

The *Canadian Lawyer* 2005 REPORT CARD on Canadian Law Schools

Most law schools drew high praise from their graduates. There are persistent concerns, however, about the balance between courses that emphasize theory and those that stress practical skills. Some graduates were also uneasy about rising tuition at some schools. **By Kirsten McMahon**

“**D**ifferent students will place emphasis on either pure legal skills or theoretical and societal issues. A good law school will allow a student to take either route,” says one respondent to this year’s *Canadian Lawyer* law school survey.

In this year’s report, the almost 330 respondents were divided on whether schools should stress a theological approach, which stresses how to *think* like a lawyer (leaving practical skills to bar admission courses and on the job), or more practical skills (*i.e.* drafting, negotiating, memo and opinion letter writing, *etc.*). Unlike other surveys of academic institutions, this one grades the institution based on the views of its former students. Those who responded had a lot to say about the role of law schools.

“Law schools need to move in the direction of medical schools and teachers colleges,” says one Queen’s University grad. “Students should intern for substantial periods of time, starting in the second term of the first year. A rotation through different areas of practice would be helpful. Not everyone knows what they want to do when they choose a summer job or articling position — but by then it’s too late. They must stick with it for about two years, or the job prospects are slim. Practical experience would fix some of this.”

A University of Alberta respondent agrees: “Law schools need to move towards

the new medical school model where practical experience is incorporated into the entire curriculum. Especially with courses such as civil procedure — these cannot be taught in a classroom alone, but must be interchanged with a series of hands-on, real courtroom and chambers experience.”

Many respondents say the problem with law schools teaching more practical skills is that some professors are narrowly focused on academics and haven’t practised themselves.

However, about half of this year’s respondents disagreed with that view. “Law schools should focus more on theory. They should not be reduced to a program that is more practical than academic — that is what colleges and certificate programs are for,” says one Dalhousie University grad. “The analysis needed in law can only be learned through a vigorous academic background. Law is not about when to file a brief.”

Another respondent concurs: “If law schools strive to be more than glorified trade shops then they must include theoretical teachings, rather than merely practical training courses. Training is learned on the job. Higher education must include the broader questions of the role of law in society.”

A respondent from the University of Windsor says: “I am not certain what the role of law schools ought to be, but there must be some reason it is ‘law school’ and not ‘lawyer school.’”



Additional comments about law school life can be read in our grading of 12 law schools across the nation (several have been excluded because of low participation rates). We had a response rate similar to that of last year, but four fewer schools are graded this time around. Readers should note that our survey forms and results are available online at the *Canadian Lawyer* website (www.canadianlawyer.com/Pages/surveys.html), and we urge all future respondents to use this method to send in their forms.

The cost of education

Another big issue with this year’s respondents was the cost of their law school education (not just at their own *alma mater*, but at Canadian law schools in general).

“I am thankful to have been in law school only at the beginning of the drastic rises in tuition fees that have occurred in the last five to seven years. Law schools should also take note that trends in articling (*i.e.* the number of students graduating without articling positions) and adapt accordingly,” says



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This year, almost 330 recent law graduates from across Canada graded the quality of their universities in seven categories: quality of curriculum; quality of law faculty; percentage of caring and competent teachers; quality of fellow students admitted; standards of testing; adequacy of facilities; and relevance of their education to their actual law practice.

Respondents were asked to grade their schools on a five-point scale, ranging from “excellent” to “very poor,” which was then translated into points, then letter grades. The average number of points according to each grade helped us arrive at an overall mark for each school. The response from some schools’ graduates was below a threshold number we needed for survey validity, so those schools have not been included in this year’s report.

1. University of Victoria	
	Curriculum: B+
	Faculty: A-
	Caring Profs: 75%-99%
	Students: A-
	Testing: B
	Facilities: B+
	Practice Relevance: B
Final Grade: B+	Recommended By: 100%

The University of Victoria law faculty admits 105 students in the first-year program each fall and class sizes range from 25 to 75 students.

In addition to academic instruction in legal mootings, UVic has an active and successful competitive mootings program. Students can compete for a position on the teams that participate in the British Columbia Law Schools Competitive Moot.

