



LAW STUDENTS *for*
CLIMATE
ACCOUNTABILITY

FUELING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Measuring T-20 law school
participation in the fossil fuel
lawyer pipeline

T-20 LAW SCHOOLS' PRODUCTION OF FOSSIL FUEL LAWYERS

Law school	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to average US law school*
1. Texas	12.9x
2. Virginia	5.2x
3. Yale	4.8x
4. Harvard	4.2x
5. Vanderbilt	3.8x
6. Chicago	3.7x
7. Stanford	3.1x
8. Georgetown	3x
9. Duke	3x
10. Columbia	2.8x

Law school	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to average US law school*
11. Penn	2.5x
12. Cornell	2.5x
13. NYU	2.3x
14. Michigan	2.3x
15. Northwestern	1.7x
16. Berkeley	1.6x
17. UCLA	1.4x
18. Washington University in St. Louis	1.3x
19. Boston University	0.9x
20. USC	0.9x

*Aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyer graduates adjusted for school enrollment

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Introduction


On November 16, 2022, the Dean of Yale Law School Heather Gerken made a shocking announcement: Yale Law School would be leaving the US News & World Report law school rankings.[1] Many law schools shared her frustrations with the rankings that Gerken called “profoundly flawed,” and more than 40 law schools have followed Yale’s decision to exit the rankings.[2]

With the dominant framework for law school rankings in decline, the question arises of how we can better evaluate law schools. One important metric is the impact that graduates are having on the greatest justice issues the world faces, including, most significantly, the climate crisis.

On this metric, the law schools that have typically been ranked highest are not performing the

best—in fact, they tend to perform the worst. We find that T-20 law schools—the top 20-ranked schools in the US News rankings—have produced fossil fuel lawyers at over three times the rate of the average US law school. T-20 schools have produced nearly half of all US fossil fuel lawyers in our dataset.

Our findings emphasize that prestige in the legal field, including the view promoted by the US News rankings, is far too often accorded to actors advancing injustice. The same law schools that sit at the top of the US News rankings serve as linchpins in the production of lawyers who help climate polluters avoid accountability, write the contracts for climate-destroying fossil fuel projects, and lobby against environmental regulations.

A photograph of a backyard at night. In the foreground, several people are sitting in colorful lawn chairs (red, blue, green) on a grassy area. In the background, there are string lights hanging across the yard, and a white car is parked near a house. The scene is illuminated by the warm glow of the string lights and some outdoor lighting.

T-20 law schools have produced fossil fuel lawyers at over three times the rate of the average US law school.

In this respect, the current rethinking of the law school ranking system could provide an opening for law schools, as it may reduce pressures to promote careers at fossil fuel-friendly corporate law firms. We hope they will take it.

Key findings

The climate crisis threatens—and has already begun—to produce immense harms, with its harshest impacts falling on the Global South and, within the US, BIPOC and low-income communities. Lawyers can play a vital role in addressing the climate crisis, but many use their legal skills to advance extraction of and dependency on the primary cause of the climate crisis: fossil fuels. As LSCA’s annual Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard shows, elite law firms conduct far more work to exacerbate the climate crisis than to address it.[3]

This report finds a similar dynamic exists among law schools: many of the schools that have hovered near the top of traditional law school rankings like the U.S. News rankings—which are often viewed as the most prestigious—are also the schools that produce fossil fuel lawyers at the highest rates.

These traditionally highly-ranked

schools tend to be the wealthiest, and their graduates are typically afforded the most opportunities.[4] These schools have the least excuse for churning out lawyers whose legal educations are used to oppose climate justice.

A significant reason that elite law schools produce fossil fuel lawyers at such a high rate is because they send such a large share of their graduates to work at elite corporate law firms.[5] Many of these law firms conduct large and disproportionate amounts of fossil fuel work, meaning that law schools that uncritically promote careers at such firms end up funneling many of their graduates towards fossil fuel careers.

Schools that churn out fossil fuel lawyers are also undermining the long-term career prospects of their graduates. As the energy transition unfolds and the fossil fuel industry faces an increasingly precarious future, law students whose career prospects ebb and flow with the fate of the fossil fuel industry could face serious financial costs.

We also find that there are significant variations in the rate at which T-20 schools have produced fossil fuel lawyers. These results bolster the argument that law schools play a meaningful role

in shaping whether their graduates end up working as fossil fuel lawyers.

We find that, of T-20 schools, the top producers of fossil fuel lawyers are (1) The University of Texas Law School, (2) University of Virginia School of Law, (3) Yale Law School, (4) Harvard Law School, and (5) Vanderbilt University Law School.

To measure law school participation in the fossil fuel lawyer pipeline, we produced a dataset of thousands of lawyers who are documented to have contributed to the work of fossil fuel companies or advanced fossil fuel extraction. When measuring the law schools that are the top producers of fossil fuel lawyers, we adjust the number of fossil fuel lawyers in our dataset that graduated from each school by the law school's enrollment. We calculate how T-20 law schools' production of fossil fuel lawyers compares to each other and to US law schools as a whole.

This report first details the role of lawyers in the climate crisis. It then analyzes the pressures that push law students into fossil fuel lawyering before exploring the risks of pursuing a career as a fossil fuel lawyer. It then presents the results and methodology of this report, before noting the

limitations of our analysis and highlighting the appropriate context in which to interpret our results. We conclude with recommendations for law schools, law students, and law school rankings agencies, particularly the U.S. News & World Report. The appendix to this report includes more granular data on the T-20 law schools analyzed in this report.

Takeaways and recommendations

In response to our findings, law schools may argue that they are neutral actors that simply train students to make the career choices they wish. In reality, law schools shape the decisions their students make, and they seem to acknowledge this point: law schools proudly claim the successes of their graduates. They should also face scrutiny for the injustices their graduates advance. Indeed, the work their graduates go on to perform constitutes the most influential effect law schools have on the climate crisis.

Many law schools perform poorly on this front. Not only are these law schools fueling the climate crisis, they are also failing their graduates—leaving law school to become a fossil fuel lawyer is an

increasingly risky career choice.

