

Where the jobs are

by Denise M. Champagne

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A rainbow rises out of the American Niagara Falls halfway across the Rainbow Bridge linking Canada and the United States in New York. iStock image used with permission.

Competition for a limited number of law schools in Canada means more students are heading south of the border.

More than 1,000 Canadians have applied to U.S. law schools over the last few years, according to Wendy Margolis, director of Communications at the Pennsylvania-based Law School Admission Council, which administers more than 170,000 Law School Admission Tests annually worldwide.

Margolis said 7,310 students applied to the 15 member Canadian law schools this year, up 15.1 percent over the previous year. LSAC recorded a

2.2 percent increase in the number of applicants to U.S. law schools, 87,476.

Margolis attributed some of the overall increase to the economy, noting that graduate schools tend to become an appealing option for people who can't otherwise find jobs. More than 200 law schools in the United States, Canada and Australia are members of the council.

About 13 of the 750 students enrolled this year at the University at Buffalo Law School hail from Canada.



Stephanie Le Coche

One of them is second-year student Stephanie Le Coche, a Toronto native now living in Buffalo.

"There are a lot more law schools here," she said of her own decision to head to Buffalo. "Even though the states are competitive, I don't think it's as competitive as the schools in Ontario."

Le Coche said there are more opportunities to practice law in the United States, particularly in litigation, which she is considering. She noted that New York City — the financial capital of the world — also offers the most opportunities for students considering corporate law. She is interviewing for a 2011 summer associate position in Buffalo.

Le Coche's undergraduate degree is in sociology and psychology. She is a graduate of York University in Toronto, but came to the United States because she eventually wants to practice law here.

"I was torn between going somewhere in Ontario, which would be close to home, and going somewhere in the states because I thought I always wanted to practice American law," she said.

Buffalo is only about 90 minutes from her home and turned out to be a good choice, she said, but she wasn't prepared for the cultural shock she experienced.

At first, it was just little things like different currency and gas being measured in gallons, not metrically. In Canada, school grades are numbered, as in ninth or 10th, so at first she didn't know what people were referring to when they said "freshman" or "sophomore" years.

She quickly became labeled "The Canadian," but she said she has found the people in Buffalo are nice and helpful.

"I think at first, they kind of looked at me like I was from another planet," Le Coche said. "I kind of got that impression at the beginning of the year when I started asking questions that most Americans would know, so I couldn't hide that I was Canadian. It took some getting used to, but I like it."

To help future Canadians who may end up studying law in Buffalo, she is writing a paper on the challenges she faced. Topics include adjusting and settling in, obtaining a student visa to work in the United States and returning to Canada with an American law degree.

Le Coche also is resurrecting the Canadian Law Students Society at UB, which had been inactive in the last few years.

"We will have meetings about any issues that affect the Canadian students here," she said, noting the group is not limited to Canadians. The focus will be on job opportunities, along with social events.

One of Le Coche's friends is a student at Osgoode Hall Law School of York University. Le Coche said her friend plans to practice in Canada, where the process to enter the bar includes a 10-month program similar to an apprenticeship. Upon successful completion, young attorneys then apply to Canada's National Committee on Accreditation.

By most accounts, more Canadians are crossing the border into American law schools than Americans traveling to study in Canada.

Bob Linney, communications director with the Federation of Law Societies of Canada, said only 226 people who applied for an NCA certificate between June 30, 2009 and June 30, 2010 graduated from U.S. law schools. He acknowledged the countries' licensing requirements are different and directed further questions to the federation's website at www.flsc.ca.

Joseph E. Schneider, director of Post-Professional and International Education at the University at Buffalo Law School, said he doesn't know of any American students who have decided they want to practice exclusively in Canada.

Many choose to learn about the enforcement of judgments in Canada and businesses that work on both sides of the border, and set up cross-border practices based in Western New York.

"Where a person comes from is not necessarily an indication of where they want to end up geographically," Schneider said. "I actually get a fair amount of interest in our L.L.M. program from people outside of the U.S. I bring it up because it's not always a safe bet to assume that just because somebody is a lawyer from Mumbai that that person plans on going back to Mumbai."

Schneider said UB Law School does not have a formal relationship with any law schools in Canada, but such partnerships do exist. The University of Detroit Mercy in Michigan and Windsor Law at the University of Windsor, just north of the Michigan border, offer degrees in American and Canadian law.

Courses required to practice law in Canada include Canadian administrative law, Canadian Constitutional law, Canadian criminal law and procedure and foundations of Canadian law. The Michigan/Ontario program includes credit hours at both schools.

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