ABA tackles employment stats

The University of Illinois’ recent admission that it had falsified admissions data at its law school isn’t the only controversy over data collection going on in legal education.

The integrity of employment statistics posted by law schools has been called into question by recent graduates who have been unable to find work or are working in temporary jobs because of dramatic cutbacks in the legal profession. Stuck with massive student loans, some grads have sued their law schools for advertising deceptively high rates of employment and misleading starting salaries.

Their plight has recently caught the attention of Congress, turning mundane job statistics into a hot political issue for the Chicago-based American Bar Association. The ABA’s Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar accredits law schools.

Earlier this month Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif, urged the ABA to better protect current and prospective students from misleading information on post-graduation employment.

Data published by the National Association for Law Placement indicates that since 2001, only two-
ABA tackles employment, salary data

Continued from Page 1

thirds of graduates from all ABA-approved law schools obtained legal jobs, according to Boxer’s letter.

The statistics are worse since 2009 when the economy was in recession. A Washington University law professor crunched some numbers and found that at least 30 law schools had 50 percent or fewer of their 2009 graduates in jobs that required a law degree shortly after graduation.

Yet many schools in the bottom half of U.S. News and World Report’s annual rankings advertised in 2009 and 2010 employment rates above 90 percent and median salaries of $160,000. The data have come under scrutiny because the employment outcomes are similar to schools in the top 20, such as the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, which send more than half their graduates to big law firms that pay $160,000 starting salaries.

It’s an open secret that law schools have padded their employment figures by counting as “employed” any job at all, whether it’s full-time or part-time, legal or nonlegal. Some schools even count unemployed grads hired by the school as research assistants.

“The difference between the information reported by schools and the real legal employment rate for recent graduates is very troubling,” Boxer wrote.

The ABA accrediting body is not required to disseminate placement information as part of the approval process. The lack of specific requirements about placement data has allowed schools to say almost anything in their marketing materials.

In response Thursday to Boxer, the ABA said it is taking steps to ensure the integrity of employment data. If schools misreport job data, they are subject to sanctions, including the loss of accreditation, the ABA said.

Going forward, the ABA will start collecting employment data directly from law schools, rather than using the National Association of Law Placement, which is a membership organization of law schools and legal employers, as an intermediary.

The changes are not happening fast enough for critics.

“Law school is not the magic ticket to financial security that people think it is,” said Kyle McEntee, who started Law School Transparency in 2009 while a student at Vanderbilt University Law School. “For some it will be and for some it won’t be. People need know that when deciding how much debt to take on.”

David Yellen, dean of Loyola University Chicago’s law school, is all for more transparency. Loyola publishes a raft of statistics about its graduates on its website. About half of its 2010 class of 266 students found jobs at law firms within 9 months of graduation.

The school also reported that half of those are working in firms with fewer than 10 attorneys, and the average starting salary was $46,731. Only 11 students found jobs at big law firms with more than 500 attorneys.

“It’s incumbent on us to give an accurate sense of how students are doing,” Yellen said. “If a school has an 85 percent employment rate but half of them are in short-term, nonlaw jobs, that’s not something it should be keeping from students.”

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