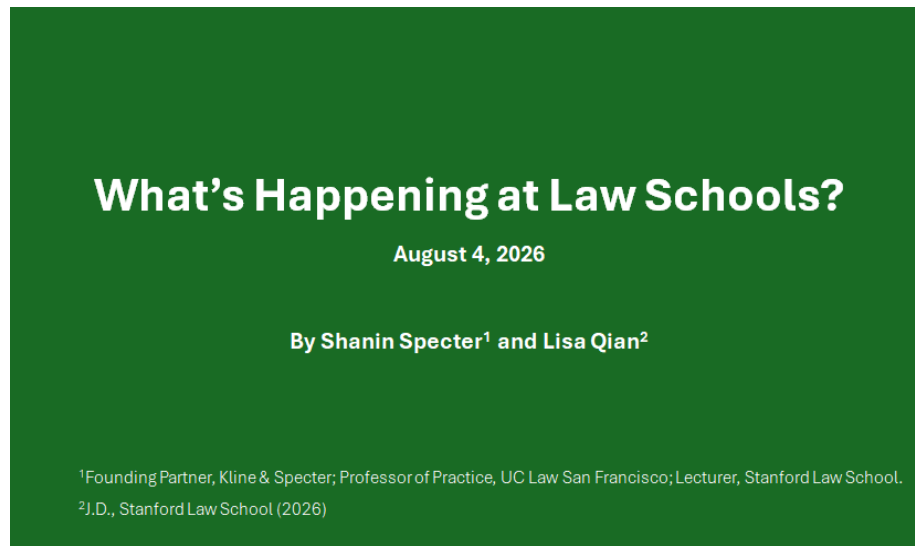


# What's Happening at Law Schools?

*August 4, 2026*

By Shanin Specter<sup>1</sup> and Lisa Qian<sup>2</sup>

## SLIDE 1



Thank you. I come to this topic with one foot firmly planted in practice and one foot firmly planted in academia, having taught for the past 27 years, including this year where I taught 1L torts at UC Law San Francisco plus two trial skills courses at Stanford Law School.

I'm happy to report that there's now tremendous interest among law students in becoming plaintiff lawyers.

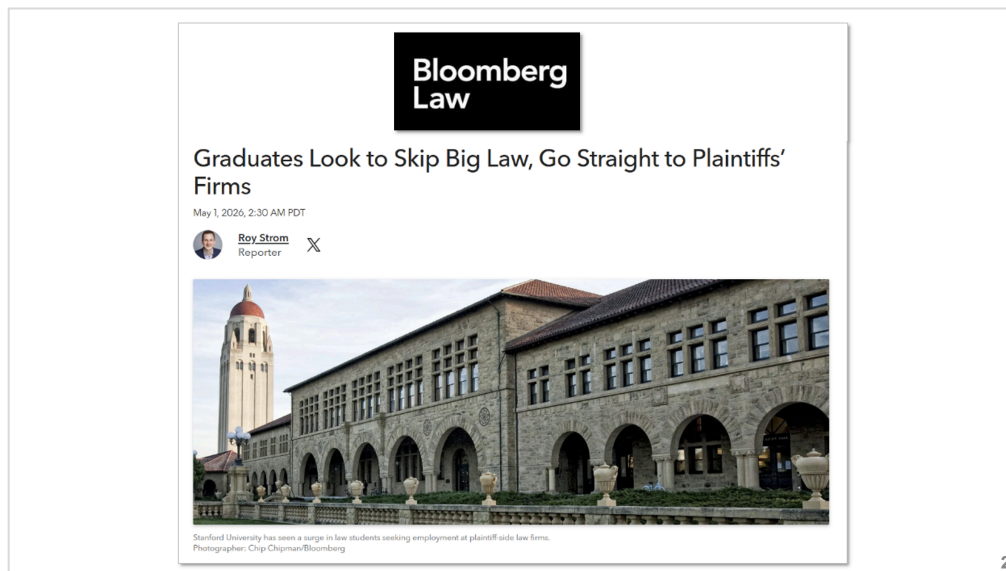
What's the evidence for this?

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<sup>2</sup> J.D., Stanford Law School (2026).

## SLIDE 2



Well here's Bloomberg News, which reported in May 2026 that "Graduates Look to Skip Big Law, [And] Go Straight to Plaintiffs' Firms."

