Law school continues to be more of a buyer’s market than in years past, as many programs invent new ways to reel in applicants who’ve been wary of the poor job outlook and steep tuitions. The legal education community is still trying to regain its footing after the Great Recession forced firms to radically tighten their belts, shutting out many new grads and sending applications into a spiral. First-year enrollment in 2014 was down by 30 percent at private law schools and 18 percent at public schools from 2009. Meanwhile, tuition climbed 46 percent at the privates and 132 percent at the publics between 1999 and 2014. In 2015, an American Bar Association task force urged law schools to get creative about improving curricula and holding the line on costs. (It wouldn’t be necessary for the ABA to impose any “tough love,” the task force noted, “because the market is already doing it – in some instances brutally.”) On the bright side, hiring seems to be inching up slightly. And fewer graduates should mean less competition for those spots.

Among the more unconventional curricular experiments law schools will keep an eye on are several new programs. The Mitchell Hamline School of Law – a merger of Minnesota’s William Mitchell College of Law and Hamline University School of Law – will offer a first-of-its-kind, hybrid on-campus/online curriculum. Students will take online courses for 12 or 13 weeks a semester and visit the campus 10 times during the four-year program to participate in skills workshops. The UNT Dallas College of Law is teaching skills like research, writing and deposition-taking in courses on legal theory like Contracts and Civil Procedure, and lectures are videotaped so students can review them at will. The school vows to close the “justice gap” by attracting nontraditional students (the average age is above 30). Tuition is comparatively affordable: $14,500 for state residents, compared to the national average of $23,214 for public law schools.

Meanwhile, more established schools continue to recast their programs by condensing coursework, addressing tuition, and adding intensive on-the-job training, perhaps the biggest trend of all. “I see more and more law schools going in this direction,” says Judith Lipton, associate dean for experiential education at Case Western Reserve School of Law. “Students will demand it.” Here’s a look at what’s happening at a few of the pioneers:

**Elon University School of Law**
*Greensboro, North Carolina*

Before committing to a career in law, Caitlin Mitchell tested the waters by working as a paralegal for a firm in Roanoke, Virginia. When the time came, she knew she wanted a law school that would teach her not only legal theory but also how to act like an attorney. She was surprised to find that many schools operate as if new J.D.s graduate and then “serve as an apprentice for years.” But firms no longer have the resources (or the patience) to train apprentices.

So Mitchell, 25, jumped at the chance to enter Elon last year as it unveiled a completely overhauled curriculum emphasis-
ing practice. The new program focuses heavily on individualized mentorship by working attorneys and faculty members and extensive experiential coursework, and it has been condensed into two and a half years. Meanwhile, the school reduced tuition by 12 percent to a flat $100,000 for the whole package.

In the first year, “lab” components of foundational courses connect theory to practice. In a criminal law lab, for instance, students might observe a plea agreement negotiation in court before doing their own simulated plea deal. Second-year students spend one trimester in a full-time “residency” in a legal setting – such as the North Carolina Business Court conveniently located on campus – while taking a related class. These experiences culminate in a third-year “bridge-to-practice” course tailored to a student’s intended career path. Family law students, for example, might participate in an extended simulation of a divorce case.

Throughout it all, each student depends for guidance on his or her personal “student success team,” which includes a faculty adviser, an attorney mentor, an executive coach from the school’s leadership program, and a professional development adviser. Mitchell had barely started her first trimester when her mentor, an Elon alum who works at a local firm, brought her to a court hearing. The judge’s line of questioning was relevant to what she was then covering in class. That realization, she says, “was really energizing.”

Case Western Reserve University School of Law
Cleveland

At Case Western, which also has overhauled its curriculum to make experiential learning central to all three years of coursework, new students right off the bat find themselves working with real clients of the Cleveland Legal Aid Society. While they can’t offer advice, the students
do the initial interviews, present the problem to volunteer attorneys, and sit in on problem-solving sessions. Lipton is one of the faculty who meet with students to discuss their experiences. "It becomes a wonderful conversation about what it means to be a lawyer," she says.

Other first-year experiences include a residency program that puts selected 1Ls to work assisting 3L interns in the school’s in-house legal clinics, which aid clients who can’t afford counsel in criminal cases, civil litigation, health issues and other areas of law. They research and draft memos and pleadings and participate in team strategy sessions. "I was taking civil procedure class, and [the clinic work] really helped because I could see it in action," says Kory Wiita, 23, who helped pilot the litigation residency last year and is now in his second year at Case. "It was a good incubator."

Simulations keep students focused on “real lawyering” as well, says Lipton. Wiita, for example, found it helpful to role-play taking a deposition in his Legal Writing 3 class from a "client" suing a department store for a false imprisonment claim after a shoplifting allegation. Meanwhile, many 2Ls and all 3Ls work full time for a semester (or half time for both semesters) in an externship. For most, that means working in the clinics. Others go abroad to work in the International Criminal Court or find spots in law firms or nonprofits to get experience in areas not practiced in the clinics, such as environmental or labor law.

