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Law School Notes

Deans discuss legal job market

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Six Illinois law school deans agreed this week to comment on a report that says, "New Lawyers Glutting the Market."

The report was issued by Economic Modeling Specialists Inc., or EMSI, a firm that specializes in national labor and employment data.

None of the six deans said the company is crying wolf, although some expressed criticisms.

EMSI said, "Every state but Wisconsin; Washington, D.C.; and Nebraska produced more — in some cases far more — bar exam passers in 2009 than the estimated yearly openings for lawyers in those states."

"The same glut holds true when comparing law school grads ... to the same opening estimates."

"On the national level, there were nearly twice as many bar exam passers (53,508) in '09 than openings (26,239)," the EMSI report said.

In this study, Illinois has the fourth largest oversupply of lawyers, after New York, California and New Jersey.

The EMSI study found that New York state has far and away the largest oversupply of new lawyers. New York state had 9,787 bar passers in 2009 compared to EMSI's estimate that New York state will need only 2,100 new lawyers annually through 2015.

EMSI said it used several databases for those projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Joshua Wright of EMSI told the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin that the projected openings "are a combination of new jobs and replacement jobs, which take into account retirements, deaths, people moving, etc."

Illinois had 3,073 bar exam passers in 2009, according to EMSI. This compares to estimated, annual lawyer job openings in Illinois from 2010

to 2015 of 1,394.

Or, if one compares 2009 law school graduates in Illinois to projected lawyer openings, there were 2,166 law graduates in our state compared to those estimated annual job openings of 1,394, according to EMSI.

This means Illinois is projected to produce lawyer jobs for only 64 percent of the state's yearly law school graduates. Forty-six percent would have to do something else, according to EMSI.

John E. Corkery, dean of The John Marshall Law School, said the report is based on the way the job market is today and appears to be in the next few years.

"It's a very tough and difficult market," Corkery said. "Law school is not for everyone. It's for people who have a real interest and an aptitude. ..."

"The decision of whether to go to law school or not is

likely not going to be made on a totally economic basis. It depends on what you want to do with the rest of your life. The decision to go to law school, like many important decisions in life, probably has to be made in the absence of complete information. That's just the way the world is."

"You can't read too much into this one study," said David N. Yellen, dean of Loyola University Chicago School of Law. "There are a number of questionable assumptions in their data. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects moderate growth in jobs for lawyers in the next decade."

"However, it is probably true that we have too many law students for our current economy. Law school enrollment grew a lot during the decade before the recession and that is probably not sustainable."

Michael H. Schill, dean of the University of Chicago Law School, said, "I have no doubt there has been an oversupply of graduates from law schools in recent years. ... Legal education has historically been seen as terrific training for

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careers outside of law, such as business, government or politics, so strictly speaking the number of jobs that require a law degree understates the true demand for legal education.

“The simple point is that if you go to a great law school like Chicago, chances are excellent that you are going to get a great job.

“If you do not go to a great law school and do not graduate at the top of your class, your chances for landing the job of your dreams will be limited. So prospective law students need to be realistic about their options.”

Cynthia Fountaine, dean of Southern Illinois University School of Law, said, “The decline in law jobs does not reflect a declining need for legal services. Indeed, there is an increasing need for legal services by low- and middle-income people who often can’t afford the high price of legal services.”

The difference between the numbers of new lawyers and the numbers of traditional jobs for new lawyers, Fountaine said, “suggests a need for law schools

and the profession to work together to redefine the way legal services are provided.”

“The old model isn’t working,” Fountaine said. Law schools need to give students the tools to “adapt to a changing profession in a global environment.”

“This is a really interesting and important study,” said Kimberly Alexandra Yuracko, interim dean of Northwestern University School of Law, “revealing the pressure that those of us in law schools have been feeling in recent years.

“The supply and demand for new attorneys is the fundamental issue confronting legal education today. The business model is in flux,” and the key question is, Yuracko said, are the changes permanent or will more lawyer jobs be created if the economy improves?

Northern Illinois University College of Law Dean Jennifer L. Rosato, said, “These statistics do not tell a complete picture about the employment of law school graduates. ... The stats do not show that an increasing number of our

graduates choose to use their law degree as integral to successful careers they pursue other than the practice of law, including business, education and politics.”

Rosato also said the statistics do not tell about communities and areas of practice that are underserved by lawyers.

Corkery said if a college student four years ago asked advisers, “Look, I’ve got an offer to go to Bear Stearns or Lehman Brothers or go to law school, they might have said ‘(Bear Stearns or Lehman Brothers) will be around forever. You could make millions!’ ”

But the giant investment bank Bear Stearns and the giant financial services firm Lehman Brothers both spectacularly collapsed.

“We’re all playing, ‘You bet your life,’ ” Corkery said.

Law school is not a “get rich quick scheme,” he said, but “it opens up a lot of opportunities.”

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