Law schools' willingness to create a pipeline into careers representing fossil fuel companies may be related to the schools' financial interests and close relationship with corporate lawyers. Among the schools that produce fossil fuel lawyers at the highest rates, fossil fuel lawyers play a prominent role in the schools' relationships with donors. For example, the Chairman of the University of Texas Law School Foundation worked as Vice President and General Counsel of ExxonMobil, while the chair of the Yale Law School Fund is a senior lawyer at Shell.[6]

Law schools can do far more to create an empowering environment for students to promote justice and fairness on climate and other issues. All too often, though, they serve as a springboard to careers opposed to climate justice, as well as justice in its other forms. Law schools can make different choices about the

law firms to whom they grant access to their campus and which firms they recommend to students. They can adapt their course offerings, clinics, and journals to promote careers compatible with climate justice. And ultimately, law schools must reduce the levels of debt with which they burden their students, including by providing high-quality financial support for public interest careers to lessen the financial pressures pushing students towards careers like fossil fuel lawyering.

It may be the case that law schools—particularly those who have produced fossil fuel lawyers at high rates—continue their complicity in the climate crisis. But even if their schools continue to fail them, law students are not bound by the histories of their law schools. Though it may be more of an uphill climb than it should be, students at these schools can still use their careers to advance justice, and they can fight for their law schools to join them.



The Climate Crisis & The Role of Lawyers

Even for those who understand that climate change poses an immense threat to humanity, the role of lawyers may not be immediately apparent. They may know that climate change's greatest impacts will fall on those who are least responsible for it, and that fossil fuels are the primary cause of the climate crisis. [7] But how are lawyers involved?

Fossil fuels do not spontaneously combust. Human-made systems extract fossil fuels from the ground, transport them, and burn them, and lawyers are present at every step of this process. They write the contracts and arrange the financing for fossil fuel projects. They litigate to protect polluters from climate accountability lawsuits and to strike down environmental regulations. They also lobby to weaken environmental regulations.

Lawyers can also play a key role in advancing a just transition that avoids the worst effects of climate change, and many do.

But unfortunately, as our Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard has shown, the biggest players in the legal industry are largely on the wrong side of history. And every lawyer who makes up that industry received their legal training in law school. This report allows us to see, for the first time, that elite law schools have disproportionately produced fossil fuel lawyers.

The climate crisis and its impacts

As anthropogenic sources increase the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the atmosphere traps more heat. This change leads to a rise in average temperatures and produces a range of impacts on the earth's delicate and highly interconnected climate system.[8] Among other impacts, climate change increases the intensity of storms, wildfires, and droughts;[9] disrupts ecosystems and biodiversity;[10] and causes sea-level rise due to factors like melting glaciers that threaten to

swallow coastal regions.[11]

The earth's global surface temperature has already warmed by about 2°F (1.1°C) since 1850, and the last eight years were the eight hottest on record.[12] Keeping global warming to 2.7°F (1.5°C) would save 150 million lives from air pollution alone when compared against 3.6°F (2°C) of warming, not to mention all the other climate impacts greater warming would produce.[13] Despite the strength of the science supporting this reality, current policies set a trajectory to reach 4.86°F (2.7°C) of warming by 2100,[14] an amount that would cost an even greater number of lives.[15]

Fossil fuels account for 75% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Fossil fuels — meaning coal, oil, and gas — account for 75% of greenhouse gas emissions.[16] It is no coincidence that the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere began to rise rapidly during industrialization in the 1800s, when humans, particularly those in the Global North, started to burn significant amounts of fossil fuels. While fossil fuels

historically served as an important source of energy, other sources of energy like solar, wind, and hydropower can replace the need for fossil energy without producing greenhouse gas emissions. The cost of renewable energy has fallen rapidly over the last decade and is now cheaper than fossil fuels.[17]

Climate change is also closely tied to economic inequality and injustice. Wealthy people and countries produce highly disproportionate shares of emissions per capita, especially when considering historic emissions.[18] The impacts of climate change fall disproportionately on countries in the Global South, as well as low-income and BIPOC communities in the U.S. Examples are plentiful: low-income people are more likely to lack the means to flee a coming hurricane, drought deprives subsistence farmers of their key source of income, and historically redlined neighborhoods experience worse heat than other neighborhoods.[19] Although it is of the utmost importance to ensure that the development of renewable energy systems does not replicate any of these patterns, a world powered by renewable energy would eliminate the enormous injustice

associated with fossil fuel extraction and additional warming.

The role of lawyers

Lawyers play a key role in expanding fossil fuel extraction and dependence. Lawyers perform at least three kinds of work exacerbating climate change, including litigation, transactions, and lobbying. As our most recent Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard showed, from 2017-2021 the top 100-ranked U.S. law firms facilitated \$1.62 trillion in fossil fuel transactions, carried out 420 representations in litigation exacerbating climate change, and received \$36.6 million in compensation for fossil fuel lobbying. They conducted ten times more litigation, four times more transactions, and three times more lobbying exacerbating climate change than mitigating it. [20] We also found that some law firms are responsible for far more fossil fuel work than others.

In litigation, lawyers sue to undermine environmental regulations, defend fossil fuel companies from paying compensation for climate damages, and ensure fossil fuel projects can proceed when they are challenged on environmental grounds. Lawyers also conduct

transactional work for fossil fuel companies on a massive scale. This work involves writing the contracts for fossil fuel projects, arranging the financing for those projects, and managing mergers and acquisitions that enable fossil fuel extraction. Lawyers also frequently serve as lobbyists for fossil fuel companies or industry groups by lobbying for legislation and regulation that allows continued and expanded fossil fuel production, protects the profitability of fossil fuel companies, slows the growth of renewable energy, and minimizes the likelihood of accountability for fossil fuel companies.

"From 2017-2021, the top 100-ranked U.S. law firms facilitated \$1.62 trillion in fossil fuel transactions"

It should come as no surprise that lawyers who work for fossil fuel clients contribute to accelerating the climate crisis. Despite frequent claims that they seek to address climate change, fossil fuel companies still devote only 5% of capital expenditures to renewable energy projects.[21] As early as the

1970s, major fossil fuel companies performed internal studies that revealed in remarkably precise terms the way that their products had caused, and would continue to cause, climate change.

