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Law School Dealing with 'Problem' of Record Applications

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IU Newspaper

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY
Maurer School of Law
Bloomington

Law school dealing with 'problem' of record applications

By GEORGE VLAHAKIS
IU News Bureau

Just five years ago, IU-Bloomington School of Law officials were groping for reasons to understand a dramatic decline in applications.

Today, they're still looking for answers, but now it's to explain a record number of applications.

In 1985, the school received 1,086 applications, its lowest since a lull in the late 1970s. This year, it received nearly 2,100 applications.

"We were all amazed last year when we got 1,800 applications for 200 slots," recalled Terry A. Bethel, acting dean of the Law School. "It's skyrocketing again, and no one can really explain what the reason is."

Reports in 1985 had strongly inferred that a smaller number of liberal arts graduates was an important factor in the previous decline in law school applications.

Nationwide, the number of applicants to law schools is up 7.2 percent, according to a report by the Law School Admission Council of Newtown, Pa. Not only are more people seeking admission to law school, but they are applying to more places, averaging 4.66 applications per person, according to the same report.

Some have pointed to the stock market crash of 1987 and the subsequent declining interest in investment banking as another factor for increased interest in the law.

"We tried to explain the last admissions crush by saying people were running into law because there was a glut of PhDs in other disciplines, but that's not the truth now," Bethel added.

"One of the theories that people have advanced was that going to law school was part of the 'Me Generation,'" he said. "People saw it as a way of serving their own interests."

There also has been speculation that the hit TV show *L.A. Law* and popular movies have inspired record numbers of college graduates into what they perceived as a fast-track legal career.

"I hope we're not drawing people into the profession because they think *L.A. Law* is representative of what their life will be like," Bethel said. "My criticism of *L.A. Law* is not that it's a bad television show, and not that it doesn't portray issues that confront lawyers sometimes in a realistic manner. But it doesn't fairly portray the way lawyers live on a day-to-day basis."

Adds Karen B. Cutright, assistant dean of the Law School, "You have beautiful people (on the show) with beautiful clothes in a beautiful office and none of them seems to be worried about income.

"If the show motivates people, I hope it's because they think lawyers can do interesting and important work," she said.

Cutright, who heads up the school's admissions, advances another, more simple explanation: "Part of it may be attributed to a perceived need for credentials, the thought that a bachelor's degree isn't enough.

"There are people who enter law school who don't have a career goal in mind. They do want more education and they hear that legal training is good for many things and they may have had their interest sparked along the line."

During the early-1980s lull in applications, many law schools bolstered their recruitment efforts, including IU.

"A lot of law schools went on the road in the early 1980s. We weren't worried that we wouldn't fill our classes. We were worried about the quality of our student bodies," Cutright said. "There's been an outreach to high school students and to those no longer in college."

Bethel said today's record interest in IU-Bloomington's Law School will not cause it to relax current recruitment efforts.

"We can't assume that we're out of the business of recruiting students because the demand for enrollment is so heavy now.

"While we benefit from it, because we're getting good students, we have to be cautious because we know that things like this have happened before and the demand has tailed off," he said.