

# Aspiring Illinois Lawyers Need More than Just Law Degrees

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The 2004 bar exam results throughout the United States were less than inspiring. Only 64% of bar takers actually passed. The exam is offered twice each year in July and February, and just last month, while many Americans enjoyed summer vacations, 77,000 law school graduates sat for the July 2006 bar exam. Among the 77,000, over 3,000 graduates sat for the Illinois bar exam with hopes of becoming Illinois lawyers.

Illinois is home to seven law schools, which is more than most states, and according to the results of the 2004 bar exam, only 76% of Illinois bar takers will be licensed Illinois attorneys after graduation. Although 76% is less grim than the national average, it is gut wrenching from the perspective of those who have spent three years of their lives in law school.

Fueled by enough caffeine to keep a lot of coffee shops in business, many law students sacrifice long evenings hard at work pouring over hundreds of pages of cases. The students who complete three years of this regime usually acquire law degrees and debt loads that go well into the six digits, but those law degrees do not make law school grads Illinois lawyers until they pass the 2-day long Illinois bar exam.

The Illinois bar exam covers just about everything that is taught throughout 3 years of law school, from Criminal Procedure to Trusts and Future Interests, every subject covered in law school is fair game for the exam. Although most Illinois attorneys never come across bar exam topics like Future Interests in the practice of law, they remain haunted by the topics and able to regurgitate their definitions tens of years later. Thus, many topics that are not even useful in the modern day practice of Illinois law prevent a lot of law school grads from becoming lawyers.

Many talented law school grads, including Hillary Clinton and John F. Kennedy Jr., have failed their state bar exams. One recent bar taker, Kathleen Sullivan, a Harvard law professor and Stanford law dean, showed the world how difficult it is to pass the dreaded exam when she failed the California bar. The California bar is known as one of the toughest in the country with a 50% pass rate.

What happens to the 24% of law school grads who fail the bar exam? Some of them take it again, and again and again... There is a limit of 6 attempts that law school graduates can make to pass the Illinois bar, however, the passage rate is substantially lower for serial bar takers. Some law school grads attempt to take the bar exam in neighboring states like Indiana and Iowa. Finally, some law school grads find legal careers that do not require law licenses such as writing for legal newspapers.

And what happens to those top 76% of bar takers who pass the bar? The ABA reports that there are currently 1,116,967 licensed lawyers throughout the United States and 961,000 of them were employed as lawyers in 2005. After passing the bar, young Illinois lawyers must compete with about 47,000 other licensed attorneys throughout the state.

Again, the 2004 bar exam results were less than inspiring for those who are interested in becoming Illinois lawyers. Nevertheless, whether you want to call them persistent or just downright naive, this generation of students continues to apply to law school. If there is a bright side to the outlook for Illinois and its future non-licensed law degree holders, it's that throughout human history, it is hard to think of a society that has ever suffered for being over-educated. As more law students compete for positions as lawyers, Illinois will have better lawyers and a more educated populace. Emily Gleason is a law student at John Marshall in Chicago. For more information, please visit <http://www.FindGreatLawyers.com>, a leading resource for referrals to Illinois lawyers.