

Organ: 2020 Legal Ed Data Show Rebound In Transfer Market

By [Jerry Organ](#)

This blog posting updates my blog postings over the last several years — [2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#), regarding what we know about the transfer market. With the ABA's posting of the [2020 Standard 509 Reports](#), we now have seven years (2014-2020) of more detailed transfer data from which to glean insights about the transfer market among law schools.

NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF TRANSFERS REBOUND IN 2020

As shown in Table 1 below, the number of transfers in 2020 increased to 1612 (4.2%). For the last several years, the transfer market had been shrinking, having declined from 5.5% in 2014, to 4.7% in 2016, to 4.0% in 2018, and down to 3.4% in 2019. Aside from a slight bump in 2017, this is the first meaningful increase in transfers in many years, although the level is still less than in 2015-2017 when there were more than 1700 transfers.

Table 1 – Number of Transfers and Percentage of Transfers from 2014-2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of Transfers	2187	1979	1749	1797	1494	1294	1612
Previous Year First Year Enrollment	39,800	38,000	37,100	37,100	37,300	38,400	38,500
% of Previous First-Year Total	5.5%	5.2%	4.7%	4.8%	4.0%	3.4%	4.2%

Some of this increase is attributable to the students transferring from Concordia to Idaho. Idaho doesn't normally show up on the transfer list, but this year it has 105 transfers as a result of Concordia announcing its closure. But that only explains part of the increase of more than 300 transfers between 2019 and 2020. I believe the most likely additional explanation for this bump in transfers was the financial uncertainty for law schools associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly uncertainty regarding the number of first-year students who would show up at law schools that had announced during the summer a shift to online instruction for the fall semester. With uncertainty regarding first-year enrollment and revenue, some law schools may have hedged by looking for more transfers. For example, Harvard took 65 transfer students — the largest class of transfers it has taken in a number of years. Its entering class this year was only 501 — when it has consistently welcomed 560 students almost every year for the last several years. Knowing it might be welcoming a smaller entering class, I suspect Harvard made a conscious decision to welcome more transfers to counterbalance the loss of revenue from a

smaller first-year class. Other law schools on the list that showed an increase between 2019 and 2020 included George Washington (up 22), Berkeley (up 19) and Florida (up 11). Relatedly, some students might have considered transferring because online learning might have made it possible for them to attend another law school without having to move, such that the transaction costs of transferring might have seemed smaller than in prior years. And if students were going to be taking online courses anyway at the law school at which they started, why not transfer and take online courses at a law school that is more highly ranked.

SOME LAW SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO DOMINATE THE TRANSFER MARKET

Table 2 lists the top 15 law schools participating in the transfer market in descending order in Summer 2017 (fall 2016 entering class), Summer 2018 (fall 2017 entering class), Summer 2019 (fall 2018 entering class), and Summer 2020 (fall 2019 entering class). The nine law schools on the list all four years include Cal. Berkeley, Columbia, Florida, Georgetown, George Washington, Harvard, Loyola Marymount, NYU, UCLA. Arizona State and Northwestern have been on the list three of the four years.

(Note that in Table 2 and in Table 4, the “repeat players” are bolded – those schools in the top 15 for all four years are in **black**, those schools in the top 15 for three of the four years are in **blue**. Nine of the top 15 have been on the list for the largest number of transfers all four years.)

TABLE 2 -- Largest Law Schools by Number of Transfers from 2017-2020

School	# in 2017	School	# in 2018	School	# in 2019	School	# in 2020
Georgetown	105	Georgetown	105	Georgetown	105	Georgetown	109
George Wash.	67	NYU	58	George Wash.	74	Idaho	105
Charleston	61	Arizona State	50	NYU	54	George Washington	96
NYU	58	Emory	42	Columbia	44	Harvard	65
Arizona St.	56	Cal. Berkeley	36	Harvard	43	NYU	53
Columbia	46	Columbia	35	Loyola Marymount	41	Florida	51
SMU	42	Loyola Marymount	34	Florida	40	Columbia	48
Emory	41	Northwestern	33	Northwestern	34	Cal. Berkeley	43
Loyola Marymount	41	Harvard	32	UCLA	34	UCLA	39

