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**Texas law school placement slowly improves**

By NATALIE POSGATE

When LynAlise Tannery applied for law school in 2008, times were still good for lawyers. Law schools in Texas were saying that 95 percent of their graduates were getting jobs. Six-figure starting salaries for new law graduates were the norm.

By the fall of 2009, Tannery’s first year at the SMU Dedman School of Law, the legal job market had plunged. Big law firms experienced unprecedented layoffs and drastically reduced the number of new lawyers they hired right out of school.

“Most of my group of friends who graduated cum laude and higher didn’t have jobs when we graduated,” said Tannery, who graduated last year. “I have some friends who are still legal interns and are struggling to find that permanent position.”

The job market for new law school graduates in Texas is improving, albeit slowly, according to data released by the American Bar Association.

Texas’ nine law schools report that nearly 79 percent of 2012 graduates found permanent, full-time jobs as lawyers or in other professional positions.

Two-thirds of the 2,346 law graduates in Texas from 2012 found full-time permanent employment as lawyers. That compares with only 56 percent of law school graduates nationally, according to the ABA.

Even that number may be misleading. Seven percent of those listed as full-time lawyers are in solo practices.

The unemployment rate for 2012 law school graduates in Texas stands at nearly 10 percent, including those no longer seeking a job. In addition, 9 percent of 2012 law graduates are listed as having temporary, part-time or unskilled jobs.

Dedman School of Law and the University of Texas School of Law had the best placement rates in the state last year for permanent, professional, full-time jobs — 86 percent and 82 percent. Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth had the lowest placement rate at nearly 73 percent.
“The fact that firms are moving [to Texas] creates a great marketplace for lawyers and opportunities for our students,” said Richard Alderman, interim dean at the University of Houston Law Center. “I hope and assume that will continue.”

Legal experts admit that the financial crisis and the decline in legal hiring exposed significant cracks in the law school business model.

The high cost of legal education, which ranges from $20,000 to more than $50,000 a year depending on the law school, was still attractive based on the pre-recession placement numbers and salaries. That investment isn’t as attractive now.

Cooking the books

Advocacy groups complained that until 2010, law schools were cooking their job placement numbers by hiring some of their graduates to work in temporary positions. In fact, a handful of law schools — none in Texas — were caught cheating by artificially increasing their job placement numbers to improve their law school rankings.

That led the American Bar Association to tighten reporting rules starting with the 2011 graduating class. While law school statistics have become considerably more reliable, the ABA points out that law schools remain on the honor code for the numbers they report.

Meanwhile, law schools became much more aggressive and strategic in seeking employment for their graduates.

SMU was one of the first law schools nationally to take steps to address the tightening job market. In the spring of 2010, it launched two programs in reaction to the economic downturn.

The first, Partner to Practice, allows students to clerk full-time at local law firms the summer before their final year. The school matches the firm’s pay in tuition remission.

The second, Test Drive, allows law firms to hire new graduates for two months with no strings attached. The law school subsidizes the graduate’s salary for the first month. If the graduate and employer believe the effort will lead to a full-time, long-term position, the school will pay for a second month.

“All we were doing was getting students through the door and betting that once they got through the door that they would get the job,” said Dedman Dean John Attanasio. “The bet turned out to be right.”
Successful Test Drive

Last August, Tannery interviewed for a job at Thering McCarley, a six-lawyer firm based in Frisco. The 2012 SMU grad used Test Drive to get her foot in the door. The firm was impressed and offered her a full-time position practicing bankruptcy and family law.

“It was such a relief that I didn’t have to worry about job hunting anymore,” said Tannery, who’s 26. “I don’t know if I would have a job if it wasn’t for Test Drive.”

Karen Sargent, Dedman’s executive director of career services, said nearly all graduates who participate in Test Drive have received offers after the two-month trial period.

Fewer offers

The Partner to Practice program has had less success. About 15 percent of the participating law students get job offers from the law firms, Sargent said.

Other Texas law schools have also gotten creative.

Texas Tech School of Law created a Regional Externship Program that allows third-year students to spend a full semester working for a government or legal services organization in Dallas or Fort Worth while gaining academic credit.

Tech Law Dean Darby Dickerson said the school will double the number of positions next year by expanding to corporate general counsel offices and creating opportunities in Austin and Houston.

Texas Wesleyan allows students to work closely with three of the school’s in-house attorneys and represent members of the local community, according to assistant dean for career services Arturo Errisuriz.

Some law schools are using other methods to help their students get jobs.

Alderman of the UH Law Center said he plans to organize breakfasts with groups of alumni, and if they are successful he will start inviting students so they can network and mingle.

Expanded services

Schools such as SMU’s Dedman and Baylor Law School have expanded their career services offices and hired people to seek jobs for students.
Dean Donald Guter of South Texas College of Law said the number of on-campus interviews has increased this year, which he said is generally an indication that the legal market is improving.

“We’re pretty optimistic that we’ll be fine,” Guter said.