



Graphic shows the average amount of money borrowed for U.S. law school and number of students enrolled; two sizes; 1c x 6 1/2 inches; 46.5 mm x 165.1 mm; 2c x 4 inches; 96.3 mm x 101.6 mm

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Analysis: Law schools growing, but jobs aren't

By JUSTIN POPE – 9 hours ago

To hear many students tell it, law school is a guaranteed ticket to a well-paying career. So a recent milestone must have sounded like good news.

The United States last week became the world's first nation of 200 accredited law schools, as the American Bar Association gave provisional approval to two North Carolina institutions.

In other countries, it's much harder to become a lawyer. In the United States, the doors are open and getting wider. The 150,000 students enrolled in law schools last year were an all-time high. So adding more slots means even more avenues of opportunity, right?

On closer inspection, however, the economics of the "more is better" argument for legal education don't necessarily hold up.

It's the numbers at the top that get all the attention: At the largest law firms, median starting salaries were \$145,000 last fall, according to NALP, an organization that tracks law placement.

But many students don't realize at first that the high-paying law firms recruit almost exclusively at institutions ranked in the top 15 or so. Overall, the median salary for new lawyers is \$62,000. For public interest law jobs, new lawyers can expect about \$40,000.

Meanwhile, the average amount students borrow to attend a private law school surged 25 percent between 2002 and 2007 to \$87,906, ABA figures show. For public law schools, borrowing averages \$57,170.

"I think we have this fundamental disconnect between images of lawyers in the popular media, in the courtroom dispensing justice, where everyone seems prosperous and well paid," said William Henderson, an Indiana University-Bloomington law professor who studies the job market. "The reality is for a lot of people, law school is a route to trying to start your own private practice, and that's a very crowded business right now."

Vichet Chan, who received his law degree from Catholic University in Washington, D.C., in 2007 has been looking for work ever since. He recently moved back in with his parents in West Virginia to save money. He owes about \$250 a month in interest on student loans. If he gets a job, he will lose his hardship deferral and will owe about \$1,000 a month.

"The thing is companies want experience from young lawyers, but it's hard to get the experience," Chan said.

One symptom of the surplus is the rise of so-called "contract attorneys" — essentially temps with JDs (the doctor of law degree). They work for roughly \$20- to \$40-an-hour on often monotonous tasks, like reviewing documents, that law firms outsource. A blog called Temporary Attorney even chronicles the mind-numbing assignments, verbal abuse and poor working conditions that include cockroach-infested, un-air-conditioned rooms with blocked exits and no breaks allowed.

Chan has been offered contract work in Washington but is reluctant to move back because — as usual with contract work — there are no guarantees it will last more than a few weeks.

Regardless, universities continue to build law schools.

With provisional accreditation, Charlotte College of Law and Elon University were Nos. 199 and 200. Nine others operating share that status. And at least 10 new ones are in the works nationwide, The National Law Journal recently reported, in states including Connecticut, Pennsylvania and California.

In New York, home to 150,000 lawyers (the most of any state), legislators recently appropriated more than \$50 million to develop two new public law schools and one affiliated with St. John Fisher College, a private school. Some leaders of the state's 15 existing law schools were dumbfounded.

"There's no question that we simply have a glut of law schools," Makau Mutua, interim dean of the University at Buffalo Law School, told The Associated Press. He called state support

for a private law school "mind-boggling."

For universities, a new law school is a lot more attractive financially than, say, spending money to make sure more undergraduates complete their degree within six years (national average: 57 percent).

Law schools have big classes, and don't need to provide much financial aid, because students are expected to borrow the money they need.

The case for some new law schools is stronger than others, and Gene Clark, who leads Charlotte College of Law, makes a pretty strong one.

Charlotte is the largest city in the United States without a law school, he says, and fast-growing North Carolina has the fewest lawyers per capita of any state.

Clark says his institution fills an important gap, serving underrepresented groups and providing a flexible schedule for working adults. While the market for traditional lawyering jobs is mixed, he says, it's strong in other fields for people — law-enforcement officers, entrepreneurs — with legal skills.

Finally, Charlotte College of Law is a for-profit institution. Unlike several law schools in the works, it isn't taking public money. It will have to offer students good results, or it will go under.

Some reasonably note that students should do their homework about job prospects. If they think they can be successful, law schools should give them that chance.

The problem is that law schools, obsessed with rankings, have been less than straight with students about what they can expect. Too many stats are self-reported. Henderson's research has found evidence of "massive exaggeration" by law schools when they report what graduates are up to.

The methods that law schools choose to collect salary info just happen to be ones that underreport low earners. The figures for what percentage are employed within nine months often say nothing about whether those graduates are using their law degree. They could be taxi drivers with JDs — and \$100,000 of debt.

"If we really started unpacking these numbers," Henderson said in an interview, "we would see some really unattractive accounting how law schools classify their graduates. It would be borderline scandalous."

It's time, he argues, to send in the accountants, to audit what law schools advertise and make sure everyone is reporting numbers the same way. Only then can customers make an informed decision about whether law school will really be a good investment.

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