“The synergy of students and faculty in creating an ideal environment for learning and personal growth,” was UVic’s greatest strength, says one graduate.

UVic is exceptional in having a full-year legal research and writing (LRW) course with specialized instruction in the first year. Students in LRW are instructed in legal writing style and methods of researching legal information. In their upper years of law, students may choose from a variety of courses designed to develop lawyering skills.

But grads from UVic agreed that the

surrounding increased scholarships and bursaries is true, because it would be tough to justify \$80,000 for those three years.”

A respondent from the University of Alberta shares the same sentiment: “Considering my tuition was only \$4,000, it was a bargain. However, I’m not sure how much of a bargain a legal education is today given the expensive current law school tuition most schools seem to be charging. I don’t know if I would have gone to law school if I had to pay \$10,000 per school year.”

Quality of student colleagues

This year, many respondents stated their concerns about the quality of fellow students at their institutions. One grad from the University of Victoria says, “It would be helpful to place less emphasis on LSAT scores and transcripts and move emphasis on extra-curricular activities, *etc.*, to attract well-rounded individuals.”

Said another: “I feel that law students — young lawyers — are too academic and tend to be people who are awkward socially. This results in a lawyer that is out of touch with the average client and has a tough time relating to real-life problems. Perhaps less emphasis should be placed on academics in the admissions process.”

Overall

Obviously, law school can’t be all things to all people. While many respondents had varying views on curriculum, testing methods, admissions and the role of faculty, almost all would recommend their law school to aspiring lawyers and generally enjoyed the experience. Those who didn’t, say they are happy to be out and are enjoying the actual practice of law.

Most of the scores were very close; in several cases, schools achieved grades within one or two points of one another. Aspiring law students, wherever they intend to go, are fortunate to have so many high-quality law schools to choose from.

In fact, a clear consensus emerged from the survey: overall, respondents observed that, in spite of some problem areas, law schools are doing well when it comes to adapting to a changing profession, as well as a changing student body.

“Law school reminded me that the value of the education you receive must be measured against what *you* do with that education,” says one University of Windsor graduate. “Too many people forget their plans and goals and slip into the rat race — whether they want that life or not.” Very sage advice!

one Osgoode Hall Law School grad.

“Increased tuition means that graduates are forced to seek high-paying jobs to repay debt, rather than focusing on careers that may be more suited to their personalities,” says one respondent. Another respondent agrees: “So much debt, you can only really practise where the money is — corporate Bay Street or New York.”

Another respondent notes: “With increasing tuition loads, schools with high tuitions should also ensure graduating students are provided with career resources commensurate with their debt loads. Students require a strong theoretical foundation taught by excellent professors. They also need some comfort that they will be able to pay for this education by having access to career planning resources and personnel.”

A University of Western Ontario grad says, “Legal education is reserved for the wealthy. I believe the only way to remedy this situation is to have more funding for underprivileged students.”

Observes another: “I hope all the publicity

school's strongest feature is the people — both faculty and fellow students.

“Excellent teachers with a deep commitment to the school and students,” says one respondent. They “make themselves available to students.”

2. University of Toronto

	Curriculum:	B+
	Faculty:	B+
	Caring Profs:	75%-99%
	Students:	A-
	Testing:	B-
	Facilities:	B
Practice Relevance:	C+	
Recommended By:	92%	
Final Grade: B		

Once again, the University of Toronto was given top marks for its location, diversity, quality of faculty and its placement rate. One of the oldest faculties in the country, it is still housed in elegant historic buildings. The high-tech Bora Laskin Law Library that adjoins the original buildings was lauded for its cutting-edge resources.

There are 57 full-time faculty members and 25 distinguished short-term visiting professors from the world's leading law schools. Its total enrollment is approximately 515 students in the Juris Doctor (JD) program.

There is a 9:1 student-faculty ratio, and

about half of the student body are women. About 25 percent of students are members of aboriginal and visible minority groups.

