law school applications grew by 18% in 2025 and are up nearly 12% so far in 2026, driven by economic and political instability and a desire to get ahead of the artificial intelligence revolution.

That energy at the front of the funnel is matched at the other end, as traditional hiring procedures like on-campus interviewing (OCI) have been replaced by rapid, aggressive scouting by law firms. In 2025, law firms made 85% of the next summer's offers before July, up from 34% the year before; roughly one-third of law firm offices have stopped OCI entirely. Law firms are assessing 1Ls with a single semester of grades (or less), often with bundled "jumbo offers" that take candidates off the market before they have a baseline knowledge of the profession.

In 2025, 17% of law school graduates were hired by Am Law 200 firms, but the exact composition of that group is changing as well. Graduates from T14 schools—the nation's most prestigious schools, as determined by U.S. News & World Report—accounted for about half of Am Law 200 entry-level hires in 2015; by 2025 the share had fallen to a third.

SurePoint's retention analysis helps explain why: Entry-level associates from non-T14 schools are more likely to stay long enough to complete training—and ultimately, become profitable.

"The traditional rhythm of career services no longer works when 85% of next summer offers were made before July."

Brenda Smith Porter
Assistant Director of Career Services,
Penn State Dickinson Law

Moreover, the data shows that within the T14, rank does not necessarily correlate to long-term success.

Firms are also hiring fewer new graduates as a share of their associate ranks. In 2025, laterals accounted for 51% of associate hires in the Am Law 200 and 62% at midsize firms. Demand for laterals with AI expertise grew 106% year over year, reflecting firms' willingness to pay for specialized AI experience even as many predict AI will reduce demand for some entry-level work.

This report examines the forces reshaping legal hiring—from rising interest in law school to evolving entry-level recruiting to changing law firm hiring strategies. Together, these insights can help law schools, law firms, and recruiters understand today's competitive environment—and prepare for what's next.

2025: The Legal Talent Pipeline

76,840
Law School Applications

Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) data shows 76,840 individuals applied to ABA-accredited law schools in 2025, an 18% year over year increase and the highest applicant volume since 2011.

65%
Acceptance Rate

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of applicants received at least one offer of admission from an ABA-accredited law school.

49,783
First-Year Law Student Enrolled

Of those admitted, 49,783 students ultimately enrolled and began law school in 2025—an 11% year over year increase and the highest entering class since 2012.

42,723
Law School Graduates

According to LSAC data, 42,723 students graduated from law school, an 8% year over year increase and the highest number of graduates since 2010.

7,426
Joined Am Law 200 Firms

SurePoint data shows that 7,426 of these graduates subsequently joined Am Law 200 firms as entry-level associates, representing 17% of all law school graduates.

LSAC also reports a 14% year over year increase in LSAT takers, including an 8% rise in first-time test takers. As demand grows, law schools face pressure on acceptance rates while expanding class sizes. In 2025, both average LSAT scores and the number of admitted applicants reached five-year highs.

For law schools and law firms, the talent pipeline remains strong. The challenge is attracting, identifying, and retaining top candidates in an increasingly competitive market.

As of May 2026:
Interest in Law School Is Rising Across Every LSAC Metric

9%
increase in law school applicants vs. 2025

12%
increase in law school applications vs. 2025

27%
increase in applicants vs. the past four-year average

30%
increase in applications vs. the past four-year average

Recruiting is Changing Faster Than Ever

Law Firm Recruiting Cycles Intensify

Law school recruiting is moving earlier, faster, and becoming increasingly competitive. According to the **National Association for Law Placement**, law firms made 85% of offers before July in the 2025 hiring cycle, up sharply from 34% in 2024. Many firms now begin recruiting for 2L summer positions as early as October 1 of students' 1L year.

Jumbo Offers Become the Norm

Law firms are also making multiyear commitments, dubbed “jumbo offers,” that take candidates off the market by providing employment for both the 1L and 2L summers. In 2025, 10% of law firms with a 1L summer program made at least one jumbo offer—often before students had completed a full semester of grades. Nearly 90% of firms extending jumbo offers included a financial incentive.

On-Campus Interviews Decline

Traditional recruiting programs like OCI continue to lose ground. Nearly 30% of law firms no longer participate, and only 20% of offers for 2026 2L programs came through law school-sponsored recruiting. OCI-generated offers fell **44% from 2024 to 2025**. As Morrison Foerster's director of attorney recruiting told **Bloomberg Law**, "Were we to wait for traditional OCI... we feel we would be missing out on some talent that's getting picked up earlier in the process."

85%
of law firm offers were made before July in 2025 (vs. 34% in 2024)

10%
of law firm offices made at least one jumbo offer in 2025

30%
of law firm offices no longer participate in OCI whatsoever

2026 "T14" Law Schools Announced

Between 2025 and 2026, the "T14," **U.S. News & World Report's** top 14 law schools, saw only small changes. These schools, comprising the top 7% of ABA-approved law programs, are ranked using an algorithm that evaluates employment outcomes, faculty resources, student credentials, and professional assessments.

The 2026 edition remained consistent with previous years. Eleven schools in the 2026 T14 have appeared on every list for the past five years. Stanford University, the University of Chicago, and Yale University have held the top three positions for the past three years, though the order has varied slightly.

What changed in 2026?

- Stanford now holds the No. 1 spot outright after tying with Yale in 2025. It has shared the top position for the past three years.
- Chicago moved up from No. 3 to tie with Yale for No. 2.
- Three schools moved out of the T14: the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Texas - Austin tied at No. 16, and Georgetown University dropped to No. 18.
- One school joined the T14: Cornell University moved up from No. 18 in 2025 to tie for No. 13 in 2026.

