

Jobs tight for law school grads

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*With the recession and rising tuition, student applications have dropped 16 percent.

University of Texas law student Javier Perez-Afanador graduates this month knowing he must be ready to compete aggressively against hundreds of newly minted lawyers if he hopes to land a job.

He has heard the stories and the statistics: layoffs at the big law firms, more students graduating from law school each year than there are jobs, recent law school graduates being forced to work as temps while searching for paychecks in something other than the law.

Adding to the angst is a student debt load that for many law students often totals more than \$100,000, according to Bloomberg Law. It has gotten so bad that graduates are suing law schools in New York, California, Illinois, Delaware and Florida, alleging that they misled them about the labor picture.

This less than rosy situation also may be contributing to a 16 percent drop in law school applicants, according to a recent analysis by the Law School Admission Council.

"I'm keeping my mind open," said Perez-Afanador, who expects to start his job search officially after he passes the bar exam in July. "I think every year they say it is getting better. People remain optimistic."

The downturn in the legal profession did not hit Texas as hard as other areas of the country - the situation in some places has led to angry blog posts saying a law degree is a waste of time and money - and law school officials and attorneys say getting a juris doctor degree is still a good investment.

"It is true that the legal market and the law school market are down," said John B. Attanasio, dean of Southern Methodist University's Dedman School of Law. "But it still is true that law school remains a good investment at many schools and remains an excellent investment at the outstanding law schools."

Tarrant County Bar Association President Robert Aldrich said he's lived through this kind of economic downturn before.

"All the young people hear about now is 'I got out of law school with a huge debt and I have no place to go,'" Aldrich said. "We all think about it because we always have to have young lawyers or else the whole thing would stop."

'Constrained' growth

Experts say the Great Recession began in late 2007. American families faced pocketbook struggles on many fronts, from the rise of gas prices to home foreclosures to a global market crash. Widespread layoffs followed.

Lawyers weren't immune.

As of December, more than 15,435 people had been laid off by major law firms since January 2008, according to Law Shucks, a website that tracks issues in the legal field. Of those, 5,872 were lawyers and 9,563 were other staff.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 10 percent increase in employment in 2010-20 with continued demand for legal work. But that growth is described as "constrained" because

businesses are more often using large accounting firms and paralegals to do the work of lawyers. Graduating law students are frustrated by not being able to find jobs. Others are angered over the cost of tuition.

The average price of law school tuition and fees at a public law school was \$2,006 in 1985, according to figures compiled by the American Bar Association in a survey of more than 70 schools. That average grew to \$18,472 in 2009. For a private law school the average tuition increase was even more dramatic, going from \$7,526 in 1985 to \$35,743 in 2009.

Nationwide there also has been criticism that there are too many law schools - 201 are accredited by the American Bar Association with five accredited since 2008. (Many were approved in the 1920s - more than 40 in 1923 alone - including those at the University of Texas and Harvard University).

Some graduates made headlines this year when they sued law schools in New York, California, Illinois, Delaware and Florida, accusing them of using misleading postgraduate employment information that keeps applicants from knowing about the true job market.

Anger simmers on the Internet.

The Third Tier Reality blog, which is maintained by "Nando," who says he is a Drake Law School graduate working in a nonlawyer position, says that unless you attend one of the nation's top law schools, got free tuition or have secured a job through personal connections, the future is grim.

"You are fully aware beforehand that your huge investment in time, energy and money does not, in any way, guarantee a job as an attorney or in the legal industry," the blog says,

Making opportunities

In Texas, the downturn reduced or eliminated summer associate programs that are often the path to employment at a firm.

Erika Bright Blomquist, hiring partner at Haynes and Boone in Dallas, said her firm hasn't drastically cut its summer programs - this year it will have 27 clerkships. The number is slightly lower than in years past and will grow only if the economy improves, she said.

"The goal is to have spots for everyone that we bring in," she said.

Recognizing the tight market, SMU has dipped into its endowment to help its students find crucial clerkships and internships in a tight market.

The Partner to Practice matching salary program aims to get second-year or third-year evening students hired.

In summer 2010, 76 students completed clerkships or internships in that program. Last summer, 74 students completed them.

Another SMU program, Test Drive, helps graduating students by paying their salaries at law firms, corporations or government entities for one month. Of the 35 graduates who participated in 2011, 29 accepted permanent employment. In 2010, 44 of 50 got jobs.

"We feel like we should do what we can within reason and what we can afford to help the students," Attanasio said.

Texas Wesleyan University's Law School in Fort Worth encourages its graduates to tap into opportunities with government agencies, nonprofits, law firms and Fortune 500 companies from which they can network, said Arturo Errisuriz, assistant dean for career services.

To help students make those connections, Texas Wesleyan also encourages its students to get involved in the local bar association by buying lunch for five students a month at a bar luncheon.

"The reason people go to law school is to find a professional job," said Dean Raymond T.

Nimmer of the University of Houston Law Center. "Part of our role as a college is to help them do that."

'Ace in the hole'

Some point out that lawyers have been around in good and bad times.

Each downturn is unique. Aldrich recalled how in the 1980s - when Texas experienced a big drop in oil prices and a weak real estate market - many people decided to stay in college or seek law degrees because there were no jobs.

"People are always going to need lawyers. It all depends on what's needed," Aldrich said.

During that time, Pete Slover, a 1982 journalism grad from SMU, earned a law degree from the University of Texas. His background became a huge plus in his 20 years as a reporter. When the newspaper industry weakened, he dusted off his law degree.

"The law degree remains an ace in the hole for any other related career," said Slover, an in-house attorney for the Pedernales Electric Cooperative. "I still tell people who are considering law school they can't go wrong. You will get further in your eventual pursuit."

The University of North Texas believes in the future of the legal profession so much that it is scheduled to open a law school in Dallas in fall 2014.

It will be the only public law school in North Texas and will be in the Old Municipal Building in downtown Dallas.

UNT System officials believe that the school will fill a niche because it will be public.

Recruiting of students won't start until fall 2013.

"Our tuition will be lower," said Rosemary Haggett, vice chancellor of academic affairs and student success for the University of North Texas System. "Our students may not have to have the same level of debt."

Haggett said that while officials are aware of the legal job market and that fewer students are applying for law school, UNT will be a viable option for students who can't afford private law schools at SMU and Texas Wesleyan.

Chris Carns, who graduated from SMU's law school in December, also didn't let the downturn sway him from getting a law degree, even with 200 people competing for 12 summer slots at law firms and students working to be at the top of the class.

"I never questioned my decision," Carns said. "I only questioned what law school was going to give me the best opportunity."

Carns participated in SMU's Partner to Practice program to get experience. After graduation in December, he found work at Arlington's Dismuke, Waters & Sweet, where he does estate and business planning.

"I feel fortunate," Carns said. "I do have a lot of friends who are still looking for work."

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