U of T's greatest strengths? Its “range of classes offered and the opportunities it gave you, *i.e.* excellent exchange program and extra-curricular activities,” said one recent grad.

High marks were also given for the school's access to Bay Street firms and top-quality articling positions, and its “excellent faculty with a commitment to teaching,” says one respondent.

3. University of New Brunswick

	Curriculum:	B+
	Faculty:	B
	Caring Profs:	75%-99%
	Students:	B
	Testing:	B
	Facilities:	B
	Practice Relevance:	B
Recommended By:	100%	
Final Grade: B		

Former students at the University of New Brunswick stressed that bigger isn't always better. The school was praised for its small class sizes and atmosphere of co-operation.

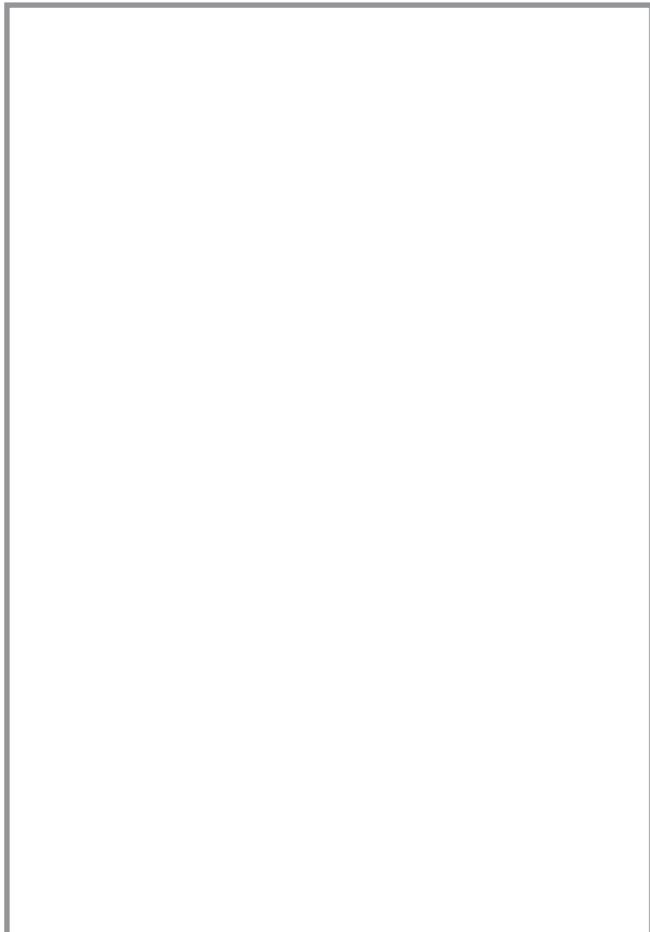
“The small size of the faculty allowed for greater interaction between the professors

and the students. It had a very collegial atmosphere,” says one graduate. “There seemed to be more intimate connections between students and professors, and between the student body, than I experienced in my undergraduate education at a much bigger school,” says another respondent.

UNB admits 80 students each year and the total student body is about 230. With 20 full-time instructors, the student-teacher ratio is approximately 12:1. All classrooms, professorial and student offices, the library, the bookstore and lounges are located in stately Ludlow Hall.

Although the student body is small, graduates say this didn't negatively affect the curriculum. “UNB has a lot of required classes, which means the students learn black-letter law,” says one respondent. “In addition, it's array of perspectives courses complement these nicely and provide the necessary training for all students, especially those who choose non-traditional careers.”

UNB was also lauded for its student body. “Admission of not only excellent students academically but, more importantly, admission of excellent people,” as one respondent summed it up.



4. Osgoode Hall Law School (York University)

	Curriculum: B+
	Faculty: B+
	Caring Profs: 75%-99%
	Students: B
	Testing: B-
	Facilities: B
	Practice Relevance: B-
Final Grade: B	Recommended By: 95%

Osgoode Hall Law School of York University was praised this year for its continuing renovations of the facilities and its wide variety of course offerings.