Harvard	40	UCLA	31	Chicago	27	Florida State	38
UCLA	36	George Wash.	31	Hofstra	26	Northwestern	36
Cal. Berkeley	33	North Dakota	28	UNLV	24	Miami	31
Lincoln Memorial	33	Florida	27	Cal. Berkeley	24	George Mason	30
Miami	33	Houston	25	Arizona St.	22	Loyola Marymount	30
Florida	31	Hofstra	24	Rutgers	21	Chicago	28
Total	723		591		613		801
Percentage	40%		40%		47%		50%

Table 2 shows an even greater concentration of transfers among the top 15 law schools with the most students transferring in, which now claim roughly 50% of the transfer market. As shown in Table 3, if we focus just on the top ten law schools for transfers in, the total is 646 — 40% of all transfers — the largest percentage in the last decade.

TABLE 3 – Totals for Top Ten Law Schools for Transfers In as a Percentage of All Transfers for 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Transfers	2427	2438	2501	2187	1979	1749	1797	1494	1294	1621
Transfers to 10 Law Schools with Most Transfers	570	587	724	625	623	583	557	456	496	646
Transfers to 10 Law Schools with Most Transfers as % of Total Transfers	24%	24%	29%	29%	32%	33%	31%	31%	38%	40%

In terms of law schools with the highest percentage of transfers in as a percentage of their previous year's first-year class, as shown below in Table 4, only three law schools have been on the list each of the last four years — Georgetown, Northwestern and NYU. Five law schools have been on the list three times in the last four years — Arizona State, George Washington, Loyola Marymount, UCLA and UNLV. The number of law schools welcoming transfers representing 20% or more of their first-year class has fallen from nine in 2013 (not shown), to six in 2014 (not shown), then to only three in 2015 and 2016 (not shown), four in 2017 (two of which were in excess of 50%), two in 2018, none in 2019 and now four again in 2020 (with Idaho leading the way

at 83%). (In 2017, Lincoln Memorial, Appalachian, and Charleston all took large numbers of transfers from Charlotte when it announced it was closing.)

TABLE 4 -- Largest Law Schools by Transfers as a Percentage of Previous First-Year Class - 2017-2020

School	2017%	School	2018%	School	2019%	School	2020 %
Lincoln Mem.	54	North Dakota	39	Georgetown	18	Idaho	83%
Appalachian	50	Arizona State	23	Florida	16	Florida	30%
Charleston	28	Georgetown	18	UNLV	15	George Mason	22%
Arizona State	25	Emory	18	Chicago	14	Florida State	20%
SMU	19	Northwestern	15	Northwestern	14	Georgetown	19%
Georgetown	18	NYU	14	George Wash.	13	George Wash.	19%
Western St.	17	UNLV	13	Loyola Marymount	13	Northwestern	15%
Toledo	17	Mercer	12	NYU	12	Chicago	14%
North Dakota	16	Cal-Berkeley	12	UCLA	11	UNLV	14%
Emory	16	Houston	11	Columbia	11	Columbia	13%
George Wash.	15	UCLA	11	Hofstra	10	Florida Int'l	13%
NYU	14	Loyola Marymount	10	Florida Int'l	10	Cal-Berkeley	13%
Loyola Marymount	13	Florida St.	10	Pepperdine	9	Western State	13%
Houston	13	Hofstra	10	Arizona State	8	UCLA	13%
Northwestern	12.6	Chicago	9.6	Harvard	8	NYU	12%

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MARKETS

Starting in December 2014, the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar began collecting and requiring law schools with 12 or more transfers in to report not only the number of students who have transferred in, but also the law schools from which they came (indicating the number from each law school). In addition, the law schools with 12 or more transfers in had to report the 75%, 50% and 25% first-year, law school GPAs of the students who transferred in.

This allows one to look at where students are coming from and are going to and to look at the first-year GPA profile of students transferring in to different law schools.

