Legal Education for the 21st Century

Five years from a new millennium, no one seems to notice. Ours is not an era of adventure, discovery, idealism or vision—of dreaming about the future. In these times we might rather avoid thoughts of the future and the problems we know it will bring—burgeoning Social Security and pension costs, government deficits. At the University of Maryland School of Law, however, thinking about the future is a necessity, not a luxury. It is also a hopeful endeavor. The more difficult the problems that our nation faces, the more important it is for lawyers to be extremely well educated.

Sometimes we forget the extent of changes in the legal profession during the last generation. Just two decades ago, the law was almost exclusively a white male enterprise. Less than 10 years ago, large law firms seemed to be inevitably and exponentially expanding. Not too long ago, there was no legal services corporation.

The change of pace will not slow in future decades. Some of the changes our graduates will encounter during their 40-year careers are already evident. Many today practice in a global economy. For transactional lawyers in urban centers like Washington or Baltimore, the “conflicts of law” soon will be between the law of the United States and China or South Africa, not that of Maryland and Virginia.

Some say there are already too many lawyers. Certainly, the opportunities available for today’s graduates differ from those of the 1980s. But, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the legal profession is one of seven professions expected to grow the most by the year 2005. By then, attorneys who graduated in the mid- to late 1960s, when American law schools dramatically expanded, will begin to retire. And, if you believe that the glut of recent graduates in the marketplace is unique to the legal profession, check with 25-year-olds starting careers as teachers, engineers, dentists, social workers or specialists in many medical fields.

At the same time, most Americans appear not to have access to lawyers for their legal problems. Large businesses can afford lawyers; indigent people have free legal services available in some cases. But lawyers are out of reach for many working class and middle class Americans. This, too, is a challenge confronting our profession and the School of Law. Part of the answer may lie in new technologies.

This issue of the JD covers several activities of the School of Law that focus on the future. I encourage you to read articles on the international securities practice of our graduates and the school’s program in South Africa. Learn about our efforts to identify unmet legal needs of the middle class and begin to address them through our students’ efforts to assist pro se domestic litigants with advanced technologies.

In other arenas, the shape of the future is less clear. It is incumbent on us to try to anticipate change in the legal profession, and sometimes to guide it. That is why the School of Law is now evaluating its mission. As a part of this process, we brought leading educators and legal professionals here during fall 1994 to discuss these issues with faculty and students.

We do not know all the answers in 1995. Ours is a law school recognized nationwide for its “cutting edge” programs in clinical education, health care law, environmental law and law and entrepreneurship. We pledge to keep listening to you and consult with you as we plan the future. We will not retreat into an ivory tower. We will continue to be a school that embraces the real world.

Donald G. Gifford, Dean