"When we started, it still needed a lot of work," says one grad of the facilities. "But throughout our three years there, a lot of corporate sponsorship allowed for the modernization of the classrooms, which was great, and the other facilities of the school (*i.e.* moot courtroom) were fantastic."

The first year is divided into four sections of about 72 students each. Four courses are offered in the fall semester and five in the

winter semester. In both semesters, one or two courses are partly taught in small groups of about 20 to 25 students. Although Osgoode is a larger school, one respondent says, "The size of the school means that a greater selection of courses can be offered. There are courses available in all major practice areas."

Another notes: "The school can be as big or small as you make it."

The law library consists of a collection of approximately 450,000 volumes (including microform) on five floors. The school also offers two legal clinics, Parkdale Community Legal Services and the Community and Legal Aid Services Programme, which give students the opportunity to work on files within the community.

"The greatest strength of Osgoode is the breadth of opportunity there to really define your own legal education. Because the school is big and the faculty so spectacular and supportive, each student has the ability to really pursue their interests to the fullest."

5. University of Western Ontario

	Curriculum: B
	Faculty: B
	Caring Profs: 74%-99%
	Students: B
	Testing: B-
	Facilities: B
	Practice Relevance: B
Final Grade: B	Recommended By: 84%

Graduates of the University of Western Ontario praised the school for its legal aid clinic, exchange programs and supportive student body. A range of course types was also plus for some. "UWO offered a lot of specialty courses but had mandatory courses for each year so you were introduced to a little of everything," says one respondent.

Graduates were enthusiastic about the school-run clinic, Community Legal Services, which gives students the opportunity to provide legal assistance to those who cannot afford a lawyer. The clinic is staffed by Western students working under the supervision of review lawyers. Second- and third-year students act as caseworkers, representing the client, and first-year students act as associate caseworkers, shadowing and assisting the caseworkers. "Working at the clinic gave great practical training," says one respondent.

Failed to make the grade

The following schools drew insufficient responses to support inclusion: the University of Quebec at Montreal; McGill University; the University of Sherbrooke; the University of Laval; the University of Calgary; and the University of Moncton.

Students in first year take one of their full-year courses (constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, property or torts) in a small group of approximately 18 students. The smaller format is used to introduce students to basic skills needed in law school. It also provides first-year students with a support system. For each group, teaching assistants conduct hands-on legal research instruction in the library, assist with skills learning and generally act as mentors to the students in their group.

UWO was also praised for its diverse student body and community feeling amongst staff and students.

6. University of Alberta		
	Curriculum:	B+
	Faculty:	B
	Caring Profs:	75%-99%
	Students:	B
	Testing:	B-
	Facilities:	B
	Practice Relevance:	C+
Final Grade: B	Recommended By:	100%

The University of Alberta was praised by former students for its strong faculty, sense of collegiality and variety of courses. The school “fostered a strong sense of collegiality and social relationships with other

students,” says one respondent.

The law program at the University of Alberta is a quota program and the first-year class maximum is set at 175 students. First year involves a set of seven required core courses that provide grounding in the major areas of law and professional ethics. Electronic research techniques are a mandatory component of the first-year program.

The instructional computer labs contain 22 Pentium 4 2.8GHz computers with 17-inch flat panel monitors, which are networked to shared resources. The software programs include: legal resource database programs such as QuickLaw, word processing programs such as Microsoft and Corel, Internet access via Netscape/Internet Explorer and access to e-mail. Two major lecture theatres include computer laptop connections to each seat (185 connections) and the CN Multimedia Centre. The Brenda and David McLean Reading Room, and the students’ common room (The Gavel) are also wired for laptop computers, giving a total of 300 laptop computer connections. Additionally, last year two wireless access points were added where students may connect to the Internet with their wireless laptops.

Top marks were also given for the strong and knowledgeable faculty, the friendly environment and the variety of courses offered.

7. University of Saskatchewan		
	Curriculum:	B
	Faculty:	B
	Caring Profs:	75%-99%
	Students:	B
	Testing:	B-
	Facilities:	C+
	Practice Relevance:	B
Final Grade: B	Recommended By:	96%

The University of Saskatchewan was lauded for its small class sizes, collegial atmosphere and curriculum. “Although U of S has, I believe, fewer course alternatives than other schools, it offers all of the staples of legal education and blends the teaching of them with an appropriate mix of practical and theory,” says one respondent.

