

January 26, 2011

Dear Students,

Many of you have likely seen one or more of a spate articles over the last year questioning the value of a law school education. A similar set of articles has questioned the value of college degrees.

As I see it, there are at least two issues that are important to consider in evaluating these articles about law school. First, there is the issue of the value of a JD degree, particularly as weighed against the cost. Second, there is the issue of law schools' reporting of job statistics, which are important to enable potential students to weigh these benefits for themselves.

Value of the JD

While a JD is not right for everyone, many people find this degree one of the most valuable educational tools and credentials available. Moreover, a JD from the University of Denver remains a good value.

There are, of course, many reasons why people seek a JD. Many people seek the degree because it can prepare them for jobs which provide a high level of personal job satisfaction, whether in law, business, politics, or public interest work. Some seek the degree because it can help them to change the world in important ways. And some seek the degree because they believe that it can help them achieve financial security, or even a high level of financial reward.

Most of the articles on the "lost" value of the JD focus singularly on this last motivation: the financial reward one might expect from a career at a large law firm. The authors concentrate on the apparent decline in the number of top-paying (\$160,000 per year starting salary) legal jobs over the last few years. The articles often quote law students and graduates who claim to have gone to law school based on the assumption that they would get one of these extremely high-paying jobs.

Some of our graduates certainly get these types of extremely high-paying jobs. However, these jobs have always been a very small segment of the legal market, both generally and in Denver. It is neither the norm nor the expectation for most of our students. For over a century, our graduates have had rewarding careers in solo practice, small and mid-size firms, government, and business. So it makes little sense to say that the value of a DU education has risen or fallen by looking primarily at this small segment of the legal job market.

A more realistic assessment of the monetary value of a JD concentrates on the break-even cost: the salary that will justify the costs of attending law school. David Van Zandt, the former Dean at Northwestern Law School, calculated that law graduates must earn an average of \$65,000 per year over the course of their career to justify the cost of getting a JD in terms of break-even cost. (<http://www.abanet.org/lsd/legaled/value.pdf>) This is not a starting salary, but the average salary over the graduate's career.

This is good news for most of our graduates. Our most recent data suggest that the median starting salary for DU grads in the private sector is \$71,000 per year. Our 75th percentile salary is \$110,000 per year, and our 25th percentile salary is \$55,000. Even those at the 25th percentile, with a starting salary of \$55,000, will likely average over \$65,000 over the course of their careers. This calculation is more favorable for our many students who receive scholarships and other forms of financial aid. And those graduates who earn lower salaries as a result of working in public service fields may be eligible for debt assistance under a recently enacted federal law, which can make the break-even point much lower. So for most of our graduates, a DU law degree makes good economic sense.

The other good news for our graduates has to do with competitiveness. Without a doubt, legal jobs have been harder to find in the last few years. But there are still many good jobs out there. And economic indicators suggest that the market for legal services in the region is growing again. So the key is making sure that our grads can compete to get those jobs.

Our law school is particularly well-positioned for this competition. Legal employers tell us that they are increasingly looking for candidates who are well-prepared for the practice of law. And our strategic plan specifically commits to do just this: to produce graduates who are more practice-ready. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, employers tell us that they perceive our graduates as being well-prepared and hard-working. Finally, our newly reorganized Career Opportunity Center is committed to helping our students identify and find good jobs. Our employment statistics (discussed below) suggest that our graduates are faring well in the competition for jobs.

Employment Statistics

Many commentators have complained about the lack of good data on jobs obtained by law school graduates. Without such data, it can be difficult for potential students to make informed decisions about whether to invest in a JD at a particular school. Indeed, some of the jobs data available from law schools – particularly the data they provide to US News – is imperfect. However, many law schools, including DU, provide detailed, useful, and reliable data to the public.

Most of the debate on employment reporting focuses on one particular statistic: the US News “employed 9 months after graduation” figure. (Our 2009 figure was 91%.)

There are at least two serious issues with the US News “9 months” figure. First, this particular statistic blends together many types of employment, some more desirable than others. For example, this figure does not distinguish between jobs that require a JD and those that do not – for example, working in a restaurant. (Only 3 % of 2009 DU Law graduates work in non-professional jobs.) Nor does it distinguish between those who are employed full-time and those who are working in part-time or temporary jobs. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of evaluating the value of a JD, it does not give a reader any sense of what the typical graduate of a school is earning.

Second, and possibly related, is that schools’ reporting of this US News number often seems suspect. When, during the depth of a major recession, some law schools report that 100% of their graduates were employed 9 months following graduation (as at least two schools did last year), it is likely to make readers wonder whether they are getting reliable information.

The good news here is that at least some law schools – including ours – provide much more detailed and verifiable employment information than the US News “9 months” figure. For example, we provide a breakdown of our employment by job category, as well as geographic area. And we provide salary ranges, along with median, 75th percentile, and 25th percentile salaries for our grads in multiple areas of practice. This information is accessible to anyone on our web page at:

<http://www.law.du.edu/index.php/career-development-center/student-resources/employment-statistics-student>

This information is also verifiable, as we provide it as part of our reporting to the American Bar Association (our accrediting body), as well as the National Association of Law Placement. And we have been involved in discussions with those bodies regarding whether there is additional employment information that law schools like ours can and should provide.

Making the Right Decision

Law school is clearly not the right path for everyone. Success in law school and in the practice of law requires hard work, intelligence, and a certain amount of competitiveness. Everyone should think hard before embarking on this demanding career. However, it is simply not true, as some recent news articles suggest, that law students today are in a “losing game” and are courting financial disaster.

Here at DU, we pride ourselves on providing good, transparent information for those trying to decide if a DU legal education is right for them, and on providing a first-rate legal education that allows our graduates to compete for the best legal jobs. For most of our graduates, law school has been and continues to be an excellent investment, both financially and in terms of job satisfaction.

Regards,



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