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Most N.C. law schools see rise in applications

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by Michelle Cater Rash

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Bucking a national trend, applications at most North Carolina law schools are on the rise for the class that will be entering in the fall.

Five of the state's seven law schools have seen their applications for the fall of 2007 rise or remain steady when compared with last year's applications, according to admissions personnel at the schools.

Nationally, however, there has been an 8.8 percent decline in the number of applicants through the end of February, according to the Law School Admissions Council. The number of applicants is down 9.1 percent in the council's Midsouth region, which includes North Carolina.

The national and regional numbers do not include applications at schools that are not accredited by the American Bar Association; the Elon University School of Law and the Charlotte School of Law both opened in the fall of 2006 and are still undergoing the accreditation process.

After seeing seven years of growth, law school applications have been falling nationwide for the last few years. The admissions council reported a 6.3 percent drop in applications for the class that entered in the fall of 2006, and a 5.2 percent decline for the class that entered in 2005.

But the only schools that appear to be following the trend in North Carolina are UNC-Chapel Hill, which has seen a 7 percent drop in applications compared with 2006, and Wake Forest University, which had seen a 9 percent decline through Feb. 28. Wake Forest's application deadline was March 1.

Neither officials with UNC or Wake Forest said they were concerned about the decline, saying graduate school applications are very cyclical.

"Two years ago we had more applications than we could read," said Melanie Nutt, director of admissions and financial aid for the Wake Forest University School of Law.

Nutt did not know why Wake Forest and UNC would be seeing a decline in applications while other schools were not.

Law schools at Duke University, Campbell University, N.C. Central University and the Charlotte School of Law are all reporting increasing application numbers. Duke leads the pack with a 32.7 percent increase compared with 2006.

The Elon University School of Law is seeing its application numbers on par with those for its inaugural class. The school received about 500 applications for its charter class of 115 students.

Bill Hoye, the associate dean for admissions and financial aid at Duke's law school, said this has been his first year at Duke and he has tried some new things to boost its applicant numbers.

For example, school officials spent more time last fall recruiting at colleges and universities nationwide than Duke typically had done in the past. Through data on individuals interested in law school provided by the Law School Admissions Council, Duke also targeted specific students they thought would be a good fit for its program and promised those individuals a response within 10 days if they chose to apply to Duke.

Campbell University also used the Law School Admissions Council database to target specific students. Acting Director of Admissions Lou Naylor thinks that helped the school target potential applicants who may not have otherwise heard of Campbell University. While the school's application deadline isn't until March 31, applications are up 8 percent so far.

Alan Woodlief, the associate dean for admissions and administration at the Elon law school, said school leaders knew about the overall trend of declining applications when opening the school. But, he said, Elon's research showed there was a demand for legal education in the state, with many potential students leaving North Carolina.

The fact that most of the state's law schools are seeing increases in applications while there is a decline nationwide shows that there was a pent-up demand, he said.

Reach Michelle Cater Rash at (336) 370-2918 or mrash@bizjournals.com.