Another grad agrees and says, “Although the curriculum was limited in choices, foundational courses were offered that provided an extremely solid legal education; such information is used at least weekly to sort through issues that come up in my daily practice.”

Most U of S grads agreed that the

collegial environment, small class sizes and moot court programs and legal clinics were top-notch. “Interesting courses taught by very able professors and practitioners; pleasant environment; and, for the most part, student body was very pleasant and not overly competitive (except for the ‘usual’),” says one respondent. “The number of people was small,” notes another graduate, “so the school was very collegial.”

The U of S accepts 110 students to the first-year program and also offers a women’s mentoring program as a way to bring law students and practitioners together in a comfortable space in which to provide encouragement and advice to law students. The program was also designed to create healthy environments for women in the legal profession, and to ultimately increase the retention rates of female lawyers in Saskatchewan.

8. Queen’s University	
	Curriculum: B
	Faculty: B+
	Caring Profs: 51%-74%
	Students: B
	Testing: B-
	Facilities: B-
	Practice Relevance: C+
Final Grade: B	Recommended By: 92%

Queen’s University was given top marks for its approachable professors and close student body. “Being in Kingston really brought everyone together and focused our energies,” says one respondent. The student body was praised for being a “good variety of academics and people who weren’t the best academics but had great life experiences,” noted another grad.

The class sizes are around 28 students per course, and the school offers legal aid clinics and the opportunity to provide advice and assistance to inmates of federal penitentiaries in the Kingston, Ont. area through the Correctional Law Project. “For the size of the school, the curriculum is of very high quality and breadth,” says one respondent. “A good mix of both tradition and non-traditional subjects,” says another.

The facilities, which have been criticized in the past, have been recently renovated. Professors were rated highly and most respondents found the faculty knowledgeable and approachable. “Those who teach at Queen’s generally appear to be committed to the school and its students,” says one grad.

9. University of Ottawa	
	Curriculum: B
	Faculty: B
	Caring Profs: 75-99%
	Students: C+
	Testing: B-
	Facilities: C+
	Practice Relevance: C+
Final Grade: B-	Recommended By: 94%