Table 5 focuses on the nine law schools that have been among the top-15 in terms of transfers in for each of the last four years, presented in descending USNews rank. It indicates the extent to which these law schools were attracting transfers from their geographic region and also identifies the law school that provided the largest number of transfers to each listed law school in 2020 as well as the percentage of transfers that came from that school. Notably, six of these nine schools are on the East Coast (Harvard, Columbia, New York, Georgetown, George Washington and Florida) while three are in California (UC Berkeley, UCLA, and Loyola Marymount).

TABLE 5 -- Percentage of Transfers from Within Geographic Region 2018-2019-2020 and Top Feeder School(s) for 2020 at the Nine Law Schools among the Top-15 for Transfers in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020

School	# of Transfers 18/19/20	Reg,	Regional # of Transfers 18/19/20	Regional % of Transfers 18/19/20	School from Which Largest Number of Transfers Came in 2020	#/% of Transfers from Largest School 2020
Harvard	32/43/65	NE	5/11/17	16/26/26	Georgetown	6/9%
Columbia	35/44/48	NE	17/18/20	49/41/42	George Wash.	7/15%
NYU	58/54/53	NE	19/22/21	33/41/40	Fordham	7/13%
Berkeley	36/24/43	CA	26/17/31	72/71/72	UC Hastings	11/26%
Georgetown	105/105/109	Mid- Atl	42/51/37	40/49/34	American	18/17%
UCLA	31/34/39	CA	17/22/25	55/65/64	Loyola Marymount	6/15%
GWU	31/74/95	Mid- Atl	21/40/48	68/54/51	American	19/20%
Florida	27/40/51	SE	16/31/41	59/78/80	Florida A&M	8/16%
Loyola Marymount	34/41/30	CA	29/34/26	85/83/87	Southwestern and La Verne	8/27%

For these nine law schools, five (Berkeley, UCLA, George Washington, Florida and Loyola Marymount) obtained most of their transfers (50% or more) from within the geographic region within which the law school is located during each of the last three years. On the other hand, four law schools (Harvard, Columbia, NYU, and Georgetown) had 49% or fewer of their transfers from within the region in which the law school is located in each of the last three years.

Moreover, seven of the nine law schools had a significant percentage (more than 15%) of their transfers in from one or two particular feeder schools. For Loyola Marymount, 27% of its transfers came from Southwestern and another 27% came from LaVerne. For Cal-Berkeley, 26% of its transfers came from UC-Hastings. For George Washington, 20% of its transfers came from American University.

VARIED QUALITY OF THE TRANSFER POOL

Table 6 below shows the tiers of law schools from which these nine largest law schools in the transfer market for each of the last four years received their transfer students. Six of the nine law schools that consistently have high numbers of transfers in are ranked in the top 15 in USNews, while two of the other three are ranked in the top 25. Five of the nine law schools had 86% or more of their transfers from law schools ranked between 1 and 99 in the USNews rankings – Harvard, Columbia, NYU, Cal-Berkeley, and UCLA (with Harvard and NYU having 81% or more from top-50 law schools). Two additional schools, Georgetown, and George Washington, had 57% and 70%, respectively, of their transfers from law schools ranked between 1 and 99. The remaining two law schools, Florida and Loyola Marymount, had 78% and 97%, respectively, of their transfer students from law schools ranked 100 or lower.

TABLE 6 -- Percentage of Transfers from Different Tiers of School(s) for 2018, 2019 and 2020 at the Nine Law Schools Among the Top-15 for Transfers in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020

(**Bolded data** indicates the modal percentage response for each law school.)

	# of Trans 18/19/20	Top 50 # -- % 18/19/20		51-100 # -- % 18/19/20		101-200 # -- % 18/19/20	
Harvard	32/43/65	22/28/56	69/65/86	10/11/9	31/26/14	0/4/0	0/9/0
Columbia	35/44/48	20/30/32	57/68/67	14/14/15	40/32/31	1/0/1	3/0/2
NYU	58/51/53	48/41/43	83/80/81	10/10/10	17/20/19	0/0/0	0/0/0
Berkeley	36/24/43	13/13/21	36/ 54/49	17/7/16	47/29/37	6/4/6	17/17/14
Georgetown	105/105/109	27/29/16	26/28/15	45/52/46	43/49/42	33/24/47	31/23/ 43
UCLA	31/34/39	11/13/19	35/38/ 49	19/17/19	61/50/49	1/4/1	3/12/2
GWU	31/74/95	7/9/21	23/12/22	16/38/46	52/51/48	8/27/28	26/37/29
Florida	27/40/51	0/2/4	0/5/8	6/3/7	22/8/14	21/35/40	78/88/78
Loyola Marymount	34/41/30	0/1/0	0/2/0	5/0/2	15/0/3	29/40/29	85/98/97

