

Experts: It's a rough time for law school grads

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By Andrea Lannom - [email](#)

Some human relations specialists say it's a tough time for students graduating from law school, especially if students are looking for prospects in bigger cities on the East or West Coast.

However, the Mountain State could have been spared from the legal market recession.

John Hussell, office managing partner at Dinsmore & Shoh's Charleston office, said for years it has been a "buyer's market" for bigger city law firms.

"We're seeing that we're getting better candidates now than we have over the last several years, and the East Coast and West Coast market has dried up," Hussell said. "It's a tough time to come out of law school."

According to the American Bar Association, total law school enrollment has experienced a slight increase in the past decade. However, data has been conflicting.

Officials with the West Virginia College of Law say it still is too early to tell if the college is experiencing the same national decline. Officials said the amount of applications is unpredictable because they fluctuate from semester to semester.

David Ferretti, a Spilman Thomas & Battle member in charge of lawyer administration, said the demand for entry level lawyers is less than it was 15 years ago.

"The biggest reason is because experienced attorneys are looking for jobs and that takes away positions that may be filled by entry level candidates," Ferretti said. "The bigger cities certainly are hiring fewer entry level lawyers than they used to. ... This has created the opportunity for many entry level attorneys to rethink their interest in a mid-sized city like Charleston, instead of a bigger city."

However, West Virginia is a different story. Ferretti said the Mountain State has not experienced a decline in the job market for experienced or entry level lawyers.

"West Virginia is a market that is not like the legal markets in the biggest cities in the country," Ferretti said. "Our need for entry level applicants has remained steady through the economic period. But this is probably a result of the fact that we tend not to over hire. Just like any business, law has its ups and downs."

According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the legal profession is expected to grow 13 percent until 2018. The biggest practice areas according to the BLS are health care, intellectual property, bankruptcy, corporate and security litigation, antitrust law and environmental law. Hussell added estate planning to the list, especially for states with an aging population, such as West Virginia.

The West Virginia University's College of Law has witnessed similar trends in student specialization areas. College Dean Joyce McConnell said one of the biggest areas of student specialization has been energy and environmental law. Other hot specialization areas deal with entrepreneurship, innovation and intellectual property litigation, McConnell said.

"A lot of students historically have worked in some way with the environmental industries," she said. "There are lots of students interested in that area."

Hussell said this area will continue to grow, especially in West Virginia.

"This is an area that was once considered fairly boring and routine that has become popular and will continue to be that way because of the investment counties are making in Marcellus wells," he said. "It's going to be going on for a while."

Still, competition remains rough for new grads, Ferretti said, which is why students must try to distinguish themselves from the pack. Hussell and Ferretti agree it is helpful for students to express certain practice preferences coming out of college.

"If someone wants to be an environmental attorney and takes those classes, it is helpful to us because we have specific niches we need to fill," Ferretti said.

Four WVU College of Law students have taken this advice to heart.

Dustin Blankenship, of Gilbert; Carrie Waybright, of South Korea; Andrew Thomas, of Wellsburg, and Ryan Orbe, of St. Augustine, Fla., all have picked hot topic areas of specialization.

Blankenship plans to focus on energy law. Thomas said he will focus on elder law. Waybright and Orbe, meanwhile will focus on family law and foreclosure law, respectively.

"I think with law, you need to try to find a niche," Orbe said. "You need to develop it in law school."

"I find a lot more law students are looking into going into specific fields rather than public practice," Blankenship added. "There is a worry about the economy, but I think it's better to have an area."

Many of the students interviewed mentioned a worry about the job market. However, McConnell said students should easily be able to find a job.

McConnell explained 50 percent of students in WVU College of Law's 2010 graduating class went into private practice. Additionally, McConnell said 12 percent of students went into judicial clerkships, 24 percent into business law, 9.5 percent into government litigation and 4.5 percent into public interest such as public defenders or legal services attorneys.

"There has been a misconception that law students aren't going to get a job after college," she said, adding employment rates for students with a law degree have remained higher than students with a master's degree in business administration.

Thomas said he hopes finding a job will be easy.

"My backup is getting a master's in political science," he said. "But I don't think I will have a problem with getting a job."

Waybright said she thinks the job outlook depends on the practice area.

"There is a large market for people who want to practice in specialized fields," she said. "There is a notion that people have to work for a big corporate law firm, but competition is rough, and they might have a harder time finding a job. I think if they focus their attention on areas of law to specialize in, they should be fine."

To succeed in the legal field, McConnell recommends students to not get discouraged and to pick specializations early.

"They shouldn't be discouraged by what they are reading in the New York Times and things like that because a place like West Virginia College of Law is different, and they will be able to fulfill their dreams," she said. "If you want to focus on areas, begin thinking about that the middle of your first year because registering for classes in the upcoming year will build a focus that will allow you to build an area of expertise."

Hussell and Ferretti said it is important for students to take advantage of summer internships.

"It's not a good time to be coming out of law school because there are more graduates than positions available," Hussell said. "It helps to be at the top of your class and to be involved in extracurricular activities."



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PO Box 11848
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13 Kanawha Blvd. West,
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