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Law dean unhappy with commission's action

by Kevin Scionti
I.U. Staff Writer

The I.U.-Bloomington Law School may lose its accreditation or be censured by the Higher Education Commission because the school emphasizes legal education through small classes. The Law School also has purchased new volumes and new space is not justified on that basis, Plager said.

The school is in danger of losing its accreditation because the library cannot provide enough space for study areas and for new volumes, Plager explained. Each of these is an accreditation requirement.

The Association of American Law Schools requires accredited schools to provide study space for at least 65 percent of the students enrolled in the school. The law library must provide space for 377 students to meet the requirement, Plager said.

At the beginning of the semester, the law library had space for only 299 students. The school purchased additional furniture for 78 students to comply with the accreditation requirement. But to accomplish this, the school had to sacrifice space for new volumes, bringing this area below accreditation standards, Plager said.

The library will be useless as a research tool and in violation of accreditation standards if it does not have the space necessary to keep its collection up to date, he said.

George Weathersby, director of the higher education commission, said the need for space for new volumes was not emphasized by I.U. officials when the commission considered the request.

The University emphasized the need for more study space and told the commission the Law School might be in violation of accreditation standards, he said. However, the Law School has met that requirement, and thus the new addition could not be justified on that basis, Weathersby said.

Weathersby said I.U. officials neglected two factors in their discussion with commission members about the shortage of space for new volumes.

First, the commission learned that nearly 50 percent of the new volumes purchased by the Bloomington Law School also had been purchased by the I.U. Law School in Indianapolis. However, no plan to coordinate and share the purchased had been developed, Weathersby said. The commission believes Bloomington officials should have investigated the possibility of sharing these resources, thus saving space at the Bloomington Law School, he explained.

Secondly, the law library's alternatives for storing materials if the addition is not constructed have never been discussed during several meetings this semester between commission members and University officials, Weathersby said. "If that's (the storage of new volumes) the primary need for the facility, then that should be presented and justified by the University," he said.

Weathersby said another reason the commission turned down the Law School addition request because the request appeared to be based on the assumption that the school will expand its enrollment. "The request wasn't justified, especially considering that nationally we currently have more people enrolled in law than can find jobs working in law when they graduate," he said.

However, Plager said earlier this semester that the proposal to construct an addition was based on a desire to improve the existing program without increasing enrollment.

The University could resubmit the additional request to the commission when it meets Dec. 8, Weathersby said.

If the $10.4 million request ultimately were approved by the legislature, it would fund project plans, renovation of existing classrooms and the library addition. The $2.5 million earmarked for classroom renovation was requested because the school emphasizes legal education through small classes. Plager said the renovation would create more small rooms in which these classes could meet.

An addition also would house Law School programs located in annexes, he said. These programs include the publication office for the Indiana Law Journal.

Plager said the school's good reputation may mean the school would not lose accreditation if the addition is not constructed. But the school could be censured by the association, Plager said.

"The problem is not so much that we are likely to lose accreditation, but that a school of the national prestige and reputation of I.U. ought not to have a major academic unit such as its Law School with a facility that hampers its ability to carry out a quality educational program," he said.

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