## SLIDE 3

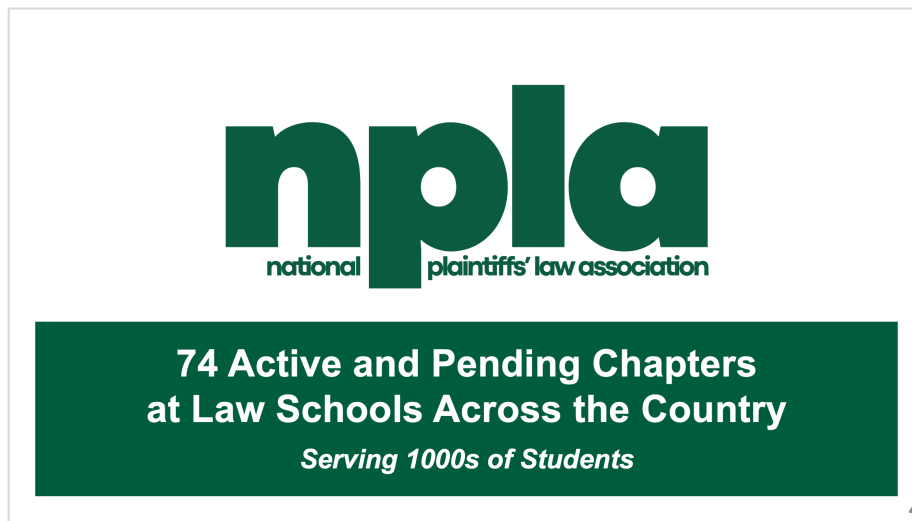
### 84 Law Students Attended AAJ 2026 in Chicago...



***...Beating Last Year's Record of 70 in San Francisco***

Look at AAJ, a record 84 students attended the recent AAJ Convention in Chicago.

## SLIDE 4



Plaintiffs Law Associations have formed at 74 law schools, including 13 of the so-called top 14 law schools.

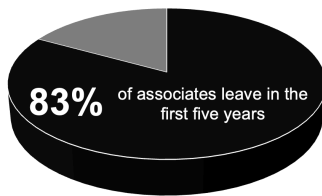
A vibrant umbrella organization, the National Plaintiffs Law Association, has formed to help oversee and organize the various law school organizations, with national leaders elected by their law school peers.

Why is there all this law student interest in plaintiffs' work?

There are several reasons.

## SLIDE 5

## BigLaw Sucks...



- Associate work is boring, exhausting, not professionally developmental, and not socially impactful
- As firms get bigger, professionalism is eroded
- Trump's targeting of big firms is demoralizing
- Recruitment of 1Ls is exploitative
- Big firms are shedding practice groups
- Big firms are run like corporations, not professional partnerships

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Let's begin with this: BigLaw sucks and law students know it.

83% of associates in BigLaw leave within the first five years. Obviously, they are leaving because they aren't professionally satisfied. That reality has seeped into the consciousness of law students, who are famously risk adverse. They doubt they will be the one in six for whom big firm practice is satisfying enough to stay.

The 83% melt rate is due to the fact that Big Law does not permit young lawyers to do interesting work and develop transferable and marketable skills. Most of the work is drudgery — document review; interrogatory drafting; legal research — not trials, depositions or in court arguments.

There's an expectation of long hours reflected in time sheets billed in six minute increments. Young associates usually don't know their

corporate clients. There's rarely a pat on the back from the client. And there's a feeling that the work is not meaningful or socially impactful.

Most of this has been true for decades. But recently the negativity around Big Law has worsened. Why?

First, there has been a consolidation among large law firms. Currently, there are roughly 70 US law firms with more than 1000 lawyers and several with more than 3000. Lawyers don't know their colleagues. And in the post-pandemic legal world, many firms do not require associates to come to the office, at least not every day, and that prevents personal and mentoring relationships from developing.

Second, in 2025 the Trump administration targeted 13 large law firms with punitive executive orders, unless they capitulated and became collaborators in the legal and political agenda of the administration. Nine of the 13 big firms knuckled under.

That's caused a lot of law students to avoid those firms and it's caused some young lawyers to quit those firms. Now, they doubt a big firm will permit the professional independence and zealous advocacy that we lawyers prize.

Correspondingly, over 1200 law students from 160 law schools in 40 states signed amicus briefs prepared by our law firm and the Walkup firm in

San Francisco in support of the four resisting law firms, as well as the American Bar Association, who all filed suit against the administration. The resisting law firms have all been successful in having these executive orders declared unconstitutional, but the stain on our profession endures.

Third, many large law firms have now moved up their recruiting process. Starting in the fall of 2025, many big firms have offered positions to first semester, first year law students. They are saying: come work for us for your 2L summer, that is, the summer before your third year of law school. Don't worry about your 1L summer.