2026 U.S. News T14 Law Schools

#1	Stanford University	-
#2	University of Chicago	+1
#2	Yale University	-1
#4	University of Pennsylvania (Carey)	+1
#4	University of Virginia	-
#6	Harvard University	-
#7	Duke University	-1
#7	New York University	+1
#9	Columbia University	+1
#9	Northwestern University (Pritzker)	+1
#9	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	-1
#12	Vanderbilt University	+2
#13	Cornell University	+5
#13	University of California, Los Angeles	-1
#13	Washington University in St. Louis	-1

Where Am Law 200 Firms Find Talent

One of the primary ranking criteria for the T14 is graduates' employment. But how do the T14 schools perform in terms of placements in the Am Law 200?

We analyzed entry-level associate hiring by law school and found that among the top 50 schools that produced the most Am Law 200 hires, T14 schools accounted for 47% of the placements, with 2,540 of the 5,428 lawyers hired.

However, the top law schools that generated the most Am Law 200 placements did not exactly parallel the T14.

> "Our biggest challenge isn't finding strong candidates—it's identifying the ones who will thrive at our firm, and for whom our firm is the right fit."
>
> ***Lisa Visconti-Liss***
> ***Senior Recruiting Manager & Legal Talent Coach, Holland & Hart LLP***

Most Am Law 200 Entry-Level Hires in 2025

* 2026 T14 Law School

Law School	Total Hires	2026 U.S. News Ranking
Harvard University*	331	#6
Georgetown University	313	#18
Columbia University*	304	#9
New York University*	254	#7
University of Virginia*	207	#4
University of California, Los Angeles*	183	#13
George Washington University	178	#26
University of California, Berkeley	176	#16
Northwestern University (Pritzker)*	176	#9
Fordham University	175	#42
University of Pennsylvania (Carey)*	169	#4
Duke University*	167	#7
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*	143	#9
University of Texas at Austin	133	#16

High Performers Outside the T14

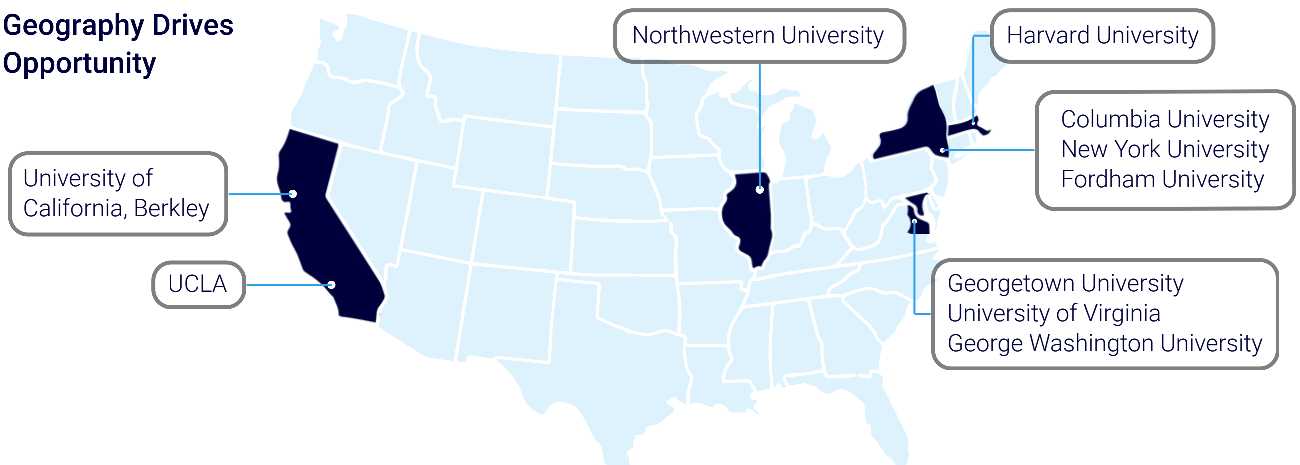
Five of the top ten law schools producing the most Am Law 200 associates in 2025 were outside the T14.

While three—University of California, Berkeley; University of Texas - Austin, and Georgetown University—ranked within the U.S. News Top 20, two notable pipelines ranked considerably lower. George Washington University, which had the seventh-most Am Law 200 associates hired, ranked No. 26 in the U.S. News rankings, while Fordham University, which had the tenth-most hires, ranked No. 42.

The results highlight the significant role geography plays in hiring. Nearly one-third of all Am Law 200 entry-level associates are based in New York or New York-area schools, including Columbia, NYU, and Fordham, which are three of the top ten sources of Big Law talent.

Notably, every school in the top ten for Am Law 200 placement is located in or near a major legal market.

Geography Drives Opportunity



City, State	Total Entry-Level Hires	% of Am Law 200 Hires
New York, NY	2,106	28%
Washington, DC	853	12%
Chicago, IL	532	7%
Los Angeles, CA	450	6%
Boston, MA	307	4%
San Francisco, CA	279	4%

