BAR PREP DEBATE RAGES ON
LAW SCHOOLS STILL UNCERTAIN OVER WHETHER EXTRA HELP IN TEST PREPARATION BENEFITS STUDENTS

Douglas S. Malan

As if law school isn't exhausting enough, some Quinnipiac University School of Law students head into classrooms on weekends for voluntary classes.

Quinnipiac law professor Richard Litvin has studied bar exam trends for many years and created a not-for-credit bar exam prep course that begins meeting on Saturdays in October in advance of each July's Connecticut bar exam. The school also offers six extra programs for students after their first year that each concentrate on a specific area of law. And there's an academic support system for students with marginal grades, said Associate Dean David S. King.

Helping students prepare for the bar exam is important at Quinnipiac, King said. —We think our students get a good fundamental grounding in topics they're likely to encounter on any bar they take.—

Despite the extra help, 51 percent of the Quinnipiac students sitting for this February's bar exam passed the test, compared to the school's 69 percent success rate over the past four years. February results for other schools that serve large numbers of students who take the Connecticut bar exam were mixed.

The bar exam is given in February and July, and it's widely acknowledged that February scores are lower because many of the test-takers are graduates who failed the test the previous July. Overall, administrators at law schools in the region say the most recent results are similar to or better than those on February tests in recent years.

But seasonal differences aside, the percentage of students passing bar exams has been declining for some time. The nationwide passage rate has dipped from 70 percent in 1995 to under 65 percent in recent years.
Non-Credit Programs

There is debate over how far law schools should go beyond their regular, rigorous curricula to stem the tide. While some institutions now offer for-credit bar exam prep classes, schools in Connecticut and near its borders seem to prefer non-credit programs and academic counseling for struggling students.

Administrators emphasize that their role is to ground students in the basics of law, not coach the nuances of a test.

—It's a lot of work— to prepare for bar exams, said Eric J. Gouvin, associate dean for academic affairs at Western New England College School of Law. —There's no shortcut.—

Western New England hit a five-year high in its passage rate on the February bar exam. Among first-time test-takers, 10 of 11 students--or 91 percent--were successful. Overall, 65 percent of the law school's graduates passed the February exam. That's above the 58 percent success rate achieved by 360 WNEC test-takers over the past eight February and July exams, dating to 2003.

Elsewhere, University of Connecticut law students had a 78 percent passage rate in February, down slightly from 86 percent over the past eight exams. At Pace University School of Law in Westchester County, N.Y., 57 percent of the students passed the most recent test, which is below the school's recent 70 percent success rate.

Relatively few Yale Law School students sit for the Connecticut bar exam. Yale has posted a 98 percent success rate since 2003, with 43 graduates taking the state bar exam.

Overall, the average pass rate for the February exam was 69 percent, according to figures compiled by the Connecticut Bar Examining Committee.

Gouvin said WNEC offers a voluntary, not-for-credit bar exam preparation program. But, he cautioned, —law school is not about preparing people to take the bar exam. The BAR/BRI [a for-profit prep program] is for that. Law school prepares you to be a lawyer. Students who are conscientious in law school will learn those nuggets that will be tested on the bar exam.—

Gouvin continued by saying that passing the bar is —not the end-all— for fledgling lawyers. —Students must learn the art of argumentation, conceptualization and where the law is going.—

Along with WNEC's unprecedented success rate among graduates taking the February exam for the first time, the school's graduates achieved a nearly 73 percent success rate on the Massachusetts bar exam. That was 1 percentage point below the state average, Gouvin said, but ahead of other Massachusetts-based law schools, including New England, Suffolk and Boston College.
UConn Still On Top

UConn remained atop the Connecticut rankings. The February 2007 passage rate of 78 percent matched February 2006 as the highest passage rate on the winter exam since 2004. Twice since July 2003 UConn graduates have reached the 90 percent success threshold during the summer test.

UConn once required students with grade point averages between 2.3 and 2.6 to enroll in an academic support course, but the course was discontinued after the 2003-04 school year because there was no proof that students benefited for it, Paul Chill, associate dean for academic affairs, has said. With only a handful of students enrolled, staffing the class with a full-time faculty member proved inefficient, Chill noted.

Last fall, UConn began offering a class targeting students in the lowest 10 percent entering their third semester. While the class was voluntary for those students, a meeting in the summer with a faculty advisor is not.

—Every school struggles with this,— Chill told The Law Tribune last year. —We feel an obligation to offer academic support; but the question is when and how do we implement it?—

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