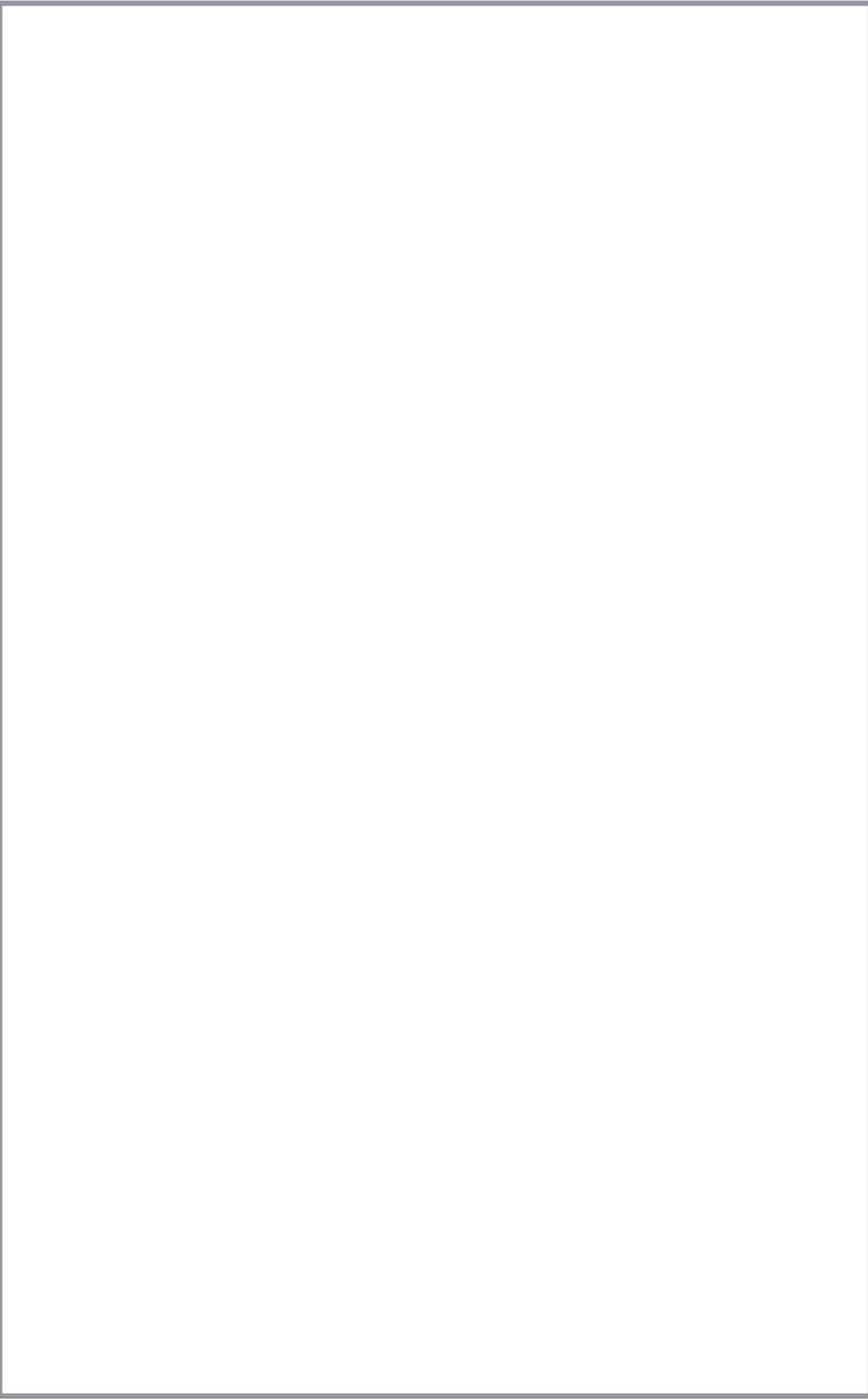
The University of Ottawa’s greatest strengths are its location, variety of courses and the bilingual program. “Lots of students, lots of choices and good profs (or enough that you could find good profs)” were

some of U of O’s strongest features, according to one grad.

The curriculum “provides great variety and yet does not purely focus on ‘Bay Street’ courses,” says one respondent. “However, it provides a great amount of courses to help one prepare for and get into a Bay Street firm.”

The quality and diversity of Ottawa’s student body was also a big plus for former students. “High quality of the faculty, diversity of the students, including franco/anglo students, handicapped students, various ethnicities, *etc.*,” says one grad.

The school recognizes the importance of



active participation in debate and the benefits of student interaction within a close classroom setting. Each first-year student is assigned to a “small group” core course of about 25 students.

Top marks were also given to the Brian Dickson Law Library and the opportunity to acquire both civil and common law degrees in four years, as well as the chance to choose instruction in both official languages.

10. University of Manitoba

	Curriculum:	B
	Faculty:	B
	Caring Profs:	75%-99%
	Students:	B
	Testing:	C
	Facilities:	C+
Practice Relevance:	C+	
Recommended By:	91%	
Final Grade: B-		

The University of Manitoba was given top marks for its student body, upgrades to facilities and progressive curriculum. “There was a real all-for-one attitude between faculty, students and support staff,” says one grad. “We were all in it together.”

Observes another: “Although each student may not be able to meet the academic credentials for admission to University of Toronto law, it became apparent that entrance marks were essentially meaningless,” says one respondent. “Several students who were admitted at the last moment became honour roll. This is not indicative of the overall level of student; instead, it illustrates the quality and diversity of the students entering the program. I have learned that this is a much appreciated and sorely missed quality in other schools.”