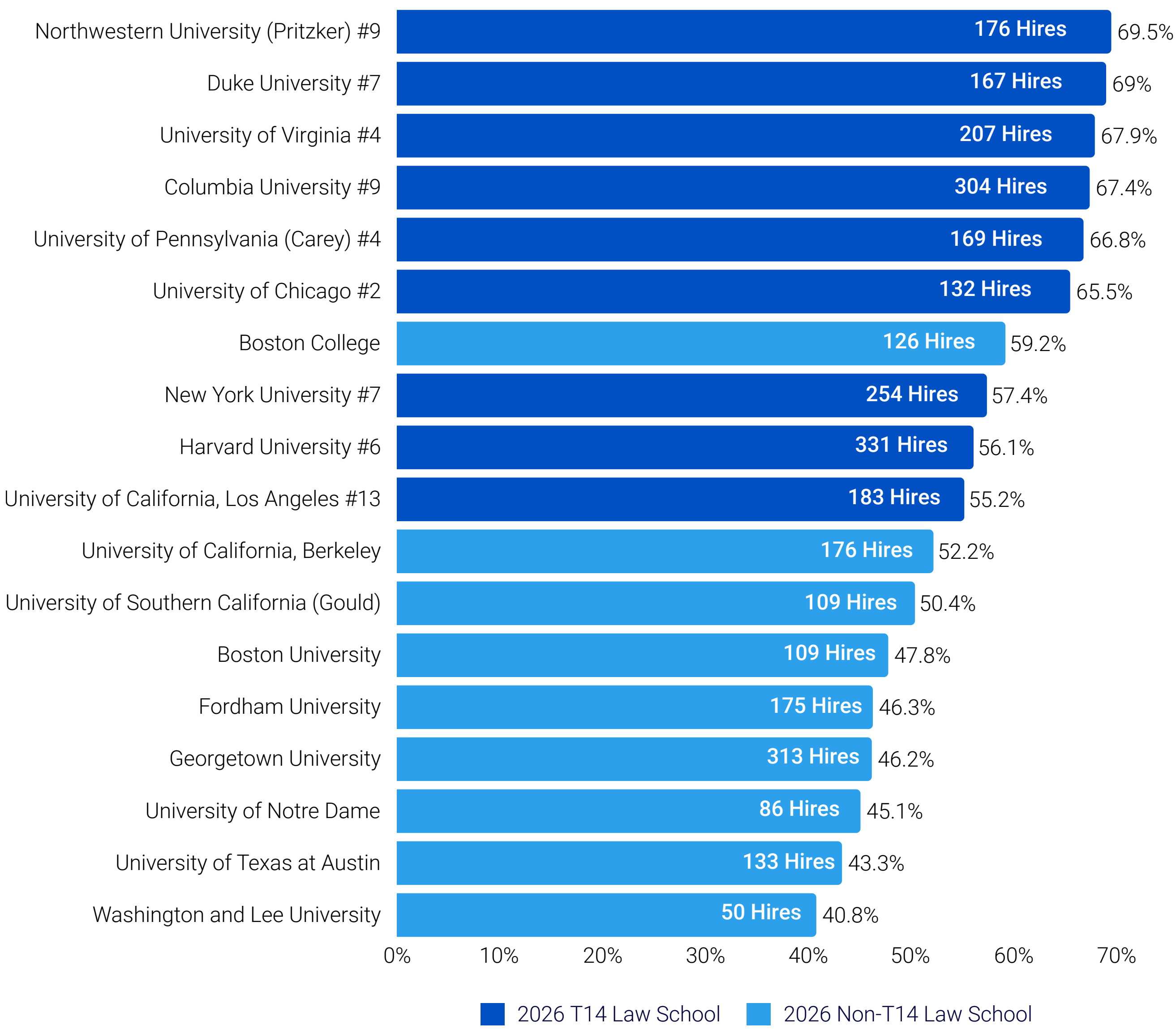
Beyond Volume: Which Schools Send the Largest Share of Graduates to Big Law?

Larger law schools produce more Am Law 200 associates than smaller institutions. Harvard University, which is the primary source of Am Law 200 associates, enrolls 1,769 students, nearly three times more than Tulane University, ranked No. 50.

For a size-neutral look at the law schools that send the most graduates to the nation's top firms, consider the percentage of each law school class hired by Am Law 200 firms, calculated using full-time enrollment data submitted to U.S. News in the rankings process.

Most 2025 Am Law 200 Entry-Level Hires Per Capita

% of Graduating Class Hired by Am Law 200

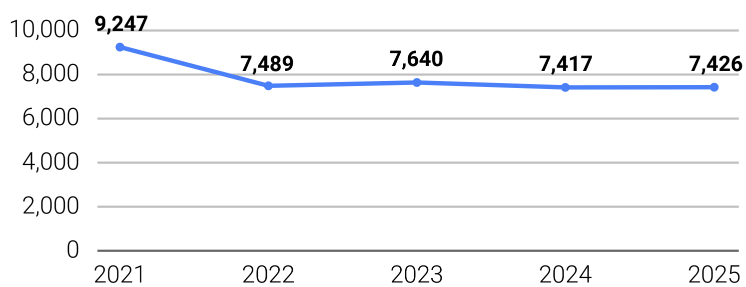


Associate Hiring Trends

Within the Am Law 200, entry-level associate hiring in 2025 stayed on pace with the past four years.

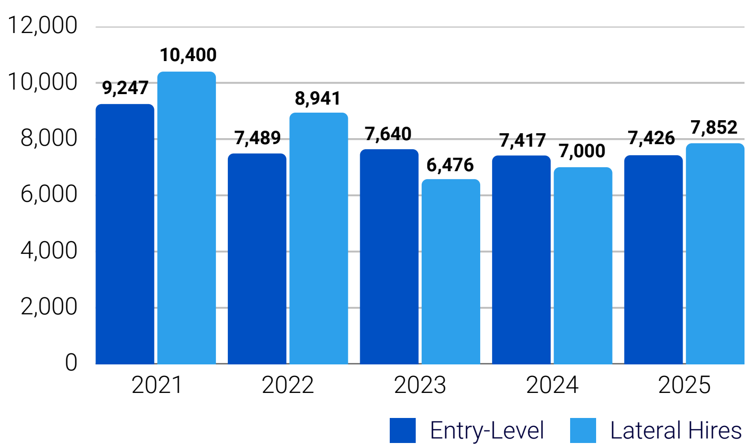
The notable exception was 2021, when firms hired unusually large first-year classes as recruiting activity rebounded from pandemic-related disruptions in 2020.