Companies chose to conceal this information and publicly cast doubt on climate science.[22] The rapid reduction in fossil fuel use necessary to address the climate crisis is an existential threat to the business-as-usual model fossil fuel companies profit on. Lawyers serve the interests of their clients — and here, their client’s interest is to delay climate action for as long as possible.

The fossil fuel lawyers represented in the underlying data for this study all played a role in enabling continued fossil fuel extraction and dependency, and as a result, they undermine climate justice and contribute to the massive harms of

climate change.

Legal ethics

Although fossil fuel lawyers often point to professional responsibility rules in order to justify their actions, this argument holds little merit. The right to counsel is often invoked in circumstances where it does not apply, and in fact, legal ethics rules in the U.S. leave law firms free to turn away any client. There is wide agreement among legal ethics scholars that unless indigent criminal defendants or court appointments are involved, no lawyer has an obligation to represent any particular client.[23] Even when a lawyer already represents a client, the ABA’s Model Rules of Professional Conduct allow lawyers to withdraw from representation based on any “good cause,” including if “the client insists upon taking action that the lawyer



considers repugnant or with which the lawyer has a fundamental disagreement.”[24] Arguments for a lawyer’s obligation to represent a client are particularly unfounded when applied to transactional work or lobbying because this work takes place outside the adversarial system.[25]

Representation and other legal work on behalf of fossil fuel companies takes place in the

"Representation and other legal work on behalf of fossil fuel companies takes place in the realm of choice, not obligation."

realm of choice, not obligation.

Further, law schools’ mass production of fossil fuel lawyers does not advance access to justice. Fossil fuel companies already have dozens of in-house lawyers while 86% of the civil legal needs of low-income Americans go unmet.[26] If law schools wanted to expand access to justice, they would propel students towards careers in fields like civil legal aid, public defense, and climate justice. Preparing students to become fossil fuel lawyers would be last on the list. The current status quo only further tips the playing field towards fossil fuel companies and away from climate justice.



Pressures Pushing Law Students Towards Fossil Fuel Careers

The methodology of the US News and World Report rankings was one of the primary drivers causing many of the T-20 schools to suspend their participation. According to NYU Law Dean Troy McKenzie, the “methodology—through its debt and employment metrics—penalizes schools that support graduates pursuing public interest careers.”[27] This concern underscores the pressures that law students face when they begin their careers. Implicit structures such as student debt and the pipeline to “BigLaw” firms (a term commonly used to refer to the largest and most “prestigious” law firms in the country) are key factors pressuring students at top law schools into corporate law firms. These BigLaw firms in turn represent fossil fuel companies, thrusting their associates into fossil fuel work and forcing many students into the choice to represent the fossil fuel industry or remain in debt.

The authors of this report discussed these dynamics with

law students and professors, whose quotes are included throughout this section.

Debt

When law students graduate, most face the pressures of finding financial and career stability. Everyone’s definition of success—and their “why” for deciding to attend law school in the first place—are different, but there are some pressures that are nearly ubiquitous in legal careers. One of them is debt. The average law school graduate owes \$180,000 in student loan debt, and 71% of law school students graduate in debt. [28] Moreover, the data on law school debt shows that it is not equitably distributed: on average, Black law school graduates’ loan debts are 97% higher than white law school graduates.[29] The pressure that early-career lawyers face to repay their loans is a driving factor underlying the high proportion of graduates going to BigLaw firms, especially in the first several years after graduation.

First year associates at elite BigLaw firms earn over \$200,000 before tax annually, while most public interest jobs pay just about one third of that, closer to \$60-70,000 before tax.[30] With average law school graduate debt totaling \$180,000, BigLaw jobs often feel like the only viable option, even for students who would otherwise pursue an alternative career path. A 2L at the University of Virginia School of Law says that “there's a greased slide into BigLaw and then an equally greased ladder up into government work and non-profits.”

"There's a greased slide into BigLaw and then an equally greased ladder up into government work and non-profits."

-UVA 2L

A 2020 survey published by the American Bar Association found over 37% of respondents chose a job that pays more money over a job the respondent really wanted. [31] In 2021, almost one third of law students with loans specified they accepted jobs less focused on public service than intended

upon entry into law school.[32] The pressure to select a high-paying job, specifically for law students experiencing student loan debt—i.e., most law students—is severe. Debt is not only pushing law students away from public interest careers, including those in renewables and environmental work, but is also actively pushing students into BigLaw careers where they are more likely to represent fossil fuel companies.

Pipeline to BigLaw

Much of the reason that traditionally top-ranked law schools produce disproportionately more fossil fuel lawyers is because they send graduates to elite corporate law firms at high rates. Each of the T-20 schools sends over 41% of students into BigLaw jobs upon graduation.[33] As our Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard has shown, top-ranked corporate law firms are the go-to firms for fossil fuel companies, and these BigLaw firms conduct far more work exacerbating the climate crisis than mitigating it.[34]

While paths to public interest careers involve a variety of application timelines and considerable research into specific

organizations and opportunities by students, the path to a BigLaw job at T-20 schools is straightforward. Through on-campus interviewing and summer associate programs, BigLaw jobs often come to students, while public interest jobs require students to find them. Further, law school culture often values corporate BigLaw jobs as prestigious and as “another rung on the achievement ladder,”[35] generating the idea that not only is corporate work easy to pursue and financially desirable, but also the natural next step in the career of a law student at an elite school. In a profession where prestige is at a premium—with students selecting “law school ranking” as the third most important factor in determining where to attend law school, behind only location and merit-based financial aid—associating BigLaw careers with achievement drives students towards BigLaw and, as a result, into fossil fuel work.[36]

While a law student “can fall into a BigLaw job,” pursuing a non-BigLaw career path requires more work in the job hunt, as well as a willingness and ability to make far less money upon graduation.

