



Donna Skibbe, Vice President of Development and Career Services, Concord Law School

[6-21-04 John J. Barnes]

Offering a unique perspective on the challenges of a career services office, Donna Skibbe talks about what it's like helping students with legal degrees from an online university advance their careers

Imagine a law school whose classrooms and library follow you wherever you go, a law school that exists in virtual space and is accessible any time you wish. That's Concord Law School, founded in 1998 as part of Kaplan, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of the Washington Post Company in Washington D.C.

We talked to Donna Skibbe, Vice President of Development and Career Services for Concord's approximately 1,700 students now studying on-line. We asked about the advantages and disadvantages of acquiring one's legal education over the Internet.

"We've only been at this for six years," Donna told us. "Concord graduated its first class in 2002, so any generalities I make are subject to change; but I can say that what most surprised me was how different our on-line student body was from that of the traditional law school.

"I think it's safe to say that most law schools cater to young adults between the ages of 22 and 28 who - at least initially - intend to practice law in the traditional sense. At Concord, our students' average age is 43, and approximately 40% already have graduate or professional degrees when they begin their legal education. Concord students have substantial work experience and have a variety of reasons for seeking a law degree.

"For example, one of our students is a dentist with an interest in forensic dentistry. He does not intend to give up his dental practice, but his J.D. will make him a better expert witness. Another graduate is an earthquake

engineer who traveled constantly and attended law school from remote locations all over the world. He said he went to law school because his experience was that lawyers and engineers do not understand each other. In addition to his other responsibilities at his company, he became general counsel after passing the bar exam.

"We've learned that about a third of our students are looking for a career change, another third want to add credentials to enhance their overall career prospects, and the remaining third are pursuing a law degree just because they're interested. This makes our student body quite different from that of a traditional law school and with different concerns."

We noted how that must make for a unique type of challenge for Concord's Career Services and Donna agreed.

"Obviously OCI - On-Campus Interviewing - is not a core function of Concord Career Services. For starters, our students reside in every state and internationally. Additionally, as I have said, students have many different career goals. Someone who has a 20+ yr career in X may be at a salary level where it is not realistic for him/her to take an entry-level legal position. His/her goal would be to use the law degree to somehow change his/her work or responsibilities within a current field. Another aspect of our counseling is state bar licensing. Concord Law School is registered in California, which makes our graduates eligible to sit for the California Bar Exam. The American Bar Association does not accredit law programs that are offered

completely through distance education and most states require graduation from an ABA accredited law school to sit for the bar exam. While we hope to - and continue to work on - opening up licensing opportunities, some graduates will be licensed in California and not live there. They may look at what is often labeled "non-traditional legal" career choices or what options they have under Multijurisdictional Practice rules which are being enacted in a number of states. We help them explore those options," Skibbe said.

We asked how she could provide Career Services information to a student body dispersed over 50 states.

"In many ways, Concord's online environment makes it easier to be in touch with students. Students can email at anytime and I can respond or set up a telephone conference. We have a rule at Concord - or at least we strive to - answer all student emails within 24 hrs. Beyond individual counseling, we do what most career offices do - provide links to career, job information on the school site, provide subscription services such as the Vault Career Library, and hold programs. For instance, we have an annual in-person Career Forum - generally each Fall - in Los Angeles.

"Perhaps unlike others in career services, I do spend a fair amount of my time working on licensing issues and bar exam support. I recently helped our alumni set up a bar mentoring program for graduates who are sitting for this July's California Bar. As we have more graduates - and more licensed attorneys - hopefully the legal community



will recognize the potential of online legal education - particularly its accessibility to those who would not otherwise be able to attend law school due to where they live or their schedules. I think Concord graduates with their backgrounds and experience will bring much to the legal profession. We are off to a good start."

Donna then filled us in on her background. A Journalism graduate of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, she worked in the Registrar's Office at the Georgetown Law Center before moving to BAR/BRI, which helps law students prepare for state bar exams. She worked there 17 years and also worked for West, before moving to Kaplan, Inc. She has worked with Concord Law School's founding dean, Jack Goetz, since 1984 in one capacity or another and is now responsible for marketing Concord as well as providing services that keep current students happy with the experience.

"In all," she said, "the experience remains continually fulfilling. Tuition is currently \$7,895 per year, with no long commute, no parking, gas and childcare expenses, plus we offer an on-line library and full panoply of courses. As a result, our students end up with a lot less debt and a lot less stress getting a degree with us. Plus we offer a demonstrably fine education - a very student-centered approach to legal education. As I see it, we're on the cutting edge of how higher education is delivered. We do what we do with efficiency and pride and we continue to grow. In short, we're the future and the future is up and running right now."