Entry-Level Associates Hired in the Am Law 200



7,426 entry-level associates were hired by Am Law 200 frms in 2025, essentially flat compared to 2024 (7,417)

Entry-Level Associate Hires vs. Lateral Hires in the Am Law 200



However, the number of lateral associates exceeded that of new law school graduates for the third time in the past five years, reflecting firms' continued desire for junior attorneys with experience (and training expenses borne by another firm).

From 2024 to 2025, associate lateral hiring increased by 12%, while entry-level hiring remained virtually flat.

Beyond Prestige: The ROI of Law School Recruiting

As first-year associate salaries rise and AI reshapes traditional law firm leverage models, firms face increasing pressure to maximize the return on talent investments.

The question is no longer where firms recruit, but which hires are most likely to stay, develop, and deliver long-term value.

To calculate the true ROI for recruiting from the nation's leading law schools, SurePoint tracked entry-level associates hired by Am Law 200 firms from 2021 to 2023 and monitored how many remained with their original firms for at least three years.

The T14 Law Schools: Am Law 200 Hiring ROI

Law School	2026 U.S. News Ranking	Hiring Retention Rate (2021-2023)
Vanderbilt University	#12	58%
Duke University	#7	54%
New York University	#7	53%
University of Virginia	#4	53%
University of California, Los Angeles	#13	52%
Northwestern University (Pritzker)	#9	51%
Washington University in St. Louis	#13	51%
Cornell University	#13	51%
University of Pennsylvania (Carey)	#4	51%
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	#9	51%
Columbia University	#9	48%
Harvard University	#6	47%
University of Chicago	#2	47%
Stanford University	#1	41%
Yale University	#2	35%

Takeaways:

- Prestige did not equal retention: Stanford, Chicago, and Yale ranked lowest among T14 schools for Am Law 200 entry-level associate ROI from 2021-2023, with three-year retention rates below 50%.
- Yale had the lowest three-year retention rate, with just over one-third of its graduates remaining at their firms.
- Vanderbilt led all T14 schools, with its graduates achieving a 58% three-year retention rate, 17% higher than Stanford, the nation's top law school.

All Law Schools:
Am Law 200 Hiring ROI

Beyond the T14, among law schools with 150 or more Am Law 200 entry-level hires, a new group of 14 schools emerged as leaders in long-term recruiting ROI.

Law School	2026 U.S. News Ranking	Hiring Retention Rate (2021-2023)
Brooklyn Law School	#105	61%
Boston University	#24	59%
Yeshiva University (Cardozo)	#59	59%
Vanderbilt University	#12	58%
University of California, Irvine	#34	57%
George Washington University	#26	57%
University of Texas at Austin	#16	56%
Fordham University	#42	56%
Boston College	#20	54%
University of Southern California (Gould)	#26	54%
University of Notre Dame	#20	54%
Duke University	#7	54%
University of California, San Francisco	#85	53%
Southern Methodist University (Dedman)	#42	53%
New York University	#7	53%

Takeaways:

- Three non-T14 law schools—Brooklyn Law School, Boston University, and Yeshiva University (Cardozo)—outperformed all T14 schools.
- The average success rate for T14 schools is 49.46%; 15 law schools outside the T14 exceeded this.
- Four public universities outside the T14 have higher average retention rates than T14 schools: UC Irvine (57.14%), UT Austin (55.92%), UCSF (53.37%), and UC Berkeley (51.01%).

"Firms are becoming much more critical about defining what makes a successful attorney—not just what makes a competitive candidate."

Katherine Allen,
Founder & CEO, Flo

ROI: Entry-Level Associates vs. Lateral Hires

Within the Am Law 200, in 2025, lateral associates accounted for 51% of all associate hires, eclipsing new law school graduates.

Meanwhile, the Am Law 200 firms expanded their recruiting efforts beyond the T14, continuing a trend present over the past decade. In 2015, T14 schools accounted for 47% of entry-level hires; in 2025, that number dropped to 33%.

But in associate hiring, which are the best long-term bets?

SurePoint tracked three categories of associates: lateral hires, entry-level hires from T14 schools, and entry-level hires from non-T14 schools.

For associates hired from 2015 to 2022—every year for which the "three-year window" has passed—entry-level associates hired from non-T14 schools had the highest retention rate.

And in every year for this same period, entry-level associates from T14 schools had the lowest.

Average Retention Rate
(2015 to 2022)

Lateral Associate Hires

52%

Entry-Level Hires: T14 School

49%

Entry-Level Hires: Non-T14 School

54%

47% → 33%

The share of Am Law 200 entry-level hires from T14 law schools fell from 47% in 2015 to 33% in 2025.

Associate ROI is a challenge for all categories, but it is the lowest for T14 entry-level hires; fewer than one in two will stay at their firm for three years.

The Traditional Partnership Track Is Changing

For decades, the traditional law firm career path was relatively straightforward: join a firm as an entry-level associate, develop your practice, and eventually advance to partnership.

Over the last decade, that model has become less common.

- In 2025, Am Law 200 firms promoted more partners than any year since 2022.
- Promotions among attorneys who joined as laterals increased 52%.
- Promotions among attorneys who joined as entry-level associates increased 46%.

The increase in promotions also reflects an evolving partnership model. Firms are expanding non-equity partner tracks to retain top talent and offer more flexible career paths.