**University of Kansas School of Law**

**Lawrence, Kansas**

From the moment she first tagged along with her father to a courtroom as a little girl, Ashley Akers, 25, was hooked. "I figured out you could just go to the courthouse and look at the docket and go to any trial you wanted. I've seen multiple murder trials. I decided around fourth grade that I wanted to be a lawyer."

Today the Casper, Wyoming, native is a third-year student at the University of Kansas School of Law, getting ready for the courtroom herself through an intense, immersive skills workshop on using expert witnesses, one of a series that forms the core of the school’s experiential offerings. (Another feature of the program that appealed to her: At $20,000 per year for in-staters and $34,000 for out-of-state students, "the tuition is so reasonable," she says. "That was the clincher.")

The skills workshops are modeled on those
Last year, Tyler McAnelly, 27, logged 40 to 60 hours a week working in the Arapahoe County public defender's office, handling cases from DUIs to child abuse. "I carried around 50 cases," he says. "They treated me pretty much the way they treated every attorney." Only McAnelly hasn’t graduated from law school yet; he was participating in Denver Law’s “semester in practice” program, in which third-year students hold down a real job and attend a seminar every week to discuss their experiences.

In the school’s new curriculum, one-third of the load consists of hands-on practice-based opportunities. In the first-year Lawyering Process course, a legal research, writing and analysis class, students might partner with a nonprofit to help it decide whether to pursue public interest litigation, for example. Similarly, potentially dry classes such as Contracts and Corporations have been recast as simulations. Professor Roberto Corrada uses the novel “Jurassic Park” to inspire students in his administrative law class, for instance; they work in teams to draft and present legislation to Congress establishing regulations for a dinosaur theme park, which may include guidance on handling dinosaur DNA and fence electrification. And five in-house clinics offer hands-on practice.

McAnelly is convinced his background will prove valuable in the job search. "I don’t think a class exists that gets into the misdemeanor stuff I learned every day," he says. "I feel like I’ll be properly prepared to handle a full caseload."
that some of the largest law firms still use to train new associates. The school partners with local firms to teach the skills, using a combination of lectures and simulations over the course of four 10-hour days. Each workshop focuses only on one skill, such as taking depositions, qualifying expert witnesses at trial, and selecting a jury through voir dire. While legal doctrines take time to absorb, such practice-related skills are mastered most effectively “in these short bursts,” says KU law professor Lumen Mulligan.

In her crash course, Akers first got a primer on cross-examination strategies by local attorneys and then was thrown into a simulated trial about a wrongful death case for which she had to cross-examine multiple expert witnesses. Local attorneys played the roles of judge and opposing counsel and later weighed in with feedback.

“The experience was so cool,” she says. “It undoubtedly prepared me for cross-examinations in the future.” That future is taking shape. After a yearlong clerkship for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that begins this summer, Akers will become an associate in products liability defense for one of the university’s partnering law firms.

Pepperdine University School of Law
Malibu, California

Students in Pepperdine’s accelerated J.D. program get their experiential learning at a somewhat reduced cost by packing three years of law school into two. But it isn’t easy, says Benjamin Schuppel, 30, a 2016 grad who is a captain in the U.S. Army and spent eight years on active duty, including a stint in Iraq. There certainly is no time to waste. He once had a 20-page paper for the summer semester due on the first day of the fall term.

Like Schuppel, though, most students who choose accelerated programs like Pepperdine’s have already been out in the professional world and are willing to double down to get back to it sooner. Tuition typically runs the same as for the traditional track, but saving a year of living expenses and lost income is a big selling point.

The streamlined approach has been lauded as a way to cut down on student debt by President Barack Obama. It had a setback last fall when the Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law, one of the movement’s pioneers, ended its program after failing to reach its goal of 30 students per class. And Gonzaga University School of Law is no longer accepting applications for its accelerated program. Nonetheless, others, such as those at Brooklyn Law School and the University of Dayton School of Law, are still going strong. Drexel University’s law school launched a two-year program in 2014.

Pepperdine’s accelerated students start off with a 12-credit summer semester, then join traditional 1Ls in the fall and spring semesters. They get a good dose of experiential learning about dispute resolution, in particular, through simulations in courses on mediation and negotiation offered by the school’s Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution (and, as a bonus, they graduate with a certificate in the field). They also do an externship while taking six classroom credits the next summer, and then wrap up the program by taking the traditional 2L coursework.

It’s certainly a heavy load, says Schuppel, who nevertheless has found ways to build in the occasional break to lounge on the beach, learn how to surf, and otherwise make the most of Pepperdine’s enviable location overlooking the Pacific Ocean. That, he notes, is not a feature you often find at the competition.