ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN LAW SCHOOLS KICKS OFF ANNUAL CONFERENCE

By Moira Herbst

Legal Education in Crisis.

That could have been the theme of the Association of American Law Schools' (AALS) annual gathering this week in Washington, D.C., given the developments of 2011.

Last year, two law schools admitted they reported false data on incoming classes to help boost their rankings. Meanwhile, three U.S. Senators scolded the American Bar Association (ABA) for what they considered weak policing of law schools, allowing some schools to make job placement for graduates look rosier than it is. On top of that, graduates of three law schools sued their alma maters, alleging consumer fraud.

Instead, the AALS, a non-profit professional group of faculty and administrators at 172 U.S. law schools, is adapting "academic freedom and academic duty" as the theme of its four-day program, with an emphasis on threats to law professors' tenure and protected speech. Attendees also are tackling a wide range of issues, from the rising cost of law school to the demographics of law school faculty.

Michael Olivas, a professor at the University of Houston Law Center and president of the AALS, said that despite the problems law schools face, there's "never been a better time to apply to law school."

"Prospective students can access more information than ever before, and it has never been easier or cheaper to borrow money to pay for law school," Olivas told Reuters.

"IT'S THE CLIENTS, STUPID"

During Thursday's session on "Changes in Legal Profession and Regulation" -- part of a day-long workshop on the future of the legal profession and legal education -- panelists sparred over whether schools have an obligation to teach students practical skills that will help them navigate the world of law firms.

Susan Hackett, chief executive officer of the consulting firm Legal Executive Leadership, said that clients are calling the shots in law firms today, and many think it is "ludicrous" to pay hefty hourly rates for recent law school graduates to learn on the job.

Hackett said that more clients should be working directly with law schools on course work and curricula.

"It's the client, stupid," she said.

Thomas Harvey of the nonprofit ArchCity Defenders in St. Louis, Missouri, countered that law schools are not meant to be trade schools that service large corporate law firms.

"I think law school works," said Harvey. "It works because it is a broad and not a narrow experience."

Offerings in the days ahead include sessions on law school finance, teaching innovations, and the regulation of the legal academy. On Thursday, there is a day-long workshop called "Socio-Economics in the Academy and the Economy," that includes discussions on the mortgage crisis and sustainable development. Participants can also attend a variety of issue-specific panels including "Jewish Law at Harvard: Rediscovering Nathan Isaacs," "Speed Mentoring and New Voices in Gender," and "Property Law and Real Estate Transactions: Rethinking Urban Development."
The keynote luncheon speaker on Friday is Judge Jose Cabranes of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, and Saturday features a forum with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer.

'THIS IS YOUR CHANCE'

Paul Horwitz, a professor at the University of Alabama School of Law attending the conference, said he hoped it would address what he called a "crisis" in legal education.

"I hope we will seize on the opportunity of being here together to reflect on legal education issues that have been in the public eye for the last year or so," said Horwitz. "In good times and bad, we need to ask certain questions: Has the cost structure of law school gotten out of whack? Do we provide the right mix of tactical and theoretical training?"

For those who routinely criticize law schools for rising tuition costs and diminishing job opportunities, he said it may be time for less talk and more direct action.

The AALS conference is "about as good an opportunity as you will have [to protest], so if you want to take it up, this is your chance," Horwitz said.