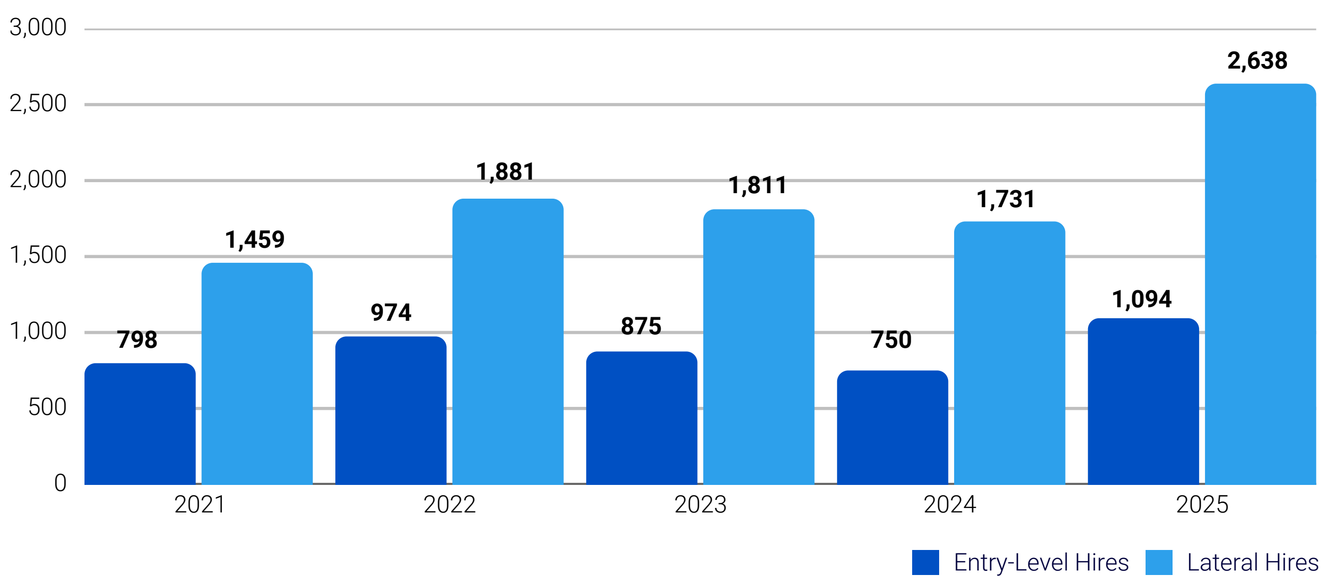
For the first time, non-equity partners make up the majority of Am Law 200 partners (50.9%).

Together, these trends signal a shift in how firms build leadership pipelines. Rather than relying solely on homegrown talent, firms are increasingly promoting lawyers with portable business, specialized expertise, and experience gained across the broader legal market.

For associates, the implication is significant.

Career advancement is becoming less tied to a single employer and more dependent on developing skills, relationships, and expertise. The path to partnership increasingly includes movement rather than advancement within a single firm.

Promotions to Partners:
Entry-Level Hire vs. Lateral Hire in the Am Law 200



Where Graduates Go After Law School

While the T14 represents a major pipeline for the nation's largest law firms, they do not recruit exclusively from these schools. SurePoint data shows that, on average, the 10 firms with the largest new associate classes hired half from the T14 and half outside it.

Am Law 200 Firms 2025 Hires

Firm	Total Hires	% of T14 Hires
Kirkland & Ellis LLP	356	42%
Latham & Watkins LLP	241	54%
Sidley Austin LLP	203	55%
Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP	157	66%
Jones Day	150	25%
Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Affiliates	149	62%
Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP	146	58%
Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP	129	77%
Covington & Burling LLP	128	65%
Cole, Scott & Kissane	125	0%

In addition, T14 graduates are increasingly being recruited by both mid-sized firms and Magic Circle firms expanding their U.S. presence. Over the past three years, Freshfields LLP and A&O Shearman, both based in the United Kingdom, have increased their recruitment of T14 graduates by 65% and 360%, respectively.

A&O Shearman's sharp increase is largely the result of the combination between Allen & Overy and Shearman & Sterling, which significantly expanded the firm's U.S. footprint. With greater access to the U.S. market, the firm has accelerated its investment in entry-level recruiting, drawing more talent from the nation's top law schools.

U.K. Firms and T14 Hiring

Firm	2023	2024	2025	Total
Freshfields LLP	26	32	43	101
A&O Shearman	5	5	23	33
Clifford Chance LLP	11	13	3	27
Linklaters LLP	4	5	7	16

Mid-Sized Firms

While fewer T14 graduates join mid-sized firms, several, including New York's Selendy Gay, have consistently hired from T14 schools over the past three years.

Mid-Sized Firms and T14 Hiring

Firm	2023	2024	2025	Total
Selendy Gay PLLC	19	10	14	43
Kellogg Hansen Todd Figel & Frederick PLLC	4	5	12	21
Keker Van Nest & Peters LLP	8	7	5	20
Desmarais LLP	4	7	5	16
Wilkinson Stekloff	3	7	5	15
Hueston Hennigan LLP	5	3	5	13
Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll PLLC	6	3	3	12
Holwell Shuster & Goldberg LLP	3	5	3	11
Michelman & Robinson LLP	5	3	2	10
McKool Smith	3	3	4	10

The law schools that comprise the mid-size law firm pipeline are distributed across the Best Law Schools rankings. Among the top 20 producers of mid-size associates, Harvard University is the only T14 institution represented.

