

The 2022 A-List: The Firms Climbing Greater Heights

For the firms on this year's A-List ranking of the most well-rounded members of the Am Law 200, one key to success is always finding another peak to climb.

By **Andrew Maloney**

Just as there are many paths to the top of a mountain, there are multiple ways to scale the summit of Big Law. But whether it's a steady ascent or maintaining a swift pace, this year's A-List arguably demonstrates the power of consistency.

Ropes & Gray has hovered around the No. 1 spot for the last several years, finishing first in 2018, then third, then second two years in a row, in 2020 and 2021.

This year, the firm got back over the hump to gain a share of the top slot in The American Lawyer's annual rankings, which consider revenue per lawyer alongside cultural markers including associate satisfaction, pro bono commitment, racial diversity and women equity partnership numbers.

"I always feel like the underdog, and I think a lot of our partners do. And that is a healthy place to be," said Julie

Jones, chair of Ropes & Gray. "You have that mindset that we need to fight for our position with our clients and avoid complacency. And I think when you have that mentality, like, 'Hey, Ropes & Gray continues to be the one climbing the mountain,' it makes it easier to keep pushing."

Ropes shares the distinction this year with Los Angeles-founded Munger Tolles & Olson, another previous high scorer on the A-List with multiple top-3 finishes over the last handful of years. Munger Tolles finished outside the top-50 last year due to a lack of information on one of the relevant surveys, but has otherwise been one of the more consistent names near the front of the class.

Firm leaders there said last year was the strongest in its 60-year history from a profitability perspective, and that remaining intentional in its growth strategy will help it



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remain near the top in all A-List categories. Hailyn Chen, a Munger Tolles co-managing partner, also pointed specifically to a bench filled with former high-ranking government lawyers, including 14 former U.S. Supreme Court clerks and 150 former federal and state judicial clerks, calling it "an unparalleled density of legal talent."

Chen said the firm's ethos is simple: "[W]e hire the most talented lawyers to take on the toughest legal challenges and we allow them to do it in a uniquely democratic environment."

The rest of the top 10 have also been a testament to

consistency; eight firms made the top 10 both this year and last year, including Ropes, Orrick, Wilmer Hale, O'Melveny, Paul Weiss, Skadden, Debevoise & Plimpton and Morrison & Foerster.

Still other firms, like Morgan Lewis & Bockius, have shown it's possible to consistently make gains. The Philadelphia-headquartered multinational firm increased from 31st in 2017 to 18th, 14th, 11th, then back to 35th after not participating in one of the surveys last year. But this year, Morgan Lewis cracked the top 10, coming in at 8th.

"The two most important things to us are our talent and our clients. Over the past several years, we have been very intentional in our effort to make Morgan Lewis a destination for both," the firm said in a statement. "We are lucky to have terrific clients who bring us important matters, and we work hard to ensure that our lawyers have the opportunity to handle interesting work that matters to our clients and our communities."

Upward Trajectory

This year, the data for Ropes & Gray showed a 17-point gain on the A-List's diversity metric, easily the largest gain for firms in the top 20 of the annual rankings. The firm also made slight gains in revenue



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per lawyer and associate satisfaction.

Jones, the firm chair, pointed to several strands of policy and culture that Ropes tries to weave together to push itself on diversity. That can include bringing it up each month during policy committee meetings, or bringing on two straight associate classes that are mostly racially or ethnically diverse. She noted the firm also built an accessible database for decision-makers to see how diversity is deployed by practice group, office, seniority and other categories in real time.

Jones said while it may be more of a long-term benefit, that metric-driven approach makes it more difficult to explain away gaps in diversity.

"We knew there were ways we could get better at holding ourselves accountable at eliminating any differential," she says. "I don't know how directly that relates to our diversity numbers [this year.] Frankly, the report card on that for the firm may come 10 years from now. But that's okay. That's what legacy is about."

Indeed, among the elite names on this list, firm leaders acknowledge the industry still has shortcomings, particularly when it comes to racial and gender diversity. "Every person, to a human knows that," says Jones. "Just because you're at the top of the elite law rankings, that's an appropriate place to be as an institution? I'd consider that a failure of perspective."

The average diversity score across Am Law 200 firms that supplied data for the A-List rankings did rise this year, from about 47.5 to about 50 on a 100-point scale. And some analysts say the needle is generally moving in the right direction.

“I think the direction is greater consideration of questions around [diversity, equity and inclusion], and greater emphasis on trying to develop a more diverse population, and greater emphasis on making sure the changes are real,” said Michael McKenney, a senior client advisor at Citi Private Bank Law Firm Group. “So we see an emphasis around trying to improve the DEI profile of the associate population, and also of the counsel and partner population as well.”

Despite an industry-wide decrease in pro bono hours last year, A-List firms also generally improved their average, from around 69.3 to about 71.

Not surprisingly, Munger Tolles recorded one of the highest scores in the category this year, with a 97.5. Firm leaders said it’s one of their core tenants, and gained even more currency during the pandemic. They said one way they try to bake it into their culture is by giving lawyers plenty of autonomy.

“We also give our lawyers—from our partners all the way down to first-year associates—the opportunity to see cases through, taking them to trial, even to the U.S. Supreme Court,” said Malcolm Heinicke, another of the firm’s co-managing partners. “While our approach runs counter to how many firms operate, it has helped us attract lawyers who care deeply about their communities and seek early responsibility in important matters.”

Morgan Lewis was able to bolster its charitable output in spite of the industry-wide decrease in 2021. The firm’s score rose three points this year, from 92 to 95. And firm chair Jami McKeon said she expects that trend to continue because it’s one of the few firms of its size that requires every single lawyer to do pro bono.

“From me, to everyone else, in every country, in every practice group,” she said in an interview. “We feel strongly that pro bono is an obligation of the firm and the profession. So our pro bono is always robust. We have a significant team that helps focus on pro bono operations, and so for us, it almost always goes in one direction.”

McKeon noted that in 2021, demand from paid clients may have cut into pro bono work

across the industry. She also said court closures during the pandemic and a subsequent backlog when litigation started moving again could have also contributed to the dip in service hours. “But I certainly feel the need has never been greater. If there is a recession, of course, the need will be even more so,” she said. “So I would anticipate that pro bono at our firm will be as robust or even more robust, and it’s something we care really deeply about.”

While last year’s A-List firms honed in on dexterity in the wake of major upheaval, the firms near the top of the rankings this year have stayed steady as the legal profession tries to find a new equilibrium. Underlying that consistency is another trait—the confidence to take on additional challenges after previous ones have been conquered.

Jones, of Ropes & Gray, noted that even after bringing in diverse associate classes, for example, the mindset shifts to improving retention.

“So you start to create those incremental challenges, and be open with people that these are hard things to achieve,” she said. “So that’s part of my job. There’s always a higher mountain to climb.”