Academia is admittedly one of the

most difficult paths to pursue as a lawyer, given the dearth of positions available. But UT Austin’s description of pursuing a career in academia is telling. “The best way to describe the competitiveness of getting [a law professor] job is to compare it to getting a job at a large law firm. Getting a tenure-track job anywhere (even at a lower-ranked school or one that is located in an undesirable city) is probably about ten times more difficult than getting a job at a large firm in a desirable city.”[37]

Yale Law’s career services website similarly outlines the difficulties of obtaining a public interest law job right out of law school, and the appeal of pursuing BigLaw instead. According to Yale, public interest organizations differ from firm positions in that they “don’t visit law school hiring fairs, they don’t have predictable hiring schedules, and they may not send law schools notices of their openings.”[38] Yale also notes factors pushing would-be public interest students into private sector careers: financial concerns, training opportunities in the private sector, and the comparatively late timeline of the public interest job search.[39]

A second-year law student and

board member of NYU Law's Environmental Law Society highlights an additional factor:

"I think a big part of the reason law students go into BigLaw is that schools and firms both make it so easy and students don't know about all the work that these firms do. The firms send you a package of cookies and a branded sweatshirt, and you get sucked in. And as you get closer to the acceptance date, it becomes harder to jump off."

"A big part of the reason law students go into BigLaw is that schools and firms both make it so easy and students don't know about all the work that these firms do."

-NYU 2L

The pipeline to BigLaw is also strikingly linked to school prestige: of the 20 law schools sending the highest percentage of graduates to BigLaw firms, 19 are in the T-20. [40]

While many students at T-20 schools view accepting BigLaw

positions as morally neutral work, sending students to BigLaw firms is often directly related to sending students to represent the fossil fuel industry. Between 2017 and 2021, the Vault 100 BigLaw firms conducted 420 representations in litigation exacerbating climate change, facilitated \$1.62 trillion in transactional work supporting fossil fuel projects, and received \$36.6 million in compensation for lobbying on behalf of fossil fuel companies.[41]

However, in a report on the prevalence of corporate law at elite law schools, current and former students at Harvard Law discussed that the moral dimension of BigLaw work is largely ignored, and students are not forced to reckon with the impact of the work they will be doing at large firms.[42] One graduate described the culture of BigLaw recruitment as one of "ignorance and inertia," saying "the defaults are set up in a way that you slide into working at these firms without much thought." [43]

Jon Hanson, the Alan A. Stone Professor of Law and the Director of the Systemic Justice Project at Harvard Law School, agrees that students are often pushed towards corporate legal work

without attention to the human consequences. "Legal education—and particularly elite law schools—have been captured by corporate interests that profit from, among other things, rendering the planet uninhabitable. The time is long overdue for those law schools and their BigLaw benefactors to be judged not according to their lofty justice claims or their astronomical wealth but according to their actual consequences here on Earth."

By obscuring the reality of BigLaw work and creating a pipeline to BigLaw where many students at T-20 schools are virtually guaranteed a job at a Vault 100 firm, law schools are pressuring students into climate-change exacerbating work.

Highlight: The University of Texas at Austin School of Law

In addition to these implicit structures pressuring students towards careers in the fossil fuel industry, some schools have explicit structures pressuring students as well. The top producer of fossil fuel lawyers, The University of Texas at Austin School of Law, provides an example of how these structures manifest. The University's Energy Center; its Journal of Oil, Gas, and

Energy Law; and its course offerings represent some of the explicit structures that grease the wheels towards a career in fossil fuel work.

Texas's Energy Center for Business, Law, and Policy is named after Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson,[44] a Republican Senator from Texas from 1993-2013 with a record of voting against environmental protections.[45] Student fellows are responsible for drafting speeches and talking points for Senator Hutchinson.[46] Without a comparable center focused on environmental or clean energy work, Texas law students interested in energy experience an imbalance of opportunity. They are confined to pursuing their interest via a group known for exacerbating climate issues.

The Journal of Oil, Gas, and Energy Law at Texas Law is another mechanism in the school's pipeline towards fossil fuel work. In addition to giving students niche experience in oil and gas legal writing, the journal also hosts an annual energy law symposium among other student events to promote networking within the fossil fuel industry community.[47]

Course offerings at University of Texas Law further incentivize work in the oil and gas industry.[48] Upper level courses including Getting Complex Deals Done: Structuring, Documenting, and Closing an Oil and Gas Asset Sale suggest students first complete “the basic Oil and Gas Law course,” encouraging this curriculum specifically for a fossil fuel track in law school.[49]

Students have expressed frustration with systemic pressures at these schools favoring fossil fuel work over environmental or renewables work. A University of Texas Law 3L asserted that “the career services office...has been largely unhelpful in helping people like me who want to do public interest environmental work... I'm kind of frustrated because I'm paying X amount of money to go to school here and I just feel like I'm being left out to dry for careers.” Given the declining relevance of the fossil fuel industry and the severity and urgency of the climate crisis, schools should be supporting students interested in pursuing environmental and renewables work.

The silver lining is the strong environmental law community at

Texas Law. The same 3L testified to having “really great professors... that are...deeply committed to public interest environmental law and have gone out of their way to... give me all sorts of resources for finding opportunities in public interest environmental law.” While these professors and informal networking opportunities are essential to supporting students interested in environmental work, the schools themselves should also be providing this support.

Highlight: Koch Money Flooding T-20 Schools

An analysis by the Center for American Progress estimated that between 2000 and 2010 collaborations with elite universities and oil companies produced \$900 million in funding. [50] These partnerships are often shrouded in opacity because both public and private universities are not subject to FOIA requests (despite receiving federal funding), and many fossil-fuel linked charitable organizations do not itemize where their donations go. [51] However, the Charles Koch Foundation—a right-wing charitable organization funded by oil billionaires Charles and (the late) David Koch—prides itself on the transparency of its grants.[52]

Its IRS Forms 990-PF allow a closer look at what schools are taking Koch money.

