

## Lawyers, Firms Optimistic for UCI Law's Graduates

***LAW: Students from 'untested' school will compete for fewer jobs***

By **JULIE LEUPOLD**

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

When the inaugural class of University of California, Irvine School of Law graduates in 2012, it could face a very different legal landscape than when it started.

Many of the larger law firms across the county are cutting back on summer associate programs, freezing or reducing raises or limiting new hires.

So what chance does a graduate with a degree from a new school stand to land one of those jobs?

"Bottom line, it's a tight market," said Kent Easter, litigation partner and recruiting chair for Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth. "UCI looks like it is starting a very innovative and practical program, which is long overdue for law schools. The quality of students is high. But it's still an unknown quantity."

The school is banking on its first class of graduates establishing a stellar name for the program, which recruited top students to its first class of 60 with free tuition funded by private scholarships.

The school is changing that up for its second year, offering a 50% scholarship—roughly \$20,000 for in-state students and \$25,000 for out-of-state students—for tuition payments for each of the program's three years.

The school is expecting to accept 80 students for its second class, working up to an eventual incoming class of 200. That means the university is promising to fund at least \$6 million for the class of 2012 and at least \$4.8 million for the second year's class of 2013.

"Privately funded scholarships for our second class of students, the class of 2013, will help us maintain the high quality of our student body and keep us clearly in the realm of a top 20 law school in our second year of operation," Dean Erwin Chemerinsky said. "We are seeking and receiving generous support from the entire Southern California legal community for these scholarships."

Most of the scholarships come from Southern California lawyers, but the law school also has gotten some support from big Orange County businessmen and philanthropists.

Donald Bren, chairman of Irvine Company, donated \$20 million to get the law school off the ground. Bren has his name on buildings at University of California, Santa Barbara, and UC Irvine, as well as a chair named for him at Chapman University.

Joan Irvine Smith, a local heiress and philanthropist, gave a million dollars to UCI's law library.

Mark Robinson, a local trial lawyer, gave \$1 million to the courtroom, which will bear his name, and then gave an additional \$400,000 in December.

### **Establishing a School**

Despite support from some deep pockets, establishing a law school is no easy feat.

"Establishing a law school in today's economy would be difficult because the demand for new lawyers has gone down," said Steve Nataupsky, managing partner of Knobbe Martens Olson & Bear LLP's Irvine office. "But I think the real challenge isn't establishing a law school, it's establishing a great law school. It's very competitive. There are great schools like Northwestern, USC, UCLA and so on. To get into that category with a new school is tough."

UCI Law puts itself in the caliber of the top 20 law schools based on the quality of its incoming class, faculty and campus. UCI Law accepted only 4% of its first-year applicants. Those accepted had grades and Law School Admission Test scores comparable to students accepted to top 20 law schools, according to UCI.

"Their approach to track top students and establish an immediate reputation is an excellent one," said Steve Casselberry, chair of the financial services department in Santa Ana for Michelman & Robinson LLP.

Casselberry said his firm looks at the reputation of the school when hiring an associate. But it isn't the only factor taken into consideration, unlike some larger firms that fork out the big salaries to secure the top graduates from Harvard, Yale and Stanford.

"If a person has been successful getting through a big-named school, that tells me the person has the capability and intelligence to accomplish a big feat," Casselberry said. "But just because they have that intelligence doesn't mean we have a spot for them in our firm. We look for the 'hallway factor'—how they can interact with other people on staff and clients."

The UCI law school is not yet accredited. It plans to seek accreditation from the American Bar Association, which requires a law school to have been in operation for two full years before applying. The process typically takes three to five years.

But UCI Law doesn't think the lack of accreditation will hurt its students.

"Employers are excited about the UCI curriculum, which combines the best in theoretical classroom learning with hands-on learning," said Elizabeth Schroeder, director of career development at UCI Law.

Schroeder said that the school has been matching students with practicing lawyers in a mentoring program.

“It’s been a win-win opportunity for employers to get to know our students well, and for students to get an insider’s view into the broad range of practice fields available,” she said.