



The Wayne Morse Commons, named after a former dean of the School of Law, is a popular place for law students to study and visit.  
Jessica Waters  
Emerald

## Debt pushes law students into private practices

A report says more students are going into private practice, but 40 percent of 2002 University law graduates are in public service

By Ayisha Yahya  
Reporter

The call of the dollar is drawing recent law graduates away from public service and into private practice, according to an American Bar Association report released Aug. 5. The study found that more students chose to work in private practice to finance huge debts they accumulated in college.

However, at the University School of Law, many graduates still choose the public interest path.

"You'll probably discover that the University is one of the top four or five schools where the first job for graduates is going into public service," said Merv Loya, law school assistant dean and career services director. He said the school had collected data

from 92 percent of 2002 graduates, and out of that segment, 43 percent took up public interest, nonprofit or government positions as their first job. He added that the average over the years has been more than 40 percent, compared to a national average of 26 to 27 percent.

About a third of those in the public interest workforce are in judicial clerkship jobs in judges' offices. Others work as a public defenders, in legal service programs that serve poor communities and other nonprofit services.

Loya said the survey, which was compiled by the ABA Commission on Loan Repayment and Forgiveness, reflects national trends that may not always apply to a local level.

He said the higher numbers of University law graduates joining public sector ranks may be attributed to the University's long tradition of public service.

"We're a public law school and so part of our mission is to serve the public," Loya said.

Students at the law school have won the Oregon Bar Association Young Lawyer's Pro Bono Challenge Award two years running for their pro bono work. Loya said one student even dedicated more than 400 hours to public service.

According to the ABA report, students may be saddled with as much as \$80,000 in debt after law school. With public service salaries starting at about \$36,000 a year, students may opt for the higher-paying private practice jobs, which offer an average salary of about \$90,000 nationally.

Loya said the debt burden for University law graduates is about \$50,000, adding that the salaries for 2002 University graduates in the public sector ranged from \$24,000 to \$61,000, with a median salary of \$39,000. Meanwhile, those in private practice have salaries ranging from \$20,000 to \$125,000, with a median salary of \$50,000.

But Loya said finances are not the

only factor behind student choices after graduation. If they are passionate about public interest, then students may pursue their goals even if the jobs do not pay much.

"Financially, it's not always feasible," he said, giving an example of a student who started in a judicial clerkship position but decided to join a private firm to finance his student loans.

Still, some students are up for the challenge.

Jennifer Gleason started working as a staff lawyer at E-Law — a nonprofit organization that works to protect the environment and human rights around the world — as soon as she graduated from the University in 1993. She said she went to law school because she wanted to find ways to best serve the public.

"Even though it's hard to pay student loans on a public interest salary, I never thought of doing anything else," she said. Gleason added that she still has about 10 years more to

pay her loans, but she doesn't plan to change jobs.

Not all students go into private practice for the money, however.

"We have students who want to experience what is done at large firms," Loya said. "They'd be there regardless of the salary."

Wendy Baker, who graduated from the University in 2002, works at local firm Harrang, Long, Gary, Rudnick P.C. She said while many students go to law school to make a contribution to society, it's a misconception that the only way one could help people is to work in a public service, like legal aid. She added that public interest jobs in the area were really scarce.

"After working a year in two private firms, I found there are all kinds of ways to help people," she said, adding that student loans did not play a bit role in her job choice. "I feel I'm doing that."

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