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Rising tuition puts value of law degree under microscope

By DOUG SHERWIN,

The Daily Transcript

Tuesday, May 20,

2014

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With law school tuition continuing to rise and starting salaries for attorneys experiencing little movement, the value of a legal education has come under intense scrutiny recently.

The local law school deans say that even with the recent tightening of the job market, a law degree's worth is as high as it's always been.

"Personally, I think it opens up so many opportunities," said Stephen Ferruolo, dean of the University of San Diego School of Law. "The great thing about legal education is that if you're not in the sciences or medicine, it's the most rigorous graduate education. It's the best way to prepare for a whole variety of things."

A new crop of law school graduates will get to test the value of their degree in the legal market now. The State Bar of California recently announced that 45.3 percent of the people who took the February 2014 bar exam passed, enabling them to become members of the state bar.

The recession really put law schools under the microscope as media outlets began to dissect their employment numbers.

"I think one of the biggest defects in the current critique of legal education is that they measure its value nine months after graduation, and that's wrong," said Niels Schaumann, California Western School of Law's dean. "There's nothing magical about that date.

"The reality is there have been more responsible economic studies that have been done that show a net positive result from a J.D. over (many) years."

USD's Ferruolo acknowledged the rising price of a legal education combined with the lack of a reciprocal rise in starting salaries makes it easy to dismiss the value proposition of a law degree.

According to figures released in 2011, the most recent numbers available, the average debt incurred by a law school graduate is \$100,584. Meanwhile, the starting salaries offered by medium-sized law firms is between \$110,000-\$120,000, according to Ferruolo, and that number dips to \$75,000-\$85,000 in the smaller firm or public agency sector.

"The challenge we have in law schools is we need to hold down tuition increases and hope salaries start to move up, and close this gap," Ferruolo said.

He said USD has witnessed an increase in on-campus interviews and job board postings, leading to optimism.

"We are seeing a significant improvement in employment," Ferruolo said. "It's not booming, but it's getting better."

California Western's Schaumann agreed that part of the challenge lies in reducing the cost of tuition.

"As far as loan repayments, until we can drive the price of legal education down, we're counting on the federal government to provide student aid forgiveness policies," he said.

Schaumann, however, said a legal education is beneficial.

"Some say the J.D. provides better preparation for a career in business than an M.B.A.," he said. "It's partly because it's more rigorous."

For the February bar exam, preliminary statistical analyses showed that of the 4,578 applicants who took the general bar exam, 32.6 percent were first-time takers. The passing rate for the 1,492 first-time applicants was 55.0 percent overall.

The passing rate for the 3,086 applicants repeating the examination was 41.0 percent overall.

In addition, the California bar exam committee announced that 275 (53.9 percent) of the 510 lawyers who took the attorneys' examination passed.

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