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## Dean's Column: Students Know Best Why the UNLV Experience Pays

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**“We work to attract students and deliver exceptional value through training, hands-on opportunities and networking.”**

# Dean's Column

BY DEAN DANIEL W. HAMILTON AND PROF. ANNE R. TRAUM

## STUDENTS KNOW BEST WHY THE UNLV EXPERIENCE PAYS

Madison Zornes was working as a file clerk at a Las Vegas law firm when she was deciding where to attend law school, so she solicited advice from lawyers at the firm. A Las Vegas native, Madison had gone out of state for college. Wing Yan Wong was in the same boat, having left Nevada for college. She was now weighing UNLV among her law school acceptances. Scott Ramsey, from Arizona, had an attractive in-state option, but was drawn to Las Vegas as a city and as a place to practice law. Deciding to attend law school, and then deciding which law school to attend, are big career decisions, involving a significant financial commitment.

In today's climate, law schools are competing for students like Madison, Wing and Scott. Law school applications are down double-digits nationally for the fourth straight year. “Big law” hiring isn't what it used to be. Some have questioned the value of a law degree, especially given hikes in tuition, a weak job market and a profession undergoing changes.<sup>1</sup> These challenges are real, and neither UNLV nor Nevada is immune. But recent studies confirm that a law degree remains an excellent investment.<sup>2</sup> Long term economic gains far outweigh the cost of the degree.

Still, with applications down, nearly every law school applicant is in demand. To attract students, law schools compete on price, value, job placement, reputation and the kinds of learning opportunities available to students. Clinics, externships and service learning programs enrich students' training and job prospects. Opportunities to study in rapidly changing practice areas that have special significance to the Nevada market – such as intellectual property and gaming – challenge our students and help them understand the kinds of issues they will encounter in a sophisticated practice. In this buyer's market,

applicants are savvy about their choices. On the back end, their future employers are hiring students who are more prepared for law practice than ever before.

Students often choose UNLV based on value. They seek advice from those in the know: lawyers and other students. At the firm where Madison worked, the associates' advice was clear: attend law school where you plan to practice because of the superior networking opportunities. A partner told her that local firms tend to be more receptive to successful Boyd students. Scott got the same advice and, like Madison, was also drawn to UNLV's small size and strong programs. Wing was impressed by the well-spoken and very professional UNLV students she spoke to, and the school's impressive rank given its very brief history. For her, the faculty's teaching experience was also a big draw.

Geordan Logan's pathway to law school was more circuitous, but not unusual among UNLV's part-time students. Being a lawyer had been his dream since childhood, but he found himself, at age 43, in an entirely different career. “I had a six-figure salary and a lot of responsibility, but I hated my job,” he said. UNLV was his one and only choice. He was impressed by its writing program, location and price, to his mind a bargain compared to most law schools. Still, at \$23,000 annual in-state tuition, law school is a big investment, even if UNLV is about half the price of its California counterparts.

Now at UNLV, these students rave about the hands-on learning opportunities and interaction with the legal community. From day one, students are involved in pro bono work through the community service program, which has served more than 50,000 clients. UNLV's small size (about 100 new students in incoming classes) means that students get individualized attention

in class, assistance on bar prep and counseling on finding jobs. On the job, Madison has valued the strong foundation she received in UNLV's rigorous writing program (ranked third by *US News* in 2013).

The law practice experience students gain in the externship and clinical programs gives them a competitive edge in hiring and in figuring out what practice area they want to pursue.

Geordan is on his second externship, this time with the Clark County Public Defender.

Scott learned the value of this real-world experience by externing for a judge and now plans to enroll in a clinic before graduation.

After Madison externed for one state district judge, another judge hired her to clerk after graduation. As a third-year, she clerked at Eglet Wall Christiansen. She's spending her last semester in the Family Justice Clinic, honing her litigation skills and developing data-driven proposals for law reform.

Wing has capitalized on a professional development fellowship, co-sponsored by the law school and the state bar, enabling her to work at Lewis Roca Rothgerber.

The pressure is on for law schools to deliver. With applications down, a tight job market and rising tuition, law schools, including UNLV, no longer take anything for granted. We work to attract students and deliver exceptional value through training, hands-on opportunities and networking. Is it worth it? Empirically, the answer is yes. On a less scientific scale, perhaps Geordan said it best. "All-in-all, my concerns about the high cost of my education and employment are tempered by the realization that I have discovered what I want to be when I grow up." Putting students on their own paths to success is what we do best. ■

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1 Most notably, Brian Z. Tamaha, *Failing Law Schools* (2012); see also David Segal, "Is Law School a Losing Game?" *NY Times*, January 8, 2011.

2 Michael Simkovic, Frank McIntyre, "Populist Outrage, Reckless Empirics: A Review of Failing Law Schools," *Northwestern University Law Review Online*, Feb. 3, 2014; Michael Simkovic, Frank McIntyre, "The Economic Value of a Law Degree" (Harvard Law Sch. Program on the Legal Profession, Research Paper No. 2013-6, Jan. 14, 2014)



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