In its 2017 disclosure of donations required by the IRS, the Charles Koch Foundation revealed it had donated \$145,000 to UVA Law School, \$400,000 to Stanford Law School, and \$501,000 to the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago (which works alongside the law school).[53] The next year, the Foundation disclosed another \$343,000 given to Stanford Law School and \$346,000 to the University of Chicago's Becker Friedman Institute. In 2020, it donated \$4,110,644 to NYU School of Law "for the benefit of the Policing Project." [54] Each of these T-20 schools are large contributors to the fossil fuel lawyer pipeline. After 2018, the Foundation stopped delineating between university and law school donations. However, in the Charles Koch Foundation's most recent disclosure in 2021, it reported over \$72 million in total donations to colleges and universities.[55] The Charles Koch Foundation's 2021 IRS Form 990-PF report disclosed, among others, donations of:

- \$3,735,281 to NYU
- \$1,538,366 to Harvard University

- \$1,186,772 to Stanford University
- \$1,000,000 to University of Texas - Austin
- \$996,750 to Duke University
- \$787,400 to Cornell University
- \$660,000 to Columbia University
- \$635,000 to Georgetown University
- \$526,000 to the University of Pennsylvania
- \$433,500 to the University of Chicago

Recent reports have further revealed the extent to which the Koch Brothers' money has allowed climate denialism to infiltrate elite universities,[56] and how the "fossil fuel industry's invisible colonization of academia" has created a "a nationwide conflict of interest with the industry that has the most to lose from action on climate change." [57] As just one large fossil fuel charitable foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation's ties to law schools and universities around the country reveals the depth of entanglement. The money these T-20 schools receive from the fossil fuel industry suggests that they are willing to overlook the real-world impact of the fossil fuel work they are pushing students toward in exchange for a vast endowment.

Risks of Pursuing a Fossil Fuel Career

Western oil companies posted record profits in 2022.[58] Fossil fuel giants like Exxon and Energy Transfer are planning new liquified natural gas terminals in North America and Europe.[59] Global use of coal hit an all-time high.[60] But at what cost?

Despite an apparent triumph for the fossil fuel industry as the climate crisis continues to devastate vulnerable communities, the risks of working in the fossil fuel industry are rising. States are transitioning from fossil fuel-based economies to renewables, resulting in a significant decline in overall jobs in the industry. Environmental justice communities are fighting back against the expansion of new fossil fuel infrastructure, and political leaders are finally realizing the dangers of fossil fuel extraction. With this in mind, the legal industry in general—and law schools in particular—should hesitate before pushing students towards careers representing an industry that is not only

profoundly harmful, but slowly dying.

Risks to Vulnerable Communities

It has long been known that the fossil fuel industry enacts and perpetuates environmental and energy injustices. These injustices are pervasive: the fossil fuel industry disproportionately negatively impacts Black, brown, and Indigenous communities' health outcomes, economic opportunities, food access, and cultural survival.

Research over the past decade has exposed the reality that Black Americans are 75 percent more likely than other Americans to live in so-called fence-line communities, defined as areas situated near facilities that produce hazardous waste,[61] and that approximately 40 percent of communities of color and low-income communities live within three miles of power plants that emit harmful pollutants.[62] In addition, oil and gas companies

continuously seek to build projects, including pipelines, through tribal land despite active protests from tribal communities. [63] They not only persist in illegal use of tribal lands, but fossil fuel companies have also “used the legal system to threaten the First Amendment rights of those who speak out against its practices by “abus[ing] strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)” and supporting restrictive and retaliatory legislation.[64]

The ongoing risks that this industry presents to environmental justice communities—many of which law students may come from, work with, and return to—create unsuitable and unsustainable conditions to support personal livelihoods or a flourishing planet.

Risks to State Economies

The risks of persistent reliance on fossil fuels are especially relevant in fossil-fuel-producing states and regions. In Texas, for example, 13.9% of total employment comes from jobs in the oil and natural gas industry.[65] As fossil fuels impact such a massive sector of the state’s economy, Texas and other fossil fuel-reliant states are concerned about transitioning

away from fossil fuels. Texas has even taken measures to counter groups choosing to divest from the industry, passing a law banning local and state government entities from working with firms boycotting fossil fuels.[66]

These attempts to slow the decline of investment in fossil fuels are unsurprising given the toll divestment has taken on the industry. States with the largest reductions in GDP in the last year, including Alaska, North Dakota, and Louisiana, tend to be large producers of coal, oil, and natural gas.[67] However, many economic experts believe the transition to renewable energy can occur without significantly disrupting state economies. Despite a decline in oil and natural gas production, Texas still outperformed several other states economically.[68] Though other industries, especially tech, also contributed to Texas’s success,[69] renewable energy sector growth played a key role. [70] Both solar and wind energy saw a boom over the last decade. [71] With the state’s GDP no longer as dependent on the fossil fuel industry as it once was,[72] and with renewable energy investment on the rise

globally,[73] Texas is well-positioned to both pursue economic growth through increased investment in sectors outside the fossil fuel industry and serve as a model for other states making this transition. Texas demonstrates that despite the best efforts of the fossil fuel lobby to enact oil and gas-friendly state policies, there may be a momentous transition to clean energy occurring that cannot be stopped.

Risks to Industry

Both business and legal spheres have begun to contend with the untenability of continuing to prop up the fossil fuel industry. In May 2021, activist shareholders with the investment firm Engine No. 1 successfully campaigned to elect three new independent directors to ExxonMobil's Board of Directors to reduce the company's emissions footprint and "lay the foundation for a viable low-carbon business strategy." [74] And in the Netherlands, a Dutch court ruled in 2021 that Royal Dutch Shell, one of the largest oil companies in the world, must cut greenhouse gas emissions by 45% before 2030 to align the country with its climate commitments under the Paris agreement. [75]

Investment in fossil fuels has become increasingly unstable in recent years, and the job market in the fossil fuel industry has become less steady too. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of United States jobs directly involved in the production and consumption of fossil fuels declined by 9%. [76] Moreover, the International Energy Agency, which has historically been friendly to fossil fuel interests, has called for no new coal, oil, and gas investments to achieve global net zero by 2050. [77] New coal plants have been canceled, and some existing coal plants have become so uneconomical to run that they are valued at just a single US dollar. [78]

"Some existing coal plants have become so uneconomical to run that they are valued at just a single US dollar."

Fossil fuel demand will face significant volatility over the next 25 years. [79] Morgan Stanley has estimated that the coal industry will all but disappear by 2033. [80] President Biden has also signed an executive order intended to make the US carbon-neutral by

2050.[81] Moreover, lawyers often practice well into their 60s and 70s. That means that many of today's law students will be actively practicing lawyers when 2050 comes around, with a significant chunk of their career extending into a period where fossil fuel use will likely have dramatically declined.