We will pay you a stipend of \$25,000 to \$50,000 and you can go travel or do public interest work for your 1L summer. You'll then join us for the 2L summer with an eye toward receiving and accepting a permanent offer. But of course, what that also means is that these law students will have no pre-graduation experience with any law firm, except the one that captures them as a first semester, first year law student.

This is a disgraceful and exploitative practice. Most first semester, first year law students have no idea where they might want to practice law or what area of law they might want to concentrate in. They should be focused entirely on their first semester studies. They should not be

concerned with their 1L summer until the second semester of their first year.

But they see this huge amount of money being dangled in front of them. Most have massive debt. And the law firms sound prestigious. So being risk adverse and distracted by their studies, many of them grab for the name and the big offer without having a real idea what they are getting into.

I have personally counseled law students who want out of those commitments, once they understand what are all their options and what are their actual interests. But of course, many are afraid of “reneging” on their duress-induced commitment and fear creating a reputational issue for themselves. It’s a big unresolved problem. And just yesterday, the ABA called on firms to cease this conduct.

Fourth, as large law firms are merging, they are shedding very successful practice groups — meaning they are firing lots of good lawyers. Why? Because these mergers create conflicts of interest. So the firms retain the practice group that’s the most lucrative and cast the less successful practice groups out of the firm. That shakes the confidence of law students and young associates.

Fifth, large law firms no longer operate like true partnerships. They are now governed by a rotating chairperson and executive committee, whom most lawyers in the firm simply don't know.

So now, key decisions like lateral partner hiring, compensation, pay transparency, new office openings, the next law firm merger, investments in AI technology – all decisions that once involved all the equity partners collaboratively and through democratic voting, are now made by small committees or just the chair of the firm. So, the title of “partner” at a large firm is now mostly an honorific.

Sixth, and correspondingly, large law firms are now admitting a smaller share of partners into ownership ranks. They are now making them “non-equity partners” which is a tactic used to reserve profit distributions for lawyers who bring in the most business. That's permitted the highest equity partner compensation in BigLaw to balloon to thirty or forty million dollars per year, while the rest get whatever is determined by someone they don't know. It's a 1-percenter's form of wealth inequality.

Nearly none of the negatives in BigLaw exist in the plaintiffs' practice. To the contrary, our practice is way more attractive.

**SLIDE 6**

## Plaintiffs' Work is Great



- The work is interesting
- Young lawyers develop skills early
- We pick our clients
- No time sheets
- It's entrepreneurial
- It's socially impactful
- Our clients know us and thank us
- Few of us leave the practice

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Look at our assets:

Our work is interesting. Every case is different.

We choose our cases, as opposed to being assigned cases by an insurance company or a corporate client.

We don't bill our time. The contingent fee system produces a perfect match of need to effort. We don't have timesheets and we rarely keep our hours. We aren't incentivized to do mindless or unnecessary work. There is very little drudgery, even for young associates.

We are paid based on our results. We have both the right to fail and the right to succeed, which is exciting. That entrepreneurial spirit is invigorating.

Some of our cases permit us to demand safety improvements as a condition of settlement. Effectuating positive change is phenomenal in every way. It makes us feel good about ourselves and what we are

doing. It adds a sense of purpose within the law firm. It provides the right kind of bragging rights on our websites, to our friends and family and in our community. And it raises public estimation of what we lawyers do.

Plaintiffs firms are almost always small firms by today's metrics. Young associates quickly develop transferable and marketable skills. In nearly every plaintiff's firm, young lawyers get great opportunities to learn early on through taking depositions, arguing motions, and trying or helping to try cases.

In our practices, we know our clients. Gratitude and hugs are common and the work feels purposeful, because we improve peoples' lives.

Starting salaries at plaintiffs firms are historically lower, but the long-term pay structures are flexible. Big law firms typically follow rigid pay scales tied to class year, not talent. And it's very hard to demonstrate your value when you're not doing much of value except billing time. In the plaintiff's practice, opportunities to shine and earn come early and compensation isn't fixed.

All of this is why relatively few plaintiff lawyers leave the profession, while many defense lawyers switch sides. In 42 years of practicing law, I've only seen four lawyers leave plaintiff law for defense law.

But let me talk about the remaining challenges.

## SLIDE 7

### Challenges Remain

-  We rarely pay Big Law first year salaries
-  Most of us don't recruit at law schools
-  Income opacity can be counterproductive
-  There's little exposure to plaintiffs' lawyers in law schools

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First, most plaintiffs firms chafe at the idea of paying first year associates anything like the starting BigLaw salaries, which are now in the range of \$230,000 per year. Let's face it, a first year associate isn't worth this kind of money in our firms.

