

## Scholarly Commons @ UNLV Boyd Law

---

Scholarly Works

Faculty Scholarship

---

2011

### State of the Law School: Achieving Academic Success in Nevada

John Valery White

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas – William S. Boyd School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

White, John Valery, "State of the Law School: Achieving Academic Success in Nevada" (2011). *Scholarly Works*. 861.

<https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/861>

This Article is brought to you by the Scholarly Commons @ UNLV Boyd Law, an institutional repository administered by the Wiener-Rogers Law Library at the William S. Boyd School of Law. For more information, please contact [youngwoo.ban@unlv.edu](mailto:youngwoo.ban@unlv.edu).



In the coming years, the William S. Boyd School of Law will continue to pursue its standing goal of becoming a great law school for Nevada. That project is considerably more complex today, due to significant changes taking place in the legal profession. Though our first decade's successes have created a solid foundation from which the law school can take on these challenges, the changes to the profession are rapid and many are likely long-lasting. The school's graduates face a world with a considerably tighter job market. Law schools are being asked to provide greater skills training even as the rapid changes in the job market make it more crucial that we instill in our students the rigorous analytic ability that will permit them to effectively take on new, complex practices amid economic instability.

# STATE OF THE LAW SCHOOL: ACHIEVING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR NEVADA

BY DEAN JOHN VALERY WHITE,  
BOYD SCHOOL OF LAW

The law school will need to provide more resource-intensive training and grow our capacity to support students in preparing for the labor market and finding jobs, all while preserving our exceptional research and teaching faculty. We will need to continue our community and public service initiatives to ensure that our graduates continue to be committed to community service, even as the demands of practice become more challenging for them. We must take on these challenges in a resource-limited environment, as a still-young school, building the institutions and traditions that more mature schools rely upon. Becoming great is indeed daunting, but we welcome the challenge.

Let me briefly review some of the law school's most notable accomplishments. Then, after outlining some of the changes taking place in the profession, I will discuss the next steps for the law school. We have made tremendous progress in creating a great law school for Nevada and have every reason to believe our success will continue. Given the rapid changes in the legal profession, it will be necessary for us to continue to grow and adjust to the changing circumstances for our students.

The growth and development of the law school occurred in several stages. In the earliest days we developed a curriculum that emphasized professionalism and skills training along with the traditional, rigorous analytic training common to most law schools. That framework

took form as we crafted our Lawyering Process Program to emphasize not only written advocacy but professionalism and other skills needed by lawyers. It is manifest in our Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic, which puts our students in the often-difficult position of representing live clients with the attendant responsibility that such representation entails. It is evident in our Saltman Center for Conflict Resolution, which emphasizes the many ways that conflict is resolved beyond litigation. It is also prominent in our extensive externship program and our mandatory community service and other pro bono experiential programs. From the beginning we have worked to develop smart lawyers with considerable analytic ability that also have a sense of how to employ that ability for the good of their clients and the betterment of their community.

Key to this innovative curriculum was building an excellent faculty of great teachers who are also authorities in their subject areas. We achieved enormous success, recruiting experienced teachers and scholars whose national reputations helped secure the law school's future. In creating a strong faculty we ensured our students would receive excellent, rigorous instruction. With a strong faculty in place and an ambitious, cutting-edge curriculum defined, our efforts to build a great law school needed only great students.

From the earliest days we were able to attract a particularly strong student body, more diverse in background and experience than that of most law schools, and with ambition

and commitment to the community that fit the spirit of our institution. That early success helped us to quickly become the school of choice for Nevadans (today we receive nearly 9 of every 10 applications from applicants with Nevada residences). We also receive many more non-resident applications than peer schools in the region. With this robust applicant pool we have been able to build ever-stronger classes whose student academic indicators are comparable with any school in our region. Today, we play second fiddle to no one.

Our success in building a solid foundation will serve us well in the next years as we, along with all law schools, respond to rapid changes in the legal profession. These changes, which are still underway, have substantially softened the job market for graduates, flattened law graduate salaries and raised questions about how young lawyers will acquire crucial training in their early careers. Nationwide, hiring at the biggest law firms ground to a halt after the economic downturn in 2008. Since then, the largest firms have been reluctant to resume hiring and, when doing so, have increasingly focused on hiring experienced lawyers. In legal markets where significant percentages of young lawyers were hired by very large firms before 2008, the number of jobs available for law graduates has substantially dropped. Though this particular problem was not substantial in Nevada given the prevalence of small firms, uncertainties in the practice at smaller firms also made the job market for graduates

continued on page 22

# Biography: Dean White

BY JOHN ZIMMERMAN, ESQ.



Dean John Valery White's resourcefulness and commitment to excellence at the Boyd School of Law are unwavering and he possesses a great combination of skills to guide the school through its next decade and beyond.

White was raised in a small agricultural town in southwest Louisiana, where his father had established a general law practice. White credits his father with showing him that a respected lawyer can have a positive impact on others and wield great influence in the community. White's father began practicing law in the 1960s, representing many individuals in school desegregation cases. White says that his father did not push him or his siblings to become lawyers; but White's experience as a child and young adult, traveling with his father and witnessing the impact he had on people's lives and the respect accorded him in his home state, certainly encouraged White to follow in his father's footsteps.

continued on page 23

# STATE OF THE LAW SCHOOL: ACHIEVING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR NEVADA

continued from page 21

difficult. Combined with cutbacks in state and local government budgets that undercut the ability of courts, prosecutors, public defenders and other government agencies to hire, the job market for graduates in Nevada is undoubtedly soft.