Table 7 below highlights the reported GPAs of transfers in for these nine law schools. In looking at Table 7, one quickly sees that of the six law schools ranked in the USNEWs top-15, three have a 50th GPA for transfers in 2020 that is a 3.84 or above, and a 25th GPA of 3.77 and above. These

three law schools — Harvard, Columbia and Berkeley — two of which also are accepting most of their transfers in from top-50 law schools and one of which has 49% of its transfers in from top-50 law schools — clearly are accepting transfers who could have been admitted to those law schools in the first instance.

The other three top-15 law schools — NYU, Georgetown and UCLA — are a step below in terms of the credentials of their transfers, with 50th GPAs of between 3.59 and 3.74 (below the 25th GPA for Harvard, Columbia and Berkeley) and with 25th GPAs of between 3.47 and 3.62. Of this group, NYU is taking 81% of its transfers from top-50 law schools, so the transfers in it is accepting might be people it would have admitted in the first instance. But for Georgetown and UCLA, with a majority of their transfers coming from law schools ranked outside the top 50, many of these transfer students may not have had the credentials to be admitted as first-years.

Once you drop out of the top-15, the other three law schools have a 50th GPA that drops to 3.36 or lower, and a 25th GPA that drops to 3.25 or lower, with the majority of these transfers coming from law schools ranked 51-100 for George Washington and ranked 101-200 for Florida and Loyola Marymount. These law schools clearly are welcoming a number of transfer students whose entering credentials almost certainly were sufficiently distinct from each of those law schools' entering class credentials that the transfer students they are admitting would not have been admitted as first-year students in the prior year.

TABLE 7 -- First-Year Law School 75th/50th/25th GPA of Transfers in 2018, 2019 and 2020 at the Nine Law Schools among the Top-15 for Transfers in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019

School	GPA 75th	GPA 50th	GPA 25 th
	18/19/20	18/19/20	18/19/20
Harvard	4.0/4.02/4.0	3.95/3.95/3.95	3.89/3.89/3.82
Columbia	3.87/3.87/3.93	3.80/3.82/3.85	3.76/3.78/3.79
NYU	3.77/3.76/3.81	3.57/3.68/3.74	3.51/3.61/3.60
Berkeley	3.93/3.97/3.94	3.85/3.77/3.84	3.75/3.71/3.77
Georgetown	3.79/3.77/3.85	3.69/3.67/3.71	3.56/3.56/3.62
UCLA	3.80/3.76/3.66	3.66/3.63/3.59	3.51/3.56/3.47
GWU	3.48/3.41/3.47	3.38/3.23/3.33	3.24/3.11/3.18
Florida	3.56/3.52/3.60	3.33/3.27/3.36	3.10/3.13/3.25
Loyola Marymount	3.28/3.39/3.38	3.22/3.20/3.25	3.07/3.11/3.12

STILL MANY UNKNOWNNS

As I have noted for the last few years, these more detailed transfer data should be very helpful to prospective law students and pre-law advisors, and to current law students who are

considering transferring. These data gives them a better idea of what transfer opportunities might be available depending upon where they go to law school (or are presently enrolled as a first-year student).

Even with this more granular data now available, however, there still are a significant number of unknowns relating to transfer students, particularly regarding gender and ethnicity of transfer students and regarding performance of transfers students at their new law school (both academically and in terms of bar passage and employment). These are questions for which additional research would be warranted.

Source: [2020 Legal Ed Data Show Rebound In Transfer Market](#), Dec. 21, 2020 TaxProf Blog