But we need to get over that. Why? Because the best young lawyers-to-be can command a significant starting salary elsewhere. If we want the best, we have to be competitive in the marketplace.

Most new lawyers have huge debt and simply can't make do with way less. That brilliant first year associate may not be worth a lot in year one, but he or she is worth a lot down the road. When they develop skills,

combined with their high aptitude and achievement, they will be a very effective and valuable young lawyer.

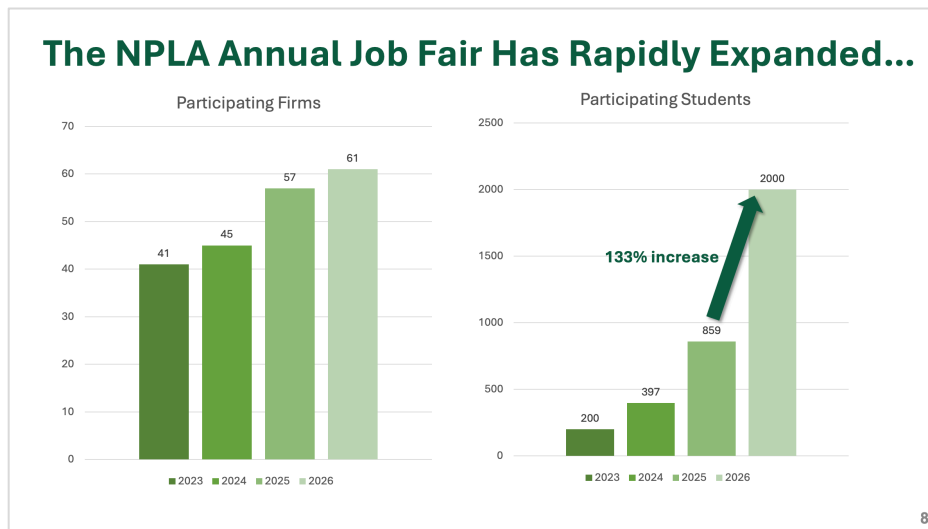
Historically, most of us haven't had a rigorous process for hiring and tend to hire who we know, be he the partner's son, the neighbor's kid, or the lawyer sitting across the table in a deposition. That reinforces the existing social strata and discourages diversity and minority hiring. It's also just plain bad for business to not make more effort to hire great people who can bring something new, different and better to the firm.

And while big law firms brag to the legal news media about how much they're paying young lawyers, we plaintiff firm leaders studiously avoid talking about how much any of our lawyers make. That's nobody's business in general, but we need to be prepared to educate law students on what can be their financial horizons. The virtues of confidentiality and opacity have sensible limits.

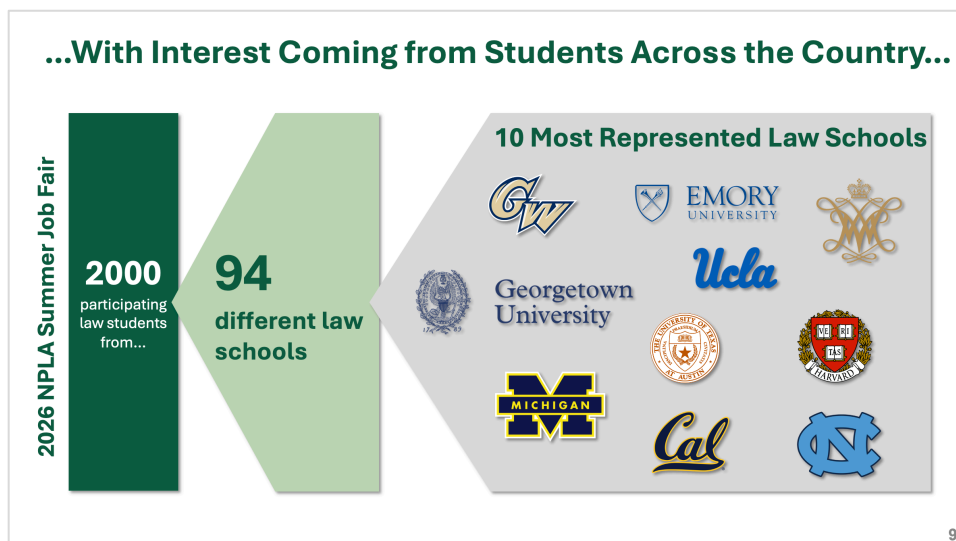
Similarly, there's little exposure in most law schools to plaintiffs lawyers. Very few plaintiffs firms take part in the on campus recruiting process.