Continued reliance on fossil fuels carries well-documented risks and will disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations. The harms that will come are numerous and can take the forms of more powerful natural disasters and riskier behavior resulting in dangerous releases of chemicals into vulnerable communities. Moreover, jobs in the industry are increasingly unstable, and even state economies traditionally reliant on fossil fuels are transitioning to renewables.

The legal industry must push fossil fuel-reliant states towards a clean energy future. This will only be possible if the schools producing those states' lawyers are preparing students for careers outside the fossil fuel industry. Continuing to drive students into careers in a declining industry is a disservice not only to the students, but also to the future of those states' economies. Law

schools have an opportunity to catalyze a transition by providing students with the resources they need to develop the country's renewable energy industry. Doing so will advance law schools towards a future more aligned with both the needs of the energy industry and the needs of our environment.

One of our goals in publishing this report is to make law schools hesitate before pushing students toward careers in the fossil fuel industry. Law schools should be setting their students up for success as lawyers transitioning to a clean energy future, not wed to representing the polluting industries of times past.

"Lawyers often practice well into their 60s and 70s. That means that today's law students will be actively practicing lawyers when 2050 comes around, with a significant chunk of their career extending into a period where fossil fuel use will likely have dramatically declined."

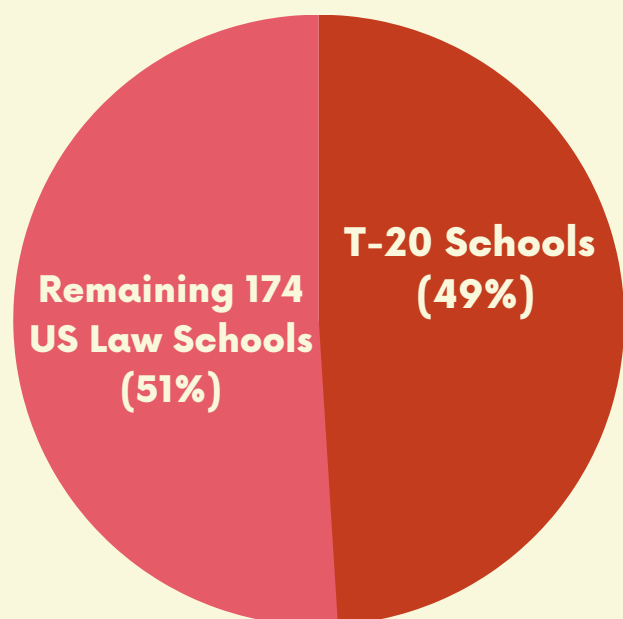
Results

The top 20 law schools in the U.S. News ranking account for 49%—nearly half—of all fossil fuel lawyers in our dataset. These numbers illustrate the massive and harmful impact the nation’s most prestigious law schools are having on our climate.

These findings also accentuate the question of why we equate school prestige with work on behalf of often-harmful companies. In this moment of reckoning with rankings founded in privilege and prestige,[82] schools must also consider their impact on communities around the world.



Proportion of Fossil Fuel Lawyers Coming from the US News T-20 Schools



With severe impacts of the climate crisis already being felt and further destruction looming, law schools must take accountability for their part in producing fossil fuel lawyers and work to alter the systems that push students toward such careers.

Associates: Continuing Trends

The work of firm associates, who are often recent law school graduates, can be more indicative of the types of lawyers a school is currently producing. While a significant portion of our fossil fuel lawyer dataset consists of partners and counsel at law firms, the data on firm associates suggests that the schools that have produced the most fossil fuel lawyers are largely on track to continue that trend. Counting only associates and adjusting for school enrollment, most of the schools producing fossil fuel lawyers at the highest rates remain the same. While several schools' fossil fuel lawyer production rate has slowed recently compared to other schools, the T-20 schools who are producing at higher rates are those located in the south and midwest. Specifically, University of Texas at Austin, UVA, Vanderbilt, Washington University, and University of Chicago have all

produced higher rates of fossil fuel lawyer associates compared to the average US law school than their overall rates of fossil fuel lawyer production compared to the average US law school.

While this may mean some of the most prestigious schools are trending away from producing the most fossil fuel lawyers, even the T-20 schools producing fewer associates in fossil fuel work are still producing significantly more fossil fuel lawyers than most other schools. In total, T-20 schools produce fossil fuel associates at just under three times the rate of the average US law school, a rate only slightly smaller than the result when including all lawyers in our dataset. 44% of fossil fuel associates come from T-20 schools, compared to 49% of all fossil fuel lawyers.

"44% of fossil fuel associates come from T-20 schools, compared to 49% of all fossil fuel lawyers"

Further, given the smaller sample size of firm associates, it is more difficult to draw conclusions from the data. Still, the law schools producing the most fossil fuel

lawyers seem to have done so both in the past and present. These schools should therefore take measures to both prepare students for careers in renewable energy and decrease pressures on students to enter the climate crisis-exacerbating oil and gas industry.

Aggregate vs enrollment-adjusted

Most of the calculations in this report focus on the rate at which law schools have produced fossil fuel lawyers, and therefore the aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyers coming from a school is adjusted for the law school's enrollment. A look at the aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyers produced by a school helps portray where fossil fuel lawyers tend to go to law school, but it is less useful for assessing law schools' causal role in producing fossil fuel lawyers because larger schools will naturally produce a larger number of fossil fuel lawyers even if the share of their graduates becoming fossil fuel lawyers is the same.

Better performing T-20 schools

There are significant variations in the rate at which T-20 law schools' produce fossil fuel lawyers, demonstrating that law schools' production of fossil fuel lawyers is not purely a function of their ranking and elite status, but also due to factors including the choices of law school leadership.

For example, UCLA has produced fossil fuel lawyers at a lower rate than 16 of the T-20 law schools. UCLA 2L Emmett Barnes thinks other law schools can learn from this example. "As the youngest of the T-20, UCLA has quickly risen through the ranks—and has done so without becoming beholden to the fossil fuel industry. I attribute this success to UCLA's impressive investment in its public interest and environmental programs, which push UCLA students toward public interest and push those headed to Big Law away from fossil fuel representation. With one of the lowest rates of production of fossil fuel lawyers among the T-20, UCLA offers an example for how law schools can produce world-class lawyers in a climate-conscious future."

