

N.C. Gains New Law Schools in **Charlotte and Elon**

North Carolina has topped so many “best places” lists and earned so many business-friendly accolades in the last decade that it’s surprising to come across a category where the state doesn’t rank well. But there is one: The number of lawyers practicing in North Carolina. Out of the 50 states, North Carolina is next-to-last in terms of lawyers per capita, with one for every 502 residents; the national average is one lawyer for every 268 residents. (The state with the highest lawyer-to-citizen ratio? South Carolina.)

Lawyer jokes aside, this statistic has long bothered the state’s university officials and legal-profession leaders, who

say that having a robust pool of attorneys is vital to economic development and expansion. It’s also important to the communities who need lawyers to run their criminal justice systems.

The main reason North Carolina’s legal profession hasn’t kept up with the state’s population and economic growth is that compared with comparable states, North Carolina has too few law schools. Until last fall, the number of law schools stood at five.

But the lawyer shortage was addressed head-on when two new law schools opened their doors in August 2006: the Charlotte School of Law and the Elon University School of Law.

Charlotte was the largest American city without a law school, not to mention the coun-

try’s second-largest banking center, making it the ideal location for a new school, said Eugene Clark, dean of the Charlotte School of Law. Charlotte Law, as it’s informally called, is the third law school to be opened by the InfiLaw consortium, which also operates Florida Coastal School of Law and the Phoenix School of Law. The schools are all for-profit, independent community law schools.

“Our first year has gone fantastically well, exceeding our greatest expectations and goals,” said Clark. The school’s inaugural class of 85 will be concluding their first semester this month.

Interest in the new school was so great that just weeks after it began accepting applications, it had received 1,000 from prospective students in 46 states for just 85 seats. Despite its relatively small size, though, Clark said the school will do its part to make it possible for more North Carolina residents to attend law school in-state. Prior to the two new schools’ opening, there were 14 applicants for every seat at North Carolina’s five law schools, noted Clark. When the school matures to three classes, its enrollment will be about 300, Clark said.

Besides being small — in comparison, the University of North Carolina School of Law has an enrollment of 710 — Charlotte Law has a more mature, diverse student population than that of many other schools. Clark said the average age of its day

program student is 27; for the school’s part-time program, which has an enrollment of 18 students and is only the second in the state after N.C. Central University’s, the average age is 30. And the makeup of its first

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‘Charlotte the Legal Beagle’ stands as Charlotte Law’s mascot.

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The first Elon Law class of 115 students is finishing up classes at a converted library building in downtown Greensboro.

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 class is 17 percent minority, while next year's entering class will be 20 percent minority, Clark said.

Charlotte Law currently occupies several buildings on East Morehead Street in midtown Charlotte but will eventually move into its own 100,000-square-foot facility; Clark is mum on

Greensboro and leader of the law school's fundraising campaign, told a *Raleigh News & Observer* reporter that one city booster was so excited about the prospect of a law school in town that he approached him on the street and offered \$10,000 to help the school get started.

That supporter's gift helped Elon raise the \$10 million a feasibility study said it needed to open the school; the university itself contributed \$3 million of the total.

Today, the first class of 115 students is finishing up classes at a converted library building in downtown Greensboro, said Leary Davis, the school's founding dean. (Davis came from the Campbell University School of Law, where he'd been dean since the school's founding in 1976.)

Davis said being in Greensboro gives students access to a 1,500-deep pool of attorneys, lets them experience the N.C. Business Court, and helps build bridges between the university and Guilford County, its nearest large neighbor.

"The school's planning committee saw that everything that could be achieved on campus could be achieved in Greensboro, but not the other way around," said Davis.

The school's opening last fall brought to a close several years of research, planning, fundraising and applying for state approval, said Davis. Elon's trustees were encouraged to proceed with plans for a law school when a feasibility study showed the many ways that North Carolina is underserved by lawyers and law schools. "We looked at states' business activity relative to lawyers, and found that only Nevada and Delaware had more gross state product per lawyer than North Carolina," said Davis.

Another deciding factor was that for the last several years, more than 50 percent of those taking the North Carolina bar exam graduated from out-of-state law schools.

But deciding there was a need wasn't enough for Elon's trustees, according to Davis. They also wanted to elevate Elon's offerings by creating a graduate program that would create synergy with its undergraduate programs, which are rising in stature nationally. Last year, for instance, the university received 9,000 applications for 1,000 seats in the freshman class, making it nearly as selective as larger cousins Duke, Wake Forest and



Jerome Sturm, Elon University



Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor dedicated the law school during ceremonies last September.

Jerome Sturm, Elon University

the location until a formal joint announcement about the building project is made with the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce. The city's businesses and legal community have given the school a warm welcome, and many of the county's attorneys have availed themselves of the school's law library.

In addition to moving into its own quarters and growing its enrollment, Charlotte Law's next steps will include applying for accreditation with the American Bar Association, Clark said. New schools can't begin the accreditation process until their second year of existence.

GUNG-HO IN THE GATE CITY

Don't be surprised if you take a campus tour of Elon University with your son or daughter and don't see the brand-new law school. That's because the university's trustees decided to locate the school 18 miles away in Greensboro, the largest city in the Triad and home of the state's first business court.

The decision was apparently a popular one. Jim Melvin, a former mayor of

Davidson. Trustees also felt the university had a duty to put its own unique stamp on legal education in the state, Davis said.

That uniqueness includes fostering a first-year culture of collaboration instead of cut-throat competition. Students are given feedback on their exams and allowed to work on the answers they missed until they get them right. And rather than issuing traditional grades at the end of the first semester, everyone who puts in the time receives a grade of "M" for mastery. Letter grades commence with the second semester, when students are more likely to have gotten used to life as a law student.

"As far as we know, this approach has never been done in any law school in North Carolina," Davis said.

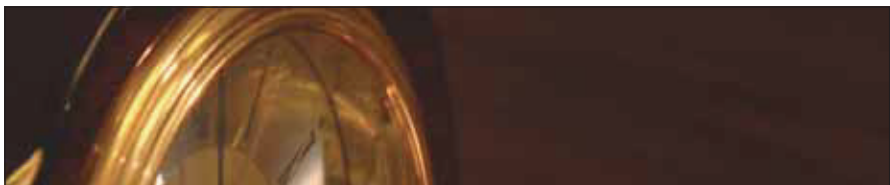
A BOON FOR THE STATE

As far as the N.C. Bar Association is concerned, Elon's and Charlotte Law's opening couldn't have happened fast enough. "From our position, we're glad to have more law schools in North Carolina," said Clark Smith, president of the association and a partner at Brinkley Walser in Lexington. "The state is growing so fast, the number of lawyers hasn't kept up. If we need more lawyers in North Carolina, we'd rather they be trained in North Carolina."

There are two reasons for that, Smith said. For one thing, students who study in North Carolina schools are trained in North Carolina law and don't need to brush up on it before sitting for the bar exam. And then there's the civility factor, according to Smith.

He said lawyers in North Carolina have historically treated each other with respect and cordiality even when opposing each other in the courtroom, which can't be said of the legal profession in some states. "North Carolina law schools have traditionally taught ethics and civility," said Smith. "So if they're trained here, we can expect that level of courtesy to continue."

The bar association and the two new schools have already gotten off to a good start. Both Charlotte Law and Elon have given the association conference rooms it can use for Web conferences or continuing legal education classes, freeing many lawyers in Charlotte and the Triad from having to drive to Raleigh for association business.



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