But we should be rethinking summer hiring and on campus recruiting. There is a pretty straightforward pathway to recruit the right law students for our firms.

## SLIDE 8

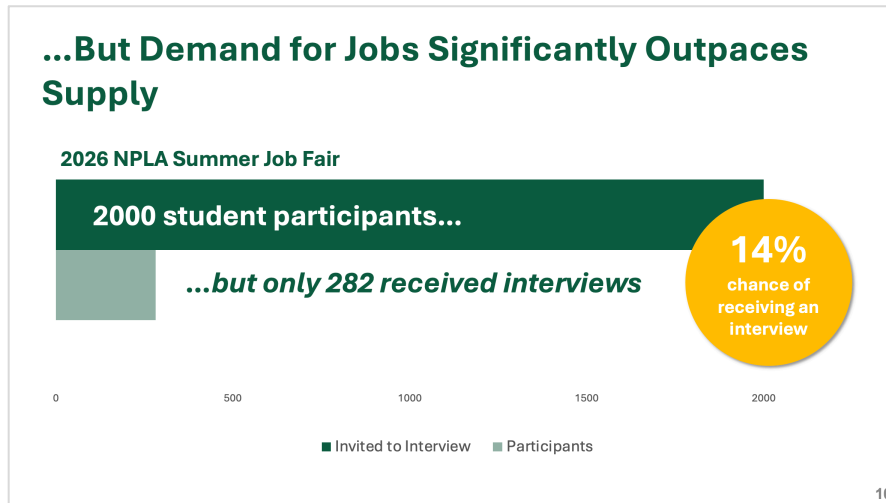


First, your firm can take part in the National Plaintiffs' Law Association job fair. This group gathers student applications from law students across the country, and coordinates Zoom interviews for you. The job fair's expansion demonstrates the accelerating demand for plaintiffs' jobs, **SLIDE 9**,



with interest coming from 2000 law students at 94 different law schools across the country.

## SLIDE 10



But demand for jobs significantly outpaces current supply. If more firms take part in the NPLA job fair, more students will get interviews and jobs.

Second, you or somebody in your firm can develop a relationship with your local law school. You can tell the career office that you hire summer clerks. You can talk to the membership and leadership of the plaintiff law association on the campus. If there is no plaintiff law association, you can ask the career office to put you in touch with law students who are interested in plaintiff's work. You can get together with them for a meal, or give a talk.

## SLIDE 11



Help a local law school  
start a chapter!



[membership@nationalplaintiffslawassociation.org](mailto:membership@nationalplaintiffslawassociation.org)

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You can give law students the contact information for the National Plaintiffs' Law Association so they can form a campus chapter – [membership@nationalplaintiffslawassociation.org](mailto:membership@nationalplaintiffslawassociation.org).

## SLIDE 12

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Beyond getting to know interested law students and giving a talk to them, you can reach out to a professor who teaches courses in the tort field and volunteer to come in and teach a single day's class.

You might also consider establishing a student prize in your name or the name of your firm for students who excel in torts or trial advocacy classes. You might consider establishing a one-year fellowship program at your firm for recent graduates. Given the high rate of unemployment for recent law school graduates, some new grads are receptive to working for a relatively low wage for a year to get their feet wet in practice.

Such fellowships would likely be undertaken with a presumption that no permanent offer will be made, but the reality is that a good fellow will end up being a good lawyer, and they may get a permanent offer.

Toward the upper end of the commitment of resources, you might consider teaching a course. Although the full-time faculty run the law schools, 64% of all law school professors are part-time adjuncts. Many of our colleagues have taught at law school. Uniformly, they have found it to be invigorating and valuable.

My experience is that preparing for a class teaches me a lot that I should know for my practice, whether it's material I didn't learn in law school, didn't learn in practice or just forgot. My students teach me a lot too, and some continue to contribute to me and me to them.

Our law firm has hired many of my best students. There's no substitute for the 13 week interview process that teaching a semester of law school provides.

### SLIDE 13



An essential good of practitioners teaching law students is the mentoring relationship and all that goes with it. All benefit. From the student perspective, when law students haven't had real, prolonged contact with practitioners, they may perceive big law jobs to be the best or maybe only sensible option. Most of my students learn a fair amount about small firm practice from their exposure to me. Some seek my advice or help.

If there were more practitioners teaching and mentoring – especially now that the job process begins in the first semester of law school,

students would know a lot more about life after law school, and they'd develop many more options.

Academia and law practice are separate but mutually dependent. Practice without doctrine is rudderless, while doctrine without practice is powerless. We can bring both the rudder of doctrine and the power of practice to the future of our profession. It's important that we focus on both.

Thank you.