Accreditation Expands Law School's Role in Community

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BY ANDY ABRAMS
Saturday, August 27, 2011

The American Bar Association noted the "remarkable journey" of the Charleston School of Law in this month's decision to award full accreditation to the school. The ABA specifically noted the significant impact we have already had in the community, state and nation. Our students, for example, have performed more than 161,000 hours of public service since 2005.

We're proud of what our students have accomplished and how they'll continue to contribute as we move forward. But just as importantly, we're proud and thankful for the strong community support we've received through the years as we have matured. This community's steadfast encouragement had a significant impact on the ABA. In the days ahead, we look to build on this support and partner in new ways to better the region.

Full accreditation means the law school will now be able to explore new initiatives for expanded educational opportunities for current students and area professionals who want to better their legal education. Preliminary investigation and discussions are under way with the local universities to identify available opportunities for the law school to partner with these institutions to enhance Lowcountry graduate education opportunities. These strategic alliances may take the form of advanced law degrees, such as a master's in law, as well as joint degrees, dual degrees and certificate programs with The Citadel, the College of Charleston and the Medical University of South Carolina. The educational possibilities for the institutions, students and the community are limitless and exciting.

Since our founding, we've been committed to and had success in recruiting a diverse student body. Over the last three years, the school increased its minority student representation by 67 percent. In this same period, we've experienced annual double-digit increases in minority applicants. But because the overall pool of minority applicants hasn't grown nationally, one school's gain is simply another school's loss. This, in turn, means there is no overall improvement in the number of minority lawyers produced by law schools. That's why, in partnership with the bar, bench, business and educational communities, the Charleston School of Law has developed a kindergarten through law practice ("K through Practice") recruitment model to reach talented minority students as early as possible.

We will serve as a resource for these young students so they can acquire the skills needed to be successful students and, ultimately, capable attorneys. We believe the cumulative effect will be an increased number of qualified minority law school applicants, leading to more minority law school graduates and, ultimately, a more diverse bench and bar.

In today's highly competitive business environment, there is a heightened expectation of employers and clients that our new graduates arrive with greater practical knowledge and more developed "lawyering" skills. Employers want these new attorneys to engage immediately and successfully in the practice of law.

Unlike the field of medicine with its post-graduate residency requirements, there is no true equivalent in the legal profession. But this is changing. In South Carolina, for example, there are mandatory programs that law school graduates must participate in as they enter the practice of law. These programs range from "Bridge the Gap" classes and observation of courtroom proceedings to the South Carolina Supreme Court's newly-adopted mandatory mentoring pilot program that "pairs new lawyers with more experienced lawyers to help with the transition from the academic world to the practice of law."

Historically, the role of law schools in this process has been to provide skills-based courses, such as trial advocacy and mediation, and hands-on learning experiences, such as legal clinics and externships. It is
clear, however, that law schools must play a greater role. Consequently, we have adopted a "Practice-Skilled" Initiative that will develop a more sharply honed sense of the practical realities and necessities of active, competent and successful law practices. The immediate beneficiaries of this initiative will be our law graduates, but the ultimate beneficiaries will be -- and must be -- their clients and the public.

The Charleston School of Law has a brief but remarkable past, a compelling present, and a bright and exciting future. By providing students with a high-quality legal education and instilling in them the importance of service, we are empowering students with the ability to make positive differences in people's lives.

We're delighted to be fully accredited. We're appreciative of all of the community support we have received. And we're proud to call Charleston our home.

*Andy Abrams is dean of the Charleston School of Law.*