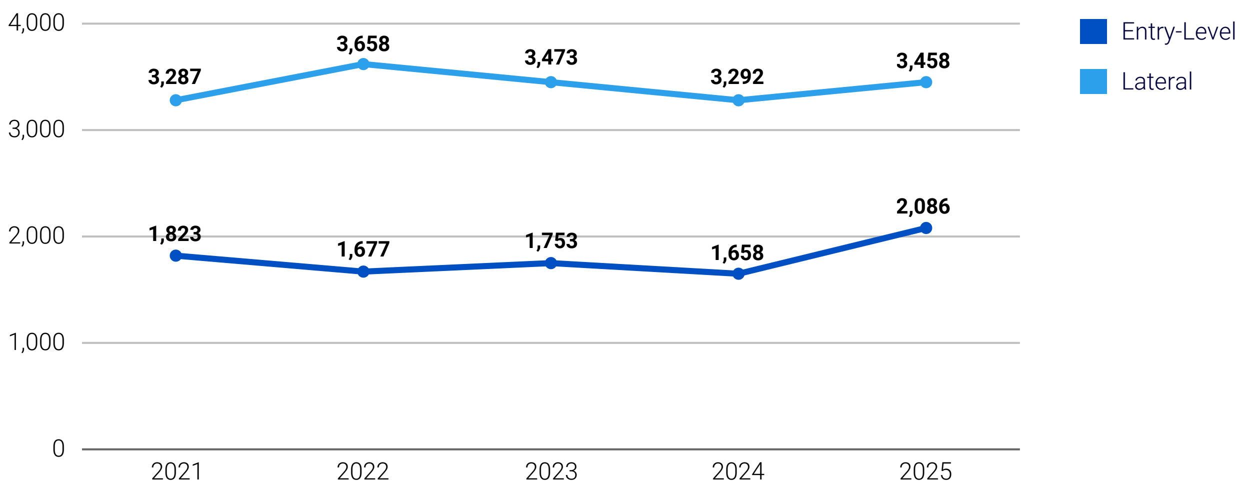
Top Law Schools for Mid-Sized Law Firm Associate Hiring

Law School	2026 U.S. News Ranking	2023	2024	2025	Total
Rutgers University	#100	40	32	48	120
Brooklyn Law School	#105	22	28	33	83
George Washington University	#26	21	26	31	78
Seton Hall University	#70	23	20	32	75
St. John’s University	#62	31	20	23	74
Stetson University	#91	31	22	18	71
South Texas College of Law Houston	#128	20	24	23	67
Indiana University, Bloomington	#49	20	19	26	65
Harvard University	**#6**	**19**	**22**	**23**	**64**
University of San Diego	#54	19	18	24	61
Georgia State University	#77	22	18	21	61
Arizona State	#44	20	17	23	60
Fordham University	#42	15	30	13	58
University of Houston Law Center	#54	24	20	14	58
Villanova University (Widger)	#49	20	13	23	56
Hofstra University (Deane)	#117	18	16	20	54
Drexel University (Kline)	#82	20	21	12	53
New York Law School	#112	18	21	12	51
University of South Carolina	#62	15	18	17	50
Yeshiva University (Cardozo)	#59	15	17	18	50

Mid-Sized Firms Favor Laterals

Mid-sized firms, which have fewer training resources than Big Law, hire nearly twice as many lateral associates as entry-level hires. Over the past five years, laterals have made up an average of 66% of associate hires.

Mid-Sized Law Firm Associate Hiring:
2021-2025



"Movement isn't a detour anymore—it's the default… I think students feel empowered when they understand that success isn't about staying put; it's about growing deliberately. Sometimes they have to move to a different geographic market to get where they want to be while they're gaining experience and developing their skills."

Brenda Smith Porter
Assistant Director of Career Services,
Penn State Dickinson Law

Practice Areas and Career Outcomes

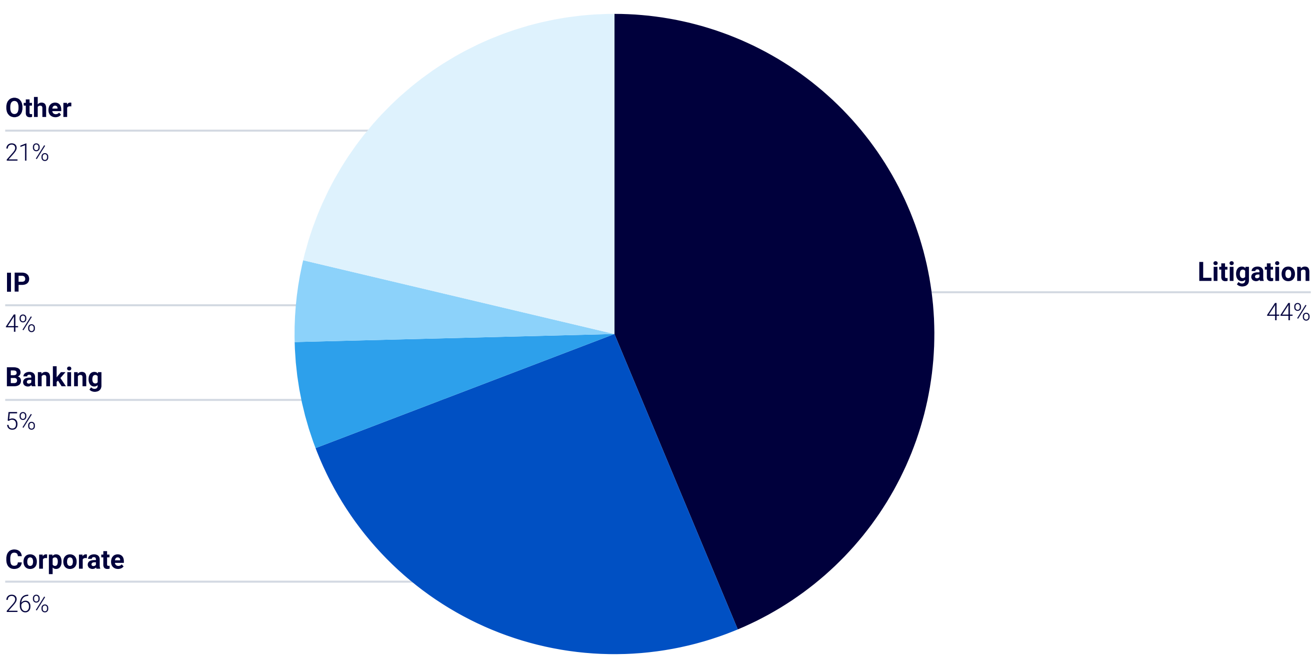
Where Entry-Level Associates Go: T14 Hires by Practice Area

