

## Why Becoming a Law Professor Is Tougher Than Ever — But Most Are Happy Once They Get There



The role of a law professor remains one of the most sought-after positions in the legal world, offering intellectual challenge, academic freedom, and the ability to shape future lawyers. But while the vast majority of law professors report job satisfaction, the path to academia is growing increasingly competitive and complex, according to a recent study by the **Association of American Law Schools (AALS)**.

### High Job Satisfaction Among Law Professors

An impressive 74% of U.S. law faculty surveyed by the AALS expressed satisfaction or high satisfaction with their current roles. Flexibility for family matters, manageable teaching loads, and accommodating leave policies were cited as top contributors to their contentment.

However, the study also revealed disparities in satisfaction levels. Women and faculty of color reported slightly lower satisfaction rates than their white male counterparts, suggesting room for improvement in equity and inclusivity within legal academia.

### The Increasingly Complex Path to Academia

Breaking into legal academia has never been easy, but it's become even more challenging in recent years. Simply earning a **Juris Doctor (JD)** from a prestigious law school and completing a clerkship may no longer suffice. Hiring committees now favor candidates with additional advanced degrees, teaching fellowships, and scholarly publications.

The study found that:

**57% of law professors** who earned their JD between 2010 and 2023 also hold a Ph.D. or another advanced degree, compared to just 43% of those who graduated earlier.

Nearly **46% of newer professors** completed a teaching fellowship — positions designed to provide experience and help aspiring academics build a publication record.

Brian Leiter, a law professor at the University of Chicago, referred to this trend as “credential inflation,” noting during an AALS panel discussion that “the path to get into law teaching has gotten a lot longer than it was 30-odd years ago.”

### The Importance of Elite Law Schools

Graduating from a top-tier law school remains a key credential for aspiring law professors. According to the study:

**71% of current professors** attended a “most selective” law school — defined as those in the top third of schools with the highest median LSAT scores.

Among faculty at these top-tier schools, **89% also graduated from a ‘most selective’ law school** themselves, underscoring the cyclical nature of academic hiring.

### Progress and Challenges in Diversity

Legal academia has made strides in diversity over the past two decades, with women now making up the majority of new hires. Additionally, faculty of color represent **37% of law professors** hired in the past five years, up from 29% a decade ago.

However, challenges remain. During the AALS panel, Boston University law dean Angela Onwuachi-Willig highlighted that women are disproportionately represented among non-tenured faculty, while faculty of color are more likely to teach at less-selective law schools.

“It’s good news that we are becoming more diverse, but the fact that faculty of color are clustered among the youngest faculty suggests that it might be a while before we see the effects of that diversity,” she noted. Law professors typically gain influence and authority with tenure and time spent in the field, meaning these shifts will take years to fully materialize.

### The Takeaway

While law professors overwhelmingly enjoy fulfilling careers, aspiring academics face a longer, more arduous journey to secure a faculty position. The profession’s increasing focus on advanced degrees and teaching fellowships is raising the bar for entry, even as it becomes more inclusive.

