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Pipeline to the Profession

How Golden Gate University's law school succeeds in hard times

BY SUSAN E. DAVIS

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Steven Nordstrom

T

he prospects for law school graduates have rarely been so tenuous. Today's legal job market can't guarantee a six-figure starting salary for graduates of the best law schools, never mind for those whose schools are toward the bottom of the list. You might suspect students would be pretty nervous about attending a fourth-tier school in this economy, but here's the surprise: Like a number of lower-ranked schools, San Francisco's Golden Gate University School of Law—and its 662 students—seem to be doing just fine. In fact, the campus, situated on the edge of the city's financial district, is thriving in these tough times. (A number of organizations publish rankings of law schools across the country. For this article we relied on the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, which place GGU in the fourth, or lowest, tier of the 184 American Bar Association-accredited schools it evaluates.)

"Students at GGU have always scrambled to make their way," says Drucilla Stender Ramey, who last August became dean of the GGU School of Law after a four-year stint as executive director of the National Association of Women Judges in New York. She had also worked for many years as the executive director and general counsel of the Bar Association of San Francisco. "These students aren't on the traditional law school gravy train," says Ramey. "They have the initiative it takes to succeed in these times."

She says GGU's students are often the first to go to graduate school in their families, or even the first to have gone to college. "There isn't that sense of entitlement," she says. "GGU students worked hard to get where they are."

GGU is hardly the only lower-ranked school doing well. "Our pool of applicants is growing substantially," says Beth Kransberger, associate dean for student affairs at Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, also in the fourth tier. "Law school applications typically are countercyclical to the national trends."

THE SCHOOL, BY THE NUMBERS

Without a doubt, if you look at the numerical rankings, the 108-year-old GGU doesn't exactly stand out. According to the Internet Legal Research Group, GGU's rela-

tively high acceptance rate of 62.9 percent puts it 182nd out of the 185 schools on the ILRG's list for selectivity. (Trailing are Loyola University in New Orleans, Western New England Law School in Springfield, Massachusetts, and Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan.) It's 163rd in the country for its "high LSAT" score of 154, and its bar-exam pass rate of 60.4 percent is 179th. GGU law school's endowment is \$5.8 million; by contrast, UC Berkeley School of Law has a \$185 million endowment, and the Yale School of Law's is \$750 million.

And GGU ain't cheap; its \$36,600-per-year tuition is among the top 54 percent for private law schools across the country, nearly as expensive as both Stanford School of Law and Berkeley Law's nonresident tuition. Eighty-five to 90 percent of GGU School of Law students receive some sort of financial aid—be it loans, scholar-



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—DRUCILLA STENDER RAMEY,
GGU LAW SCHOOL DEAN

ships, or both. (Eighty percent of Stanford's law students receive tuition fellowships or loans.) Maureen Doran, for instance, a 3L student, has received two scholarships from GGU but is also borrowing money and using her savings. Shannon Adams-Ferris, a part-time night student, likewise is covering her tuition with a combination of loans, scholarships, and earnings.

GGU's four-year part-time program—which in 1901 became the first evening law school in California—enrolls about 20 percent of the university's law students. And the entire law school's lower admissions requirements allow more flexibility to accept students whose scores may not be great but whose personality and goals seem a good fit with the school's mission. For instance, Trevor Thanh Nguyen, a 3L student, admits that he was either rejected or wait-listed at about half a

dozen other law schools, ranging from Harvard to Santa Clara University. "Ultimately, GGU was the only school that gave me an opportunity," he says. "I once heard a GGU professor, who was also a GGU graduate, put it this way: 'GGU was not my first choice, but it was my best choice.' I find that statement ever so true."

GGU has a high national ranking in a least one category: diversity. (*U.S. News & World Report* lists it 30th this year.) Ramey is frank when she describes GGU as "the opposite" of where she went to school (Harvard for undergraduate and then Yale School of Law). Yet she claims, "This is the only deanship I would consider taking. I've always had a lot of admiration for the student body."

GGU's law school offers a well-rounded academic track, with traditional emphases in tax law, IP, litigation, and international studies available. But its reputed strength is public service law—especially environmental and poverty law, and other civil rights issues. The school operates two on-site clinics: Its Environment Law and Justice Clinic focuses on environmental problems in low-income and minority communities (it received the EPA Region 9's Environmental Award for Outstanding Achievement in 2009); and its Women's Employment Rights Clinic advocates for the working poor in a variety of ways—including public policy advocacy, an advice hotline, impact litigation, and amicus curiae filings.

"We specialize in skills-based training," says Dan Angel, president of GGU. "It's about gaining

practical experience, not aiming to become the next Supreme Court Justice. And given that we often start with students with lower LSATs than in the top-ranked schools, we're very proud of what they go on to do."

THE PATH TO SUCCESS

The school's emphasis on developing practical skills is just part of the reason Golden Gate is able to succeed during these challenging economic times. More important is that the school's operating budget is generally drawn from tuition, so it hasn't had to make the kinds of cuts to faculty, travel, and support staff that more endowment-dependent schools did when their investment earnings crashed. In fact, GGU added four tenured professors this year.