U of M accepts 101 students into the first-year program each year and boasts an advocacy program, which progressively builds upon skills learned in each year of law school. In first year, all students prepare and present an oral motion. In second year, all students prepare and present a trial and then take the matter on to appeal. In the appeal, the students must write an appeal *factum* and then present oral argument before a panel consisting of a lawyer, articling student and a third-year student.

“I don’t believe there is another law school I could have attended which would leave me with a feeling as happy with the law school experience as U of M did,” says one respondent. “I came from provinces away but felt the Manitoban spirit from day one.”

11. University of Windsor

	Curriculum:	B-
	Faculty:	B-
	Caring Profs:	51%-74%
	Students:	B-
	Testing:	C+
	Facilities:	C+
	Practice Relevance:	C+
	Recommended By:	86%
Final Grade: B-		

The University of Windsor was given high marks for its joint JD/LLB program, faculty, student body and clinical programs. “The school does well to choose individuals from diverse backgrounds,” says one respondent. “The feeling at Windsor is one of collegiality and friendliness.” Says another grad: “The most valuable professional resource I have is the support and encouragement I receive from my law school colleagues.”

“Windsor provided excellent opportunities for sessional instructors to teach based on their ‘real life’ experience,” says another respondent. The school was also lauded for its legal writing program, which according to one grad, “made articling much easier for me.”

The career services department was also commended for helping students and graduates define and achieve their career goals, both short-term and long-term, through individual career coaching, programs and workshops, resumé and cover letter clinics, peer mentors, job shadowing and access to an extensive resource library.

“Windsor is an underrated school that produces competitive and job-ready graduates,” says one respondent. “I cannot say enough good things about my school.”

12. Dalhousie University

	Curriculum:	B-
	Faculty:	B-
	Caring Profs:	51%-74%
	Students:	B
	Testing:	C+
	Facilities:	B-
	Practice Relevance:	C
	Recommended By:	94%
Final Grade: B-		

Dalhousie University was praised for its small class sizes, diverse student body and broad selection of courses. One grad says Dalhousie’s greatest strength is “its size, which was small enough that you weren’t lost in the mix but large enough to have good facilities and a mix of classmates.” Another says the atmosphere of collegiality was top-notch, which the professors helped foster.

One grad enjoyed “the fact that its students were from different parts of the country and had different backgrounds, thereby offering different perspectives.”

Dalhousie’s Sir James Dunn Law Library houses 200,000 volumes of common law material and legal periodicals, and a fast-growing marine and environmental law section. The school also hosts a marine and environmental law program. The school allows a limited number of students to complete their LLB on a part-time basis, if attending full time would cause hardship or inability to attend. Dalhousie also has an active clinical law program, with a community law office in downtown Halifax. Students are able to participate in several moot programs as well.

13. University of British Columbia

	Curriculum:	B-
	Faculty:	C+
	Caring Profs:	51%-74%
	Students:	B-
	Testing:	C+
	Facilities:	C-
	Practice Relevance:	C
	Recommended By:	83%
Final Grade: C+		

The University of British Columbia was praised for its broad course offerings, strong faculty for first-year courses, and strong student body. According to one grad, UBC offers a “good range of courses from black-letter law to special interest applications — faculty/adjunct faculty was generally very good.” Another says: “Very broad course offering. Good mix of academics and professional lecturers.”

Students at UBC also have the opportunity to become involved in a wide variety of student-run organizations and activities, including two law reviews (the *UBC Law Review* and the *Canadian Journal of Family Law*); competitive moots at the local, regional, national and international levels; and the law students legal advice program, which provides free legal advice to members of the community under the supervision of volunteer lawyers.

The school was criticized for its facilities, which are becoming “rundown,” according to one respondent. “The law school is in need of some renovation,” says another grad. “The facilities are adequate, but not welcoming. Who wants to hang out in vinyl chairs in a concrete bunker between classes?” **Q**

Kirsten McMahon is an editor at Law Times, a newspaper for Ontario’s legal professionals.

In the Nov/Dec 2004 issue of *Canadian Lawyer*, the Law Firm Associates’ Survey contained incorrect information about salaries at Miller Thomson LLP (British Columbia). The correct starting salary is \$73,500. We apologize for the error.