Litigation remains the dominant practice for entry-level attorney placements, leading in each of the past five years, but declining slightly after a peak in 2021. At the same time, Corporate hiring fell dramatically, from 1,137 placements in 2021 to 649 in 2025—a decrease of 43%.

In terms of share, Litigation now comprises 44% of entry-level attorney assignments, up more than 8% from 2021; the other practice area with an increasing share is Banking, which grew 2%. Assignments to Corporate, IP, and other specialty groups declined.

Nearly 70% of entry-level hires from the T14 will be placed in the stalwart subjects of Litigation or Corporate.

T14 Hires by Practice Area
2025



Which Practice Areas Retain Talent Best: ROI by Practice Area

Again, defining success as associates staying for three years or more, we turn to the data for 2022 T14 graduates.

Among the practice areas that recruited 20 or more entry-level associates from T14 schools, Healthcare had the highest retention rate, with two-thirds of associates staying three years or more. The most volatile: Labor & Employment, with 38%.

This is not an isolated incident for Labor & Employment. It had the lowest retention rates for the T14 graduating classes of 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Among 2025 graduates of T14 schools, early warning signs are evident in Real Estate, which has shed more than 15% of its associates in their first year.

"Most students arrive [at law school] with broad labels—litigation, corporate, public interest—but very little sense of the actual work."

Brenda Smith Porter
Assistant Director of Career Services,
Penn State Dickinson Law

Retention Rates by Practice Area: T14 Hires

Practice	Total T14 Hires (2022)	Retention Rate (2022-2025)
Healthcare	24	67%
Corporate	773	56%
Real Estate	58	53%
IP	138	53%
Tax	55	53%
Litigation	1,069	45%
Banking	112	41%
Labor & Employment	56	38%

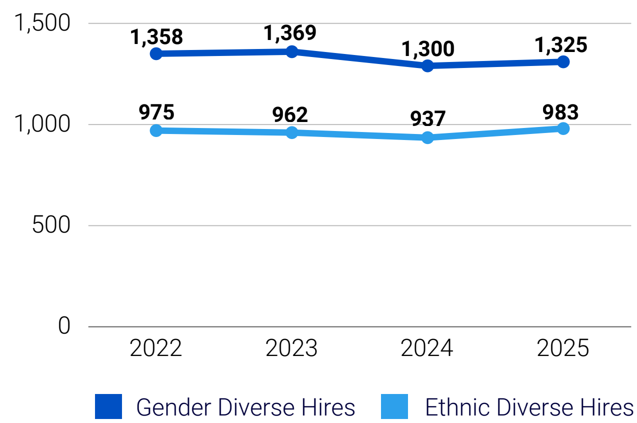
Diversity Outcomes

Does the ROI Story Hold for Diverse Talent?

Overall, the Am Law 200's recruitment of diverse entry-level attorneys—both by gender and ethnicity—from T14 schools has remained relatively consistent over the past four years.

Harvard University and Columbia University consistently lead in both categories for the total number of diverse hires; they are also the two largest T14 schools by total enrollment.

T14 Entry-Level Hiring in Am Law 200: Diverse Hires



ROI in Diversity Hiring

To assess retention, consider the entry-level associates hired from T14 schools in 2022; these lawyers have been at their firms long enough to pass the critical three-year window.

- Among female hires from T14 schools, an average of 50% remain, with the highest retention coming from the University of California, Los Angeles (65%), followed by the University of Virginia (56%) and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (55%).
- Among ethnic-diverse hires from T14 schools, the average retention rate is 47%. UCLA leads retention here, too, at 64%, followed by Vanderbilt University (62%) and Duke University (54%).

Despite being ranked No. 2 in the 2026 U.S. News' T14 law schools, Yale has the lowest associate placement success rates for female hires (31%) and ethnically diverse hires (32%) of any T14 school. Among all law schools with 150 or more Am Law 200 placements, Yale also ranks lowest (35%).

Yale's recruits have prestigious credentials, but most do not stay long-term.

The Future of Legal Hiring

Laterals vs. Entry-Level Hires

For much of the past decade, law firms have balanced two talent strategies: investing in entry-level associates or acquiring experienced attorneys through lateral hiring. Increasingly, the market has favored the latter.

In 2025, lateral associates accounted for 51% of associate hires in the Am Law 200, marking the third time in five years that laterals outnumbered new law school graduates. Mid-sized firms leaned even more heavily on experienced talent, with laterals representing nearly two-thirds of associate hires.

The preference is understandable. Laterals arrive with practical experience, require less training, and contribute billable work more quickly. Yet SurePoint's retention analysis suggests the decision is not as straightforward as many firms assume. While lateral associates outperform T14 entry-level hires in long-term retention, entry-level associates hired from non-T14 schools demonstrate the highest overall success rates.

The implication is that firms may need to move beyond traditional assumptions about prestige and experience. The most effective hiring strategy may not be choosing between laterals and entry-level talent, but identifying the candidates most likely to remain, develop, and generate long-term value regardless of pedigree.