WHO'S WHO FROM GGU

NOTABLE ALUMNI OF GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW IN SAN FRANCISCO

- **Phillip Burton** (JD 1952), former congressman
- **Joan Blades** (JD 1980), co-founder of MoveOn.org
- **Patrick Coughlin** (JD 1983; LLD 2009), of counsel for Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd
- **Justice Morgan Christen** (JD 1986), Alaska Supreme Court justice (only the second woman to serve)
- **Amy M. Wollman** (JD 1994), vice president of business and legal affairs for Walt Disney Studios
- **Karen L. Hawkins** (MBA 1981; JD 1997), director of the Office of Professional Responsibility for the Internal Revenue Service

Student Outlook

TREVOR THANH NGUYEN, 27, started GGU School of Law in 2007. "I wanted to build a practice here in San Francisco," the San Jose native explains. "I was drawn to the emphasis on practice and clinics and the fact that I would be learning in this community, developing networks, and meeting colleagues during my law school years."

Nguyen, who is interested in business and international law and is working concurrently on an MBA, pretty much hit the ground running. After his second year, he traveled to Vietnam and met with a contact in Saigon who had founded TDL International Law Firm, with an office already open in Los Angeles. Then Nguyen was the 2009–10 president of GGU's student bar association. As other 3L students around the country worry about their job prospects after graduation, Nguyen expects to be in charge of setting up a San Francisco office for TDL as soon as his bar results are in.



MAUREEN DORAN is a 3L student who worked as a senior vice president at General Electric before applying to law school. Doran, who demurred when asked her age, had an internship last fall at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague. Now she's set her heart on going back to Europe and working again in some aspect of international law. "I'd love to be in Paris," she says.



SHANNON ADAMS-FERRIS, 33, a part-time night student now in her fourth year, worked full time as an administrative assistant for a local hedge fund during most of her time at GGU, until she was laid off in December. Adams-Ferris chose the school because "it's well known for being practical," she says. "As an older, returning student, that's important to me." But, she admits, she's nervous about her prospects after graduation. "Because I worked full time through law school, I couldn't do internships and externships," she says. "But my hope is that between now and when I take the bar, I can work through one of the school's pro bono clinics. Or maybe I'll have to take another job temporarily and volunteer for a while to get experience. I applied to law school before the recession started—I guess now that the recession is here, it just means I'll have to work harder."





Students in Golden Gate University's law library (top) and in class with Associate Professor Michele Benedetto Neitz.

Meanwhile, the number of people taking the LSATs and applying to law schools is surging upward. That may be because college grads who see no immediate employment prospects think law school might be a good way to either avoid a dismal job market or get a new career going—or both. “The number of applicants last year was 3 percent higher than the year before,” says Angela Dalfen, GGU’s director of admissions. The increase at Berkeley Law was 8 percent.

But Ramey—a longtime advocate for diversity—notes that women’s applications aren’t ticking up at the same rate, especially in the part-time programs, which just held steady. “The theory is that in uncertain times, women are anxious about losing their full-time jobs, so they’re not willing to be in school part-time too,” she says.

At the same time, the number of jobs available for graduates in big corporate law firms is falling. “What’s good is that most of our students don’t go for those kind of jobs anyway,” says Ramey. (Her own parents, she cheerfully notes, “would have sat shiva” if she had taken

a job with a corporate law firm.)

According to Susanne Aronowitz, GGU’s associate dean of law career services, “we’ve generally been more oriented to small firms, small businesses, and public interest work. And we’ve always emphasized developing skills and building relationships via internships, clinics, pro bono work, and reaching out to the bar. We’re encouraging our students to be creative that way even now.”

The school has also beefed up its career services, with weekly meetings and e-newsletters that address professional development topics such as interviewing, dressing for success, and getting published, as well as how to network and find contract work. “Most of our graduates are finding work,” Aronowitz says. “But the nature of the work in the first year is changing. We’re seeing more students doing internships and contract work and part-time work. They’re mixing it all together to make a living.”

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

Other schools in the lower tier certainly appreciate GGU’s strengths. “The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings use a very narrow set of criteria,” says Kransberger at Thomas Jefferson in San Diego, which also seeks to open the doors of the legal profession to those who traditionally have been shut out. “They don’t include the strengths of the student body or the faculty.”

And rankings, it should be added, are hardly permanent. For instance, last year Chapman University’s School of Law rose from the fourth tier to the third tier, and this year the Orange County school’s number 93

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ranking puts it in *U.S. News's* top tier (the upper 50 percent of all the law schools it evaluates). "This is a milestone for Chapman Law School," says interim Dean Scott Howe. "It reflects the hard work and dedication of many people since the law school began 15 years ago. Very few law schools have been able to do what Chapman has done."

Howe attributes the school's impressive rise to several factors, including its low student-faculty ratio (roughly 9:1), high-quality faculty, high admission standards, and wide offering of clinics and legal specialties. Former Dean John Eastman—who stepped down in February to run for state Attorney General but remains on the Chapman faculty—pointed out in an interview that "an influx of financial support" from the school's trustees also helped, as it allowed him to offer more scholarships, nearly double the size of the faculty, and increase its travel budget.

"Some fourth-tier school deans believe their schools don't belong there and they're working to get out," Eastman said. "That's where Chapman was. Another group understands that their market niche is people who can't get into other schools. Those schools don't invest in changing their rank." Like Eastman, Ramey considers herself to be part of the former group. "We are very committed to moving up, tier-wise," she says, "as it can only enhance our ability to attract great students and faculty."

On the other hand, Ramey shrugs off some of the importance of the national rankings. "Forty percent of those [ranking] scores are based on reputation, as defined by deans and academics," she says. "The big national law schools have a huge advantage because their reputation is self-perpetuating."

GGU obviously doesn't have that kind of advantage, but under Ramey's tutelage, it seems that the tough economic times are playing to the school's strengths. ●