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## **Gonzaga Law School to introduce new curriculum this fall Enrollment cut, new practical training part of revamped program**

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**Earl Martin says smaller enrollment also will make it easier for the school to provide a quality education to law students here.**

—Staff photo by Jeanne Gustafson

enrollment in its three-year law program last fall, and it will have been reduced by 2010 to its target of 175 first-year students, down from between 200 and 210 students each year previously. The program currently has 535 students altogether, but that number will fall to 505 next fall and to between 475 and 485 students by 2010. Though it's decreasing its enrollment, the school has been receiving about 13 percent more applications, even while applications at law schools nationally are falling, Martin says.

The small enrollment will make it easier to administer the revamped program, which will emphasize more skills training, both in litigation and transactional law, to help new lawyers to be marketable in today's workplace environment, Martin says. Transactional law skills include dealing with bankruptcy issues, contracts, and the legal issues connected with buying and selling businesses, he says.

"Our No. 1 goal is to graduate a person who can practice law in any environment," Martin says.

He says the new curriculum will help law students, who increasingly are expected to be able to "hit the ground running" when they graduate, rather than getting on-the-job training at a law firm during their first several years in practice.

Martin says there's less time in law firms these days to train junior associates, and clients increasingly are less willing to pay the higher legal fees necessary to build such training into a firm's overhead. An increased focus on practical skills in the curriculum will help fill that need, he says.

Beginning next fall, Gonzaga University's law school plans to roll out a new curriculum that Dean Earl Martin says will freshen the program and provide graduates with more of the skills they'll need to enter the law profession.

Last year, the law school announced plans to reduce its enrollment to emphasize quality and the individual learning experience for students, Martin says. Both the enrollment reduction and curriculum change stemmed from a strategic planning effort that began in 2003 and will culminate with the curriculum overhaul, he says.

Gonzaga began reducing

Law school graduates today can expect a huge range of potential salaries, from the mid-\$30,000s in public-interest jobs, such as at public defenders' offices, to a high end of \$140,000 in major private practice firms in larger metropolitan areas, though the high end likely will decrease over the next few years due to economic pressures, Martin says.

### **Setting the bar higher**

Gonzaga decided to reduce its law school enrollment to offer a better experience for top law students, Martin says.

"It's really about quality," he says. "It puts us in an even stronger position to manage the quality of the entering class as measured by academic performance, such as law-test scores and other parameters."

"We'll be in a better position to render a quality experience," Martin says. He says the school gets crowded for space when it has more than 500 students.

The changes the law school is making, he says, are based on demographics, student surveys, research in the teaching of law, and an internal study of bar passage rates.

"The hardest thing to do in an academic environment is to change curriculum," Martin says. A committee made up mostly of faculty members reviewed the entire program over a period of 13 months, he says, adding that he believes Gonzaga is at the forefront of a trend at law schools to review curriculum.

Gonzaga's law school routinely draws students from about 30 states, though the majority come from the western U.S., Martin says. About 60 percent of its graduates stay in Washington after they graduate. Gonzaga has had a 92 percent to 94 percent job placement rate among its graduates over the last three years, Martin says.

The "typical" law student here is about 25 years old. Though Martin says there is diversity in the student body, Gonzaga doesn't have a part-time night program, which keeps its demographic on the younger side. He says its students also tend to be more likely to go on to practice law, rather than work in academia.

### **Refocused curriculum**

The new curriculum will be phased in over three years, beginning with the fall 2009 first-year students, Martin says. Students already attending the law school will continue in the current program without changes, he says.

With the changes, Gonzaga will seek to emphasize skills and professionalism more, increasing requirements in courses targeted at those areas from three credits to 10, and adding an additional two credits to the legal research and writing requirements, Martin says.

The three major components of the new program include the core courses in legal procedure and knowledge, which the school will retain from the previous program but with a slightly decreased emphasis; a greater emphasis on skills training, focusing on analytical, organizational, presentation, and interpersonal skills; and an increased focus on professionalism, going beyond the field of ethics into such work habits as punctuality, Martin says.

This coming fall will bring the biggest programmatic change, he says, adding, "The first-year program is dramatically changed."

First-year students will take four credits each of torts and civil procedure courses in the fall and four credits

each of contracts and property courses in the spring. Those courses have been five credits each and have been spread across a full year. A few credits are being shaved from those courses in order to add more practical training, in the form of skills and professionalism lab courses each semester, focusing on litigation in the fall and transactional skills in the spring.

The second year in the new curriculum will include two sections of constitutional law, evidence, professional responsibility, and an additional course in legal research and writing.

Third-year students will be required to take three credits in the law clinic or in an internship, which typically takes place in the field of public law.

Altogether, the new curriculum includes 15 credits of required skills training, up from 6 credits in the current program, including eight credits of legal research and writing, Martin says.

The new curriculum will emphasize a more broad-based education, and integrates theory with practice.

Students studying contracts and property law during the spring semester, for example, are taking at the same time a skills and professionalism lab class in transactional law, in which they will practice negotiating and drafting such transactions.

Though the new curriculum will have specialized courses in areas of practice, including the Indian law section the school recently rolled out and its commercial law center, which it opened last year, it doesn't require a "concentration," which is like a minor degree, Martin says.

As it moves forward with the curriculum change, the law school also is seeking to expand its focus on international law. To that end, it's developing an international student and faculty exchange program, Martin says. He recently signed agreements with two universities, in China and South Korea, and the school will host five students from China as first-year law students next year.

Over the next few years, Martin says he expects Gonzaga to solidify these changes and refine its new curriculum, while seeking to minimize cost increases for its students.

"We're in a very changing marketplace, with the cost of education and the economy of practice," Martin says. He says the school, which has only raised its tuition an average of 4 percent a year for the last three years, will continue to look at keeping costs down without cutting programs.

"I like being a private institution in that regard. You control your own destiny," Martin says.

Compared with public law schools in Washington, Idaho, and Montana, Gonzaga is in a good financial position to do that right now, Martin says.