AI Reshapes Both the Work and Who Does It

As their clients grapple with AI's effects on copyright, privacy, compliance, and liability, law firms are building teams dedicated to AI—and recruiting attorneys with experience in it.

That demand is being filled through lateral hiring. **SurePoint's 2025 State of the Legal Industry Report** found lateral associate hiring within the AI specialty grew 106% in 2025, outpacing both partner and counsel activity. From cross-border regulation to product liability, law firms need specific AI expertise, and they would rather buy it than build it.

At the same time, AI tools are increasingly handling work that once fell to junior associates. A **Citi report** found that 86% of large law firms planned to increase their associate ranks through 2027, but only 35% plan to grow their first-year classes. Two-thirds expect a significant change to the lawyer leverage model by 2035.

Recruiting Cycle Sped Up

Perhaps the most immediate challenge facing legal hiring is speed.

The recruiting cycle has shifted dramatically in just a few years. Firms now extend the vast majority of summer associate offers before July, increasingly recruit students during their first year of law school, and rely less on traditional on-campus interview programs. In some cases, students are making career decisions before completing a full semester of grades or gaining meaningful exposure to legal practice.

For firms, accelerated recruiting creates an opportunity to secure top talent before competitors. For students and law schools, however, it raises important questions. Candidates are being asked to evaluate firms, practice areas, and career paths earlier than ever, often with limited information and experience.

The accelerated recruiting cycle, direct recruitment model, and trend toward "jumbo offers" demonstrate that today's market strongly favors junior legal talent. Firms are competing aggressively for promising candidates, extending offers earlier, and investing in relationships long before graduation.

Yet the long-term outlook tells a more complicated story.

At the same time firms are accelerating entry-level recruiting, they are increasingly prioritizing experienced lateral talent, investing in attorneys with specialized skills, and preparing for a future in which artificial intelligence reshapes traditional associate development paths. The result is a market where demand for top law students remains intense today, even as questions emerge about the size and structure of future entry-level classes.

Taken together, the trends explored throughout this report point to a legal hiring market in transition. Talent remains abundant, but firms are becoming more selective in how they evaluate it. Recruiting is happening earlier, AI is reshaping expectations, and retention—not prestige alone—is emerging as a more meaningful measure of hiring success. The institutions that adapt to these realities will be best positioned to compete for the next generation of legal talent.

"I think we may see a resurgence of 3L hiring, clerk hiring, and lawyers with one to two years of experience because that person has way more experience than a second-semester law student."

Katherine Allen,
Founder & CEO, Flo

How Law Schools Can Adapt

Legal academia must adapt to an increasingly fast-paced, frenetic hiring process unless and until some intervention occurs. Such intervention, however, appears unlikely given the antitrust concerns that led NALP to retire its recruiting and timing guidelines in 2018. In the meantime, there are key actions law schools can take:

- **Engage before school starts:** Today's 1Ls are not only learning how to adjust to the rigors of law school, but they are also navigating a new and aggressive recruiting gauntlet. George Washington University provides an online "Pre-1L" course that helps with classroom readiness and provides networking opportunities. Such programs could address resume drafting, interview coaching, and recruitment protocols.

- **Introduce students to real work environments earlier:** Today, 1Ls may be interviewing for law firm positions without knowing whether they favor Litigation or Corporate (or whether they enjoy the law whatsoever). Brigham Young University (Clark), for example, offers immersive "academies" in trial work, appellate, deals, immigration and more, guiding students through mock exercises inside law firm offices. These had traditionally been offered in the spring, after the 1L year; in response to the expedited recruiting cycle, BYU Law has shifted these to the first 1L semester starting in 2026.

- **Address potential bias in the system:** Direct recruitment favors law students with connections at law firms, elite credentials, and those who take time to research firms, apply, and interview independently. Schools should work to provide support systems for first-generation college graduates, law students who work full-time, and other groups traditionally underrepresented in the legal industry.

What to Watch For:

In early 2026, students from 18 law schools—including every member of this year's T14—sent a letter to the American Bar Association asking it to review the issue of accelerated recruitment. The letter asked the ABA to consider soliciting input from students, schools and employers on the current situation; develop new policies for law school recruitment; and evaluate potential accreditation options related to the first-year experience.

The ABA confirmed receipt to the Yale Daily News but, as of this writing, has not taken action.

How One School Is Adapting

The University of Chicago (tied for No. 2 in the T14) offers a roadmap for incorporating AI into the law school experience in a purposeful way.

“By incorporating AI thoughtfully across the curriculum, ... the Law School is ensuring its graduates not only adapt to a changing profession, but lead it.”

Dean Adam Chilton,
University of Chicago School of Law

Chicago proactively worked to address AI’s impact on legal education and the profession. In addition to revamping its legal research and writing curriculum to phase in AI use, it developed programs to build:

"Students shouldn't shy away from AI... they should bring those skills to contribute to the firm."

Lisa Visconti-Liss
Senior Recruiting Manager & Legal Talent Coach,
Holland & Hart LLP

AI fluency.

Chicago includes a specific AI orientation for all new students and developed 1L modules designed to ensure all students have a “minimum level of literacy with generative AI.”

AI expertise.

The school added upper-level electives to bolster students’ capabilities with the technology, including Advanced Legal Writing in the Age of AI; Digital Lawyering: Advocacy in the Age of AI; and Generative AI and Legal Practice.

AI opportunity.

Working with a legal tech entrepreneur alumnus, Chicago launched an AI Lab where students can create new AI tools.

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Special thanks to **Katherine Hollar Barnard** for their guidance in structuring and drafting this report.

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The report is compiled and analyzed using data from SurePoint Legal Insights and research as of June 2026 and does not include recent news and events that occurred after that period.

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