**T-20 Schools:
Largest Number of
Fossil Fuel Lawyers
Adjusted for
Enrollment**

1. Texas
2. Virginia
3. Yale
4. Harvard
5. Vanderbilt
6. Chicago
7. Stanford
8. Georgetown
9. Duke
10. Columbia

**T-20 Schools:
Largest Aggregate
Number of Fossil
Fuel Lawyers**

1. Texas
2. Harvard
3. Georgetown
4. Virginia
5. Columbia
6. NYU
7. Yale
8. Michigan
9. Chicago
10. Duke

**T-20 Schools:
Largest Number of
Fossil Fuel Lawyer
Associates
Adjusted for
Enrollment**

1. Texas
2. Virginia
3. Vanderbilt
4. Chicago
5. Harvard
6. Yale
7. Duke
8. Georgetown
9. Penn
10. Michigan

Comparing enrollment-adjusted and aggregate fossil fuel lawyer production

Law schools in order of enrollment-adjusted production of fossil fuel lawyers



Aggregate production of fossil fuel lawyers

Methodology

Dataset

This report is derived from a dataset that we constructed in late 2022 and early 2023. The dataset includes 3,312 lawyers. For each lawyer in the dataset, we recorded their name, the law school they attended, their employer, and whether their position is partner, associate, or another title. We also recorded the form of documentation that we used to classify a lawyer as a fossil fuel lawyer, allowing us to verify the validity of all entries in the database.

We determined that lawyers should be included in the database if they met one or more

of the four criteria below.

For the criteria that considered law firm websites, we examined the websites of Vault 100 firms as well as non-Vault 100 US firms shown in the IJGlobal database to have facilitated more than \$500 million in fossil fuel transactions over five years. We also included lawyers from non-Vault 100 firms when listed on litigation documents. Work conducted as a government employee did not qualify a lawyer for entry in the database.

We only included lawyers who attended US law schools and practice in the United States. We did not include lawyers whose

Four Criteria for Database Inclusion

- The lawyer's firm listed them as a member of a practice specifically devoted to fossil fuels.
- The lawyer's page on the website of their firm listed a nontrivial amount of fossil fuel work in the lawyer's experience.
- The lawyer is listed on court documents in a case in our litigation database for the 2022 Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard, representing a party whose success in the case would exacerbate climate change.
- The lawyer is listed as a lobbyist for a fossil fuel company on a federal lobbying disclosure form in our lobbying database for the 2022 Law Firm Climate Change scorecard.

only degree from a US law school is an LLM, and in the case of lawyers with an LLM and a JD from a US law school, we only listed the law school from which they received their JD. When recording whether a lawyer's position was partner, associate, or other, we listed them as a partner or associate if they held an equivalent position at an employer that lacked such titles.

Law school calculations

This dataset serves as a representative sample of US fossil fuel lawyers and where they attended law school, and it provides the basis for our calculations on the rates at which the top 20-ranked schools in the US News rankings have produced fossil fuel lawyers. We are also able to compare these 20 law schools to US law schools as a whole, because our dataset includes fossil fuel lawyers who attended both T-20 and non-T-20 schools. We decided to focus on T-20 schools due to the disproportionate resources available to them and the prestige that traditional law school rankings have accorded these schools.

When we rank T-20 law schools against each other on the basis of fossil fuel lawyer production, unless otherwise specified, law schools are ranked based on the number of fossil fuel lawyers in our database who attended the law school, adjusted for the size of the student body of the law school. In order to adjust for law school size, we used the ABA's law school enrollment data.^[83] To account for the fact that the enrollment of a law school fluctuates over time and may have been different when a lawyer in our database attended law school, we used both 2022 enrollment data and 2011 enrollment data, the earliest year for which the data is available. A law school's enrollment for the purposes of the ranking is treated as the average of the law school's 2022 and 2011 enrollment. This enrollment figure is used to adjust a law school's aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyers in the database. The law schools ranked as the top producers of fossil fuel lawyers, therefore, are those for whom the greatest share of their graduates have become fossil fuel lawyers.

Limitations

This report derives from a carefully-prepared methodology and an extensive database of lawyers. Every lawyer who counted towards our findings is documented to have engaged in legal work advancing fossil fuel extraction or dependence. However, as with any study and methodology, there are limitations to our method of calculating law schools' production of fossil fuel lawyers. We readily acknowledge these limitations in the hope that this will allow readers to appropriately interpret our results and fully appreciate all that is valuable about them.

First, the database on which this report is based includes only lawyers who are documented to have engaged in legal work advancing fossil fuel extraction or dependence. Because such documentation is not available for all fossil fuel lawyers, our database is underinclusive, and it should be seen as representing a sample of fossil fuel lawyers and the law schools they attended, rather than a comprehensive list. We consequently focus on the relative

frequency with which law schools produce fossil fuel lawyers and the share of fossil fuel lawyers coming from those schools, rather than making claims about the absolute number of fossil fuel lawyers these schools have produced. The sample size of 3,312 lawyers is large enough to produce a credible ranking of law schools.

There are also certain types of legal activities for which documentation was more difficult to find. While we aimed to include in-house counsel for fossil fuel companies in our dataset, we were unable to find sufficient documentation. Lobbying and litigation work is also frequently the product of the work of a wide range of lawyers, only some of whom are listed on the lobbying disclosures and litigation documents such as briefs. Further, when relying on legal experience listed on lawyers' profile pages on their law firm's website, the websites provide only a sample of the work that the lawyer has conducted. That sample is likely to be indicative of their most impactful or successful work, but it precludes the inclusion

of lawyers whose fossil fuel industry work does not make it into their “highlight reel.”

Documentation of lawyers’ roles in fossil fuel work is least likely to be available for young lawyers, contributing to our decision not to limit our dataset to recent graduates. Senior lawyers will typically be listed on litigation and lobbying documents and associate lawyers working on those matters will often not be listed. In addition, associate lawyers are often not sorted into specific practices and therefore are not identifiable members of law firms’ fossil fuel practices. Similarly, associates usually have little experience listed on their profile pages on law firm websites, making it difficult to determine whether they work on fossil fuel matters.