The softness of the job market has flattened what had been a

steady (and in some sectors sharp) rise in starting salaries for beginning lawyers. With salaries flat or dropping, graduates' ability to service debt is falling even as the cost of attending law school has continued to rise. Although the tuition and fees at the Boyd School of Law have increased significantly in recent years, our cost remains at the middle among our peer schools and substantially below private competitors. Despite continuing budget uncertainty in the years to come, the law school will need to be particularly creative to suppress increases in tuition and fee costs for our students. This will be especially difficult as the profession's expectations of law schools in the aftermath of the economic downturn focus more and more on providing increasing amounts of expensive training at law schools.



## Holland & Hart provides arbitration and mediation services for commercial and construction disputes.

Phil Dabney concentrates in construction litigation and alternative dispute resolution. His additional experience as judge *pro tempore* in Nevada courts helps Phil weigh complex issues to achieve effective mediation results.



**Contact: Phil Dabney**  
702-669-4621  
pjdabney@hollandhart.com  
9555 Hillwood Drive, 2nd Floor  
Las Vegas, Nevada 89134

**HOLLAND & HART**   
www.hollandhart.com

In many sectors, clients have objected to being billed for junior associate work. However prevalent this trend might be, it has added to the reluctance of many firms to hire law graduates, even those with clerkship experience. Though this trend is most widespread in markets with many very large firms, it nonetheless threatens to undercut several traditional routes for law graduates to acquire significant skills. Of special concern is acquisition of experience and skills related to large and complicated transactions. Law schools can do more to help train graduates in the skills they will need in practice, as the Boyd School of Law's short history has shown. However, it is not clear that law school skills training will be able to replace *practice* of law as a means to acquire skills, especially in certain areas. Nevertheless, all law schools, including Boyd, will need to do more without abandoning the focus on a rigorous analytic training of our students.

If the economic downturn has reminded us of anything, it is that law graduates must be prepared to retool rapidly, becoming expert in new areas of law and providing competent and professional representation to new clients in a competitive marketplace. The long-celebrated achievement of American legal education has been its ability to rapidly impart in our students critical thinking and rigorous analytic ability. As legal education focuses more on skills and professionalism, we cannot abandon our focus on rigorous analytic training. For our graduates at Boyd, most of whom will practice in the smaller law firms that are characteristic in Nevada, the ability to comprehend and analyze a wide range of difficult legal problems remains the most important skill we can impart, along with the ability to communicate that understanding effectively.



With all the elements of a great law school in place, we look forward to a second phase of growth. That growth requires us to continue to diversify our offerings and further transform our curriculum to respond to the changing profession. Those changes, I believe, will require us to prepare students to be more creative and innovative –

demanding a wider variety of courses, particularly more subtle and complicated substantive courses that encourage independence and analytic rigor – while also preparing them for work environments that are smaller, less hierarchical and less secure. So even as we will need to add substantive courses, we will be forced to take up more of the early training that traditionally occurred within larger law firms. Fortunately, the law school's early commitment to instruction in professionalism and skills and our many opportunities for students to engage in live client representation serve as an effective base for addressing these growing needs.

What does this mean for the direction of the Boyd School of Law? Our focus on greatness remains resolute, but the path is more complicated. We must continue to build our faculty and add needed student support services, particularly related to job readiness and placement. More notably, however, will be creation of imaginative and sometimes experimental methods of imparting skills to our students. The faculty is in the middle of a periodic curriculum review, focusing in part on reviewing our skills offerings. We are committed to developing our combined approach of imparting skills and professional training without sacrificing rigorous analytic instruction. We remain focused on research that aids Nevada and the world. And we will work more closely with partners in the state to add value on policy and economic development issues. Greatness demands no less. ■

## Biography: Dean White

continued from page 21

In addition to practicing law, White's father started a farm and grew soybeans and raised cattle. At the time, growing cotton was the status quo for the region, so growing soybeans and raising cattle were somewhat challenging because the necessary equipment and expertise were not easily accessible. White says that it shows his father's creativity and courage to try something different.

Dean White attended Southern University in Baton Rouge and Yale Law School. After earning his law degree, Dean White chose to enter academia instead of private practice. He taught at Louisiana State University for 15 years before coming to Boyd. Nevada's spirit of "anything is possible," however, proved too strong to resist, and Dean White accepted the deanship at Boyd in 2007. Since coming to Nevada, Dean White has traveled all across the state and says he is amazed by the vast landscapes and remoteness of the rural areas of Nevada.

Regarding Boyd, Dean White says he appreciates the hard work the founding faculty and Dean Morgan put into the school. The dean says he is focused on continuing to build an exceptional law school that provides a rigorous analytical environment and teaches future lawyers professionalism and dedication to the community.

Dean White says he has no regrets about leaving Louisiana for the arid southwest and enjoys Nevada. He is married to a Las Vegas lawyer and they are expecting their first child. ■