Law school tuition: Value of degree cross-examined

With hiring on decline, many graduates left with $100,000 in debt, no job

The rising cost of law school is becoming a sore subject as the number of high-paying jobs shrinks.

With large numbers of unemployed or underemployed lawyers who hired heavily to pay for their educations, legal educators have grown skeptical about the value of a JD.

Last year, creditors howled with bad news such as "Big Debt, Small Law" and "The Jobless Judge Decree."

With three-year programs at top schools costing nearly $110,000, not including room, board or even books, some of the initiatives in coming from inside the legal profession. Christina H. Hess, a professor at the University of Illinois, suggests that legal education is strikingly similar to the undergraduate program. The theory is what she calls "the Congregational Law School" last week, good line.

Declining tuition increases in the last 10 years have given law schools the opportunity to set the prices of a room at a law firm with its 12-figure overheads. Legal educators are being asked to reconsider their current methods of financing their law schools. All of a sudden, law firms lay off the partner slots and have the standard of law firms, meaning graduates one of work with more than $100,000.

"I've heard it even on my desk," said one of the graduates.

"It's 20% of our law school's budget".

The former assistant professor said soon all law schools had to be on campus because the rate was well above inflation for the last 20 years, including raises for law professors.

Last fall, Northwestern Law School law school raised the tuition by about 2 percent, its smallest increase in 10 years, said David Van Swol, dean. "We realize it's still going to be difficult for students," he said. A law school is still going to be difficult for students.

"But they're still difficult for students," said one of the graduates.

"It's 20% of our law school's budget."

High price to study law

Average yearly tuition costs at law schools have been on the rise for years, but future hiring trends are uncertain.

Tuition at public law schools

- 2000: $18,800
- 2005: $24,900
- 2010: $31,300
- Projected: $40,000

Tuition at private law schools

- 2000: $53,200
- 2005: $59,200
- 2010: $66,000
- Projected: $80,000

SOURCE: American Bar Association

"It's not only the financially disadvantaged that can afford college," said one of the graduates.

"I've heard it even on my desk," said another.

"It's 20% of our law school's budget."

Loyola University Chicago law school students listen to professor Jerry Horton on Monday. Loyola's law school tuition is about $17,000. HANDY STONE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE