

The Winston-Salem Journal

LEGAL 101: Elon University has one of two new law schools opening in state this year

By Laura Giovanelli

JOURNAL REPORTER

Friday, August 11, 2006

GREENSBORO

Cardboard boxes are still stacked not far from a row of empty library shelves. The bookstore, set up in a small first-floor office, smells of new carpet, but there is a full rack of gray and red sweat shirts for sale.

"Elon Law" itself is an idea that's new. But even this charter class of 115 is doing what law students across the country do around this time every year - hunt for affordable apartments and crack open new textbooks.

Elon University has one of two law schools that are opening in North Carolina this year, up from the five last year. Charlotte School of Law, the state's first for-profit law school, is also opening this month.

North Carolina's law-school boom follows a national trend particularly centered across the southern half of the country, said Stephen Yandle, the deputy consultant on legal education for the American Bar Association.

"But that really follows the population growth," he said.

The number of law schools accredited by the ABA has grown from 183 in 2000 to 194 in June 2006.

Elon's law school has been about three years in the making.

Until now, North Carolina has had law schools at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Wake Forest, Duke, Campbell and N.C. Central universities.

Lawyers in North Carolina aren't necessarily coming from just those schools, though. Of the 488 people who took the bar exam in February, 373 were from out-of-state law schools, according to the N.C. Board of Law Examiners. Slightly more out-of-state students passed that exam, too.

"It was obvious to us ... that there was going to be a sixth," Leo Lambert, Elon's president, said yesterday.

And so, a feasibility study and \$10 million in donations later, Elon welcomed its first class yesterday in downtown Greensboro with formal greetings from Greensboro officials and state law leaders.

Elon's main campus is about 24 miles east, but university officials chose to set up the law school in the former main branch of the Greensboro Public Library to be near a growing downtown, courthouses and law firms, they say.

It is the first law school to open in North Carolina in 30 years, said Leary Davis, the school's dean, and he thinks that there will be plenty of jobs for its graduates.

"It's overwhelming in a sense that we are the students that will make or break this school," said Danielle Caldwell, 23, of High Point, as she stood near a new coffee bar in a student-lounge area.

She described being part of the school's inaugural class as a big honor.

A graduate of Wake Forest, Caldwell said she chose Elon because of its push for leadership training, as well as the expected property, tort and contracts classes.

She wants to be a criminal prosecutor, and her experience at Elon will help her think of her future career as less 9 to 5, "not just the daily grind, but to do some good with it," she said.

Her classmates come from Harvard, Duke, Yale, Furman, UNC Greensboro and Chapel Hill, and other schools.

Together they are starting a three-year journey, and unless they have scholarships, are paying annual tuition of \$26,000 for the privilege of taking classes at a school that is not yet accredited by the ABA.

Elon will be fully accredited in six years at the earliest, but the school can get a provisional license next year, Yandle said. American law schools need ABA accreditation - provisional or otherwise - so that students can take the bar anywhere in the country.

More law schools do not necessarily mean proportionally more law students. After a jump in 2001, the number of students enrolled in the ABA's 191 accredited law schools leveled off at about 48,100 last year. There were 186 schools during the 2002-03 school year, and 48,433 students. The increase in law schools means that some institutions are reducing their classes slightly, Yandle said.

"First thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," goes the quote from Shakespeare's play Henry VI. But there may not be enough of them to spare in North Carolina - it ranks at the bottom of states in its number of lawyers per capita, Elon officials say.

"We saw evidence of a lot of people who wanted to practice leave the state, then come back," Lambert said.

"And I've heard every lawyer joke this year."

- Laura Giovanelli can be reached at 727-7302 or at lgiovanelli@wsjournal.com.

This story can be found at: <http://www.journalnow.com>