Big Jumps for Texas Trio of Law Schools in U.S. News Rankings

Jeanne Graham

Three Texas law schools saw major gains this year in their positions on the U.S. News & World Report annual rankings. The deans at each of the schools — the University of Houston Law Center, St. Mary's University School of Law in San Antonio and South Texas College of Law in Houston — say those gains likely are due to changes in the way the magazine weighs employment statistics in a school's overall rating.

"If you look at the numbers and you sort of see who's gone where, our guess is that employment has been a big factor — and it should be a big factor," says Richard Alderman, UH Law's interim dean. "Students do not go to law school just to get a good education; they want to get a good education and get a job. And we're doing that very well."

The University of Houston Law Center jumped nine places to tie with four other schools — including Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas — for 48th position. In last year's rankings, UH was in position No. 57 and SMU tied for position No. 51.

"The bottom line for me is: We have been a really good law school for a long time," Alderman says. "And I think that's the key to all this."

The magazine rated 194 American Bar Association-accredited law schools and publishes the rankings of 150 of the schools, including seven of Texas' nine ABA-accredited schools. The remaining 44 schools are listed alphabetically.

Twenty percent of a school's overall rank is based on placement success, which is a combination of employment data and bar passage rates, according to the rankings methodology on the U.S. News website. This year, 2011 graduates with full-time jobs lasting at least a year, which require bar passage or where a law degree is an advantage, were given more weight in compiling each school's placement success, according to U.S. News.

St. Mary's and South Texas law schools are new to the list of schools with published rankings: St. Mary's tied with three schools for position No. 140, and South Texas tied with three schools for position No. 144.
"We are very pleased, and I'm sure this is going to play well with our alumni base," says St. Mary's Law Dean Charles Cantú. "I've been thinking about it, and I think the reason for this is that career services has done a tremendous job in placing our graduates."

He also attributes the gain to the school's clinical and advocacy programs.

"For so many years we've been unranked," he says. "To be ranked in the top tier, that's really something."

Donald J. Guter, president and dean of South Texas Law, says that many of the metrics used for the rankings are subjective and not controlled by a law school.

"I think there was some relative movement because we are strong on employment placement," Guter says. "We have had strong bar pass rates for several years, especially when compared with overall state averages. Those are two categories that at least you can put a number on. Among those matters you can measure, we've done very well."

The University of Texas School of Law in Austin maintains its hold on the highest rank among the Texas schools. It's tied for 15th, up one slot from its 16th position last year.

Baylor University School of Law in Waco tied for the 54th position, a drop of three slots from its 51st position last year, when it tied with SMU and three other schools.

Texas Tech University School of Law in Lubbock tied with three schools for the 105th slot, down from its 101st position last year.

Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law in Houston and Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth were not among the 150 schools with published rankings.