Applications down at most law schools
By Jerry Crimmins
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While the number of people applying to law schools nationally as of Feb. 11 is down 11.8 percent compared to last year, not every school's applications are down.

Three law schools in Illinois say their applications are up.

The reasons for the ups and downs vary at different schools.

And even nationally, according to a chart from the Law School Admission Council, applicants to law schools approved by the American Bar Association reached a recent peak at 100,600 for the fall semester of 2004 and have never since equaled that.

The applicant numbers are of interest because many voices in the media have wondered if the high amount of debt incurred as a law student and the effect of the economy on jobs for young lawyers means the bloom is off the rose for law schools.

The LSAC reports that 53,610 people have applied to ABA-approved law schools as of Feb. 11 for the 2011-2012 school year, down 11.8 percent compared to last year at this time.

Thousands more applicants will almost surely apply in coming weeks because the number of applicants to ABA-approved schools has been running at well over 80,000 annually since 2002.

In Illinois, applications are up at three schools: The John Marshall Law School, Northwestern University School of Law and Southern Illinois University School of Law, representatives of those schools report.

At John Marshall, "as of Feb. 16, we had 2,133 applications compared with 1,873 at this time last year, which is a 13.9 percent increase," reported William B. Powers, associate dean for admissions and student affairs.

"We've been doing a great deal of outreach," Powers said, "but we also waived our application fee this year, which might account for a portion of the increase." At John Marshall, that fee, now waived, was $60.

Applications at Northwestern Law are at 4,510, up about 8 percent compared to this time last year, said a spokesperson for the school.

"We are seeing more applicants with work experience self-selecting to apply to us, most likely because of our reputation for enrolling students with that type of real-world experience," said Johann H. Lee, assistant dean for the office of admissions and financial aid.
And at SIU Law, Alicia H. Ruiz, director of communications and outreach, said, "despite the decline in applications nationally, our applications are up about 6 percent compared to this time last year. We are confident we will be able to enroll a strong class for the fall."

DePaul University College of Law said it has received 3,579 applications so far for the fall 2011 entering class. Last year at this time, DePaul Law had received 4,277 applications, so the decline is about 16 percent.

"Understandably, prospective students are expressing concerns about both the cost of a legal education as well as the impact of the economic downturn on entry-level positions at law firms," said Michael S. Burns, associate dean and director of admissions at DePaul Law.

"I think we're seeing more students who understand that law school does not guarantee wealth but can provide them with the opportunity to enter a fulfilling profession and serve as an advocate."

At the University of Chicago Law School, so far 4,766 applications have been received for the next school year, compared to 5,546 applications received at this time last year, according to Ann Killian Perry, assistant dean for admissions.

This is a drop of about 14 percent. "The quality seems very strong even with the decline," Perry said.

"I've been doing this 15 years. When the economy starts to improve, applications decline. I think it's a good sign for the rest of America."

David N. Yellen, dean of Loyola University Chicago School of Law, agreed with Perry.

At Loyola as of last Friday, 3,488 applications had been received compared to 3,852 at this time last year, a 9.45 percent decrease.

"It's not at all surprising. In fact, on one level it's good news," Yellen said. "Law school applications normally increase during a recession and decline when the overall economy is improving."

"This will still probably be the second largest number of applicants in our school's history," Yellen said.

"Students are nervous about jobs and concerned about costs, but still optimistic about the future," he said.

At Chicago-Kent College of Law, Nicole Vilches, assistant dean for admissions, said applications are down 10 percent compared to last year, slightly better than the overall decline in national applications."

Vilches said the volume of students taking the Law School Admission Test "still remains strong," comparable to some earlier years in the 2000s.

Those numbers are down compared to last year, however.
"We are cautiously optimistic about this year's applicant pool," Vilches said.

The University of Illinois College of Law received a record number of applications during the 2009-2010 school year, 4,832, which was a 38 percent increase over the previous year, according to Melissa Englund, director of communications for the school.

To date during the 2010-2011 school year, the college has received "8 percent fewer applications than last year's record-breaking pace," Englund said, still better than the national decline.

"Given the top-notch education offered at the college, its relative value compared with other peer institutions and its proactive recruitment efforts, the college expects to continue to outperform the national average going forward," Englund added.

Northern Illinois University College of Law did not release any numbers. Melody Mitchell, director of alumni events and public relations, at NIU Law said, "Because we have a later application deadline than many of our peer law schools, it is far too early for us to form any conclusions about the current admission year."