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3 Law Schools Pass the \$100,000-a-Year Mark

Columbia, Stanford and Chicago law will charge more than \$100,000 to attend in the 2019-20 academic year, but passing that benchmark won't hurt their popularity, experts say.

By [Greta Anderson](#)

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The price to attend the law schools at [Columbia](#) and [Stanford](#) Universities and the University of Chicago will pass \$100,000 this academic year, making them the first of the nation's law schools to blow past that mark. Several of their law school peers are poised just below it and will surpass six figures soon.

Columbia's cost of attendance went from \$97,850 in 2018-19 to \$101,345 this upcoming year, according to its [costs and budgeting information](#) published online, which includes both tuition and fees and law students' nine-month cost of living expenses. Stanford Law will charge \$101,016 this upcoming year, as reported in its [2019-20 Financial Aid Handbook](#). That's a 4.5 percent increase from its 2018-19 total cost of \$96,429. Chicago edged over the \$100,000 mark by \$80 for first-year students, but is at a mere \$98,505 for second- and third-year students.

A six-figure cost of attendance can be shocking to prospective law students at first glance, said Kyle McEntee, director of Law School Transparency, a nonprofit that aims to increase the accountability and affordability of the nation's law schools.

But many elite schools like Harvard Law, the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Law and Northwestern's Pritzker School of Law have been creeping toward \$100,000 over the past three years, with 2019-20 costs at \$99,200, \$94,338 and \$94,410, respectively.

In a statement, Stanford Law said its tuition pricing is set by the university and noted that cost of attendance accounts for both university-provided health insurance and the high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area, which was more than one-third of Stanford's total COA and \$10,000 more than Columbia Law's cost of living in 2018-19, according to the American Bar Association's most recent [required disclosures](#).

"Tuition covers roughly one-third of the actual cost of educating law students," the statement read. "Stanford Law School currently has the lowest tuition rates among our peers."

The cost of attending elite law schools is rising over all, so Stanford Law and Columbia Law surpassing \$100,000 is unsurprising and won't affect application rates for these schools, said Chris Chapman, president and CEO of AccessLex, a nonprofit that works to improve legal education.

For law students considering the two schools, which are ranked second (Stanford) and fifth (Columbia) in *U.S. News & World Report's 2020 Best Law Schools*, they acknowledge the high costs as an investment in a prestigious legal education, Chapman said.

“They could increase demand and that wouldn’t impact the number of people who apply or qualify [to attend],” Chapman said. “These schools, they’re perceived as a premium item, a luxury good. You almost have a reverse psychology that if it’s not that expensive, it’s not that good. No one wants to be seen as the cheap version of these schools.”

Top law schools generally aren’t worried about expenses diminishing their attractiveness, McEntee said, and the law students attending won’t be dramatically swayed by an additional \$1,000 to \$3,000, said Chapman, who compared the decision to investment in other big-ticket purchases.

“Most people don’t walk away from a house that they really enjoy being in for a couple thousand dollars in savings,” Chapman said.

But it is possible that some schools with costs of attendance upward of \$90,000 are strategically limiting increases in tuition to avoid reaching \$100,000, McEntee said. Harvard Law showed evidence of slowing its tuition and fee increases -- if it had increased by the same amount this year as in 2018-19, the school would also be hitting \$100,000 for 2019-20, but tuition and fees increased by only 3.2 percent this year, which is a lower rate than each of its *yearly increases over the last five years*, McEntee said.

Harvard Law’s Office of Communications did not reply to multiple requests for comment.

While the \$100,000 marker may not impact students who know they can afford a Stanford or Columbia legal education or who plan on making loan repayments with a substantial salary, low-income prospective students and those hoping to enter the public sphere are much more likely to notice this cost, McEntee said.

Students who attend these law schools could accumulate as much as \$300,000 or more in loans by the time they pass the bar, which could take 25 years to pay off at roughly \$2,500 a month.

“Those increases hurt. They make it more difficult for students who attend Columbia to consider noncorporate careers,” McEntee said. “On top of that, the national data show that people of color are more likely to pay full price than their white counterparts.”

To help students afford its legal education, Stanford Law said in a statement it provides “very generous loan forgiveness and financial aid programs.”

“Columbia Law School is committed to making a first-rate legal education accessible to students regardless of their financial circumstances,” wrote Columbia Law in a statement. “We devote substantial resources to financial aid and have increased this support in recent years.”

Grants and scholarships from the schools haven’t made a meaningful dent in a majority of students’ cost of attendance, either, with 47 percent of Stanford students and half of students at Columbia receiving financial aid from the school in 2017-18, according to 509 disclosures. Law School Transparency’s financial aid analyses show that 49.8 percent of Columbia Law students paid full price in 2018-19, McEntee said.

Tuition increases over the past decade -- private law schools were collectively 1.2 times as expensive in 2018 as in 2008 (when adjusted for inflation), **LST reported** -- are leading many students to pursue corporate law, where returns are likely to be higher than in other fields, McEntee said.

“You can spend any time with any group of law students with any type of debt, and they’ll tell you, they don’t get to go into the career they want because of this,” McEntee said. “These law students could be the leaders of our future. That makes this really important.”

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/08/21/columbia-stanford-and-chicago-law-schools-now-cost-more-100000-attend?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=7ec79b2d89-

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