These data limitations contributed to our decision to not limit our dataset to recent graduates, but this decision also has significant merits of its own. The actions of a school’s broader pool of graduates – not just recent graduates – is relevant to evaluating which law schools bear the greatest responsibility for contributing to the climate crisis. That said, there is still an effective time limitation

on the years of graduation of the lawyers included in our database, as it only includes lawyers who have practiced within the last five years.

Still, there are tradeoffs involved in basing our findings on a dataset that is not limited to recent graduates. The policies that were in place at a law school when some lawyers in the dataset attended may be quite different from the law schools’ policies now. Law schools that previously encouraged legal work exacerbating the climate crisis may have since changed their practices. However, it is worth noting that in our results section, we discuss a ranking calculated solely on the basis of the associates in our dataset, thus limiting the ranking to more recent graduates of law schools. Those findings should be interpreted with caution because of the smaller sample size and the documentation challenges we faced in identifying recent graduates, but it is notable that the resulting ranking is not dramatically different from our primary ranking.

As noted in our methodology section, we could not find data on law school enrollment prior to

2011. In recognition of the fact that law school enrollment may have been different when a lawyer in our dataset attended law school, we included the 2011 data in our calculation of a law school's enrollment by averaging it with the 2022 enrollment figure. However, we recognize that this attendance figure does not fully account for the fluctuations in law school enrollments over time.

We also acknowledge that our report limits its analysis to lawyers conducting legal work that exacerbates the climate crisis, rather than lawyers conducting legal work that mitigates it. As a result, we do not have data on which law schools produce the greatest share of graduates addressing the climate crisis.

Similarly, lawyers included in our dataset may also conduct legal work that mitigates the climate crisis – though, it should be noted, a significant number of lawyers who represent fossil fuel clients refuse legal work addressing the climate crisis due to conflict of interest concerns. Despite this limitation, our dataset still offers key insights on law schools' role in the climate crisis. As the results of our Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard suggest – and as the existence of many under-resourced environmental legal organizations further illustrates – it is fair to assume that more lawyers are involved in exacerbating the climate crisis than addressing it.



Recommendations

Law schools

Law schools are not neutral actors. They play a key role in shaping the career trajectories of their graduates. Law schools should:

- Ensure their career offices devote at least as much time and resources promoting careers in public interest law as careers at corporate law firms. For employers who are heavily implicated in the climate crisis, law schools should not grant them preferential access to students. When career offices provide information about corporate law firms, they should accompany information provided by firms with independent information on firms, such as our Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard.
- Limit the debt they place on students to amounts that are manageable for students in public interest careers, including by implementing high-quality public interest loan forgiveness programs and

offering scholarships for public interest law.

- Provide course offerings, clinics, and journals that advance students' pursuits of careers in environmental law, renewable energy, or other fields conducive to a climate just future. Under no circumstances should law schools offer more academic opportunities focused on fossil fuels than renewable energy.
- Prevent fossil fuel lawyers from serving in law school governance or teaching law school courses, particularly those addressing environmental subjects.

Law students

Law students face a number of constraints, and these constraints are worsened by the ways law schools push students towards fossil fuel careers. However, law students (especially those already entering the profession from a position of privilege) are not without agency. Law students

should:

- Sign LSCA's Law Student Climate Pledge to incorporate climate change into their career considerations. The pledge is available at <https://www.ls4ca.org/law-students>
- Spread information about about the role of lawyers in the climate crisis, such as this report and the 2022 Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard, to their peers
- Push their schools to divest from fossil fuel interests and support students in pursuing careers compatible with climate justice
- Use student-managed platforms like journals and student organizations to promote climate justice and sustainable careers
- Flyer, put up posters, table, and hold events to raise consciousness on campus about the complicity of law schools and law firms in the climate crisis

Law school rankings agencies

We recognize that general law school rankings have to incorporate a broad range of factors, but nevertheless this report provides meaningful lessons to rankings agencies like U.S. News & World Report. Law school rankings agencies should:

- Avoid using criteria that incentivize careers like becoming a fossil fuel lawyer. For example, law schools rankings agencies should remove metrics that penalize law schools that provide public interest fellowships.
- Rankings focused on a specific area of law, like the US News Best Environmental Law Programs rankings, should incorporate data related to social justice. Flawed metrics like peer assessments can lead to misleading results, where the title of the ranking suggests a commitment to social justice concerns but the ranking system in fact rewards schools for producing graduates whose work causes harm and promotes inequality.

Additionally, we encourage actors who are willing to abandon our profession's commitment to a flawed view of lawyers as neutral actors to produce analysis similar to this report for issues such as labor justice, reproductive justice, immigration justice, and abolition.

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Appendix

School	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to T-20 schools (fossil fuel lawyers adjusted for enrollment)	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to T-20 schools (aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyers)	Production of fossil fuel lawyer associates compared to T-20 schools (number of fossil fuel lawyer associates, adjusted for enrollment)	Percent share of all US fossil fuel lawyers	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to average US law school
Texas	1	1	1	10.6	12.9x
Virginia	2	4	2	4.0	5.2x
Yale	3	7	6	2.4	4.8x
Harvard	4	2	5	5.6	4.2x
Vanderbilt	5	11	3	1.6	3.8x
University of Chicago	6	9	4	1.8	3.7x
Stanford	7	13	16	1.4	3.1x
Georgetown	8	3	8	4.7	3x
Duke	9	10	7	1.7	3x
Columbia	10	5	12	3.0	2.8x
Penn	11	12	9	1.6	2.5x
Cornell	12	15	11	1.1	2.5x
NYU	13	6	14	2.6	2.3x
Michigan	14	8	10	1.9	2.3x
Northwestern	15	16	13	1.1	1.7x

School	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to T-20 schools (fossil fuel lawyers adjusted for enrollment)	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to T-20 schools (aggregate number of fossil fuel lawyers)	Production of fossil fuel lawyer associates compared to T-20 schools (number of fossil fuel lawyer associates, adjusted for enrollment)	Percent share of all US fossil fuel lawyers	Production of fossil fuel lawyers compared to average US law school
Berkeley	16	14	18	1.2	1.6x
UCLA	17	17	17	1.1	1.4x
Washington University in St. Louis	18	18	15	0.8	1.3x
Boston University	19	19	20	0.6	0.9x
USC	20	20	19	0.5	0.9x