Chicago Law: Law schools seeing fewer applicants
Grim numbers reflect dismal job market for law grads and toll of their post-education debt loads
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March 23, 2012

Law schools face some new economic challenges after years of prosperity.

Demand for legal education, as measured by the number of applicants, has experienced double-digit percentage declines for the second year in a row. If demand continues to decline, schools have to consider cutting class sizes or tuition, or both.

The Law School Admission Council reports that as of March 16 the total number of applicants at accredited law schools stood at 58,983, more than 14 percent below the same time a year ago. The admissions cycle for the 2012 academic year is not over, so the falloff could be less severe.

But if current trends continue, the decline could be steeper than the year before. In 2011, there were 78,500 applicants, down 10.7 percent from 2010.

The grim numbers reflect the dismal job market for law school graduates in recent years and the toll taken on students who graduate with loads of debt. The recession blew up the notion that a law degree is a ticket to job security and the good life. The largest and most prestigious law firms that pay six-figure salaries to first-year lawyers laid off thousands of attorneys and have not resumed hiring from law schools at pre-recession levels.

Their lack of hiring has trickled down the profession and increased competition for legal jobs in government, not-for-profits and business. Law graduates who can't find work or are underemployed feel betrayed because schools used to advertise nearly 100 percent employment rates at high-paying jobs.

Recruiters and law professors now predict there may be weakness in the legal job market for years to come. About 45,000 students enroll in law school every year.

"I do think students should think long and hard about whether they want to make the investment to go to law school," said Harold Krent, dean of the IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law. "It's a serious investment and one has to approach it that way."

Law schools in Illinois reflect the national demand trends.

Applications to DePaul University's law school are down 13 percent from the same time a year ago. Loyola University Chicago is off 16 percent. John Marshall Law School is down 13 percent and Kent is off 4.5 percent.

The University of Illinois could not provide specific numbers because the law school's application deadline is April 1. But John Colombo, acting admissions dean, said in a statement that applications are "down more than 20 percent over the average of the past two admissions cycles."
Even the state's elite institutions are not immune from market realities. Applications to the law schools at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago are down 4 percent and 6 percent, respectively, from last year at this time.

Loyola will have about the same number of applicants this year as it did five years ago, said David Yellen, dean of the law school. There was a huge increase in applications during the recession as undergraduates postponed entering the job market and went to graduate school.

"The whole environment is one of caution as opposed to growth like it was a few years ago," Yellen said.

With demand falling, schools face a tough choice: be less selective or cut their class sizes to maintain admissions standards.

Krent said he has already alerted his provost that Kent likely would enroll fewer students than the 308 that matriculated last year. He said it was too early to say how many fewer students would be enrolled.

But many schools cannot trim their class sizes, because they cannot afford to lose tuition revenue. Schools have fixed costs, such as faculty and staff salaries, that cannot easily be reduced. Costs went up during the boom times of the last decade as schools added programs and professors to be more competitive.

Enrolling students with lower test scores and grade-point averages, though, is dangerous. There is a correlation between performance on the law school entrance exam and performance on the bar exam, law professors said.

If the value of a law diploma continues to decline, Yellen predicts an ominous future for legal education.

"If applications keep going down," he said, "there are going to be some schools in financial jeopardy."