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## Law School Enrollment Edges Up, with Surprise Spike in Non-JD Programs

Enrollment in law school J.D. programs dipped a tad this year, but some unexpected good news provided a counterbalance. While J.D. enrollment...

By Angela Morris | December 15, 2017



<http://images.law.com/contrib/content/uploads/sites/292/2017/12/Students-2.jpg>

Enrollment in law school J.D. programs dipped a tad this year, but some unexpected good news provided a counterbalance.

While J.D. enrollment fell by 0.7 percent compared with last year, the numbers of non-J.D. students—studying for LL.M., masters or certificate degrees—grew by a whopping 20.5 percent, compared with last year, according to data from the American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, which accredits U.S. law

schools.

That means overall law school enrollment edged up by 1.6 percent to 126,638, which is 2,010 more students than last year. That total is made up of 110,156 J.D. students plus 16,482 non-J.D. students.

As for first-year student enrollment—which schools closely watch since it has financial implications for the next three years—the ABA data released late Thursday shows the number of those students ticked up slightly for the second year in a row. There were 37,398 new first-year students in fall 2017, a gain of 291 students or **0.8** percent compared with last year. This year's increase is small, but it's still greater than the miniscule uptick last year, when only 36 additional first-year students enrolled compared to the previous year.

Any type of increase in the first-year class, however small, is a good thing compared with the alternative—those numbers plummeted by 29 percent between 2010 to 2016, forcing schools to lay off professors and make budget cuts.

Recovering some of that revenue could be why schools are seeking non-J.D. students.

The ABA's legal education section doesn't formally approve non-J.D. programs. The section does acquiesce to them after ensuring they won't detract from the school's regular J.D. program. The legal education section keeps a [long list \(https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/llm-degrees\\_post\\_j\\_d\\_non\\_j\\_d/programs\\_by\\_school.html\)](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/llm-degrees_post_j_d_non_j_d/programs_by_school.html) of law schools running non-J.D. programs.

Traditionally, many LL.M. students come from other countries, noted Derek Muller, who writes about enrollment trends on this blog, *Excess of Democracy*. He expected non-J.D. enrollment to drop because of unpredictable immigration and travel rules under the Trump administration.

"Apparently, law schools are finding students—domestic or foreign—interested in these programs," said Muller, a professor at Pepperdine University School of Law.

The non-J.D. program can bring in tuition-paying students who are not required to take the LSAT, and schools don't have to report them to U.S. News & World Report for the annual law school rankings, added Muller.

"There's no question schools are looking to other programs to make up the revenue shortfall in J.D. programs," he said.

It's not apparent that the efforts will pay off, said another enrollment observer, Alfred Brophy.

"It's not clear to me there's a huge need for law-focused training outside the J.D.," said Brophy, a professor at the University of Alabama School of Law.

As to traditional J.D. training—the data shows tough times are still here for law schools, he said. J.D. enrollment is basically stable. The tiny increase in first-year enrollment is not enough to declare a trend—not yet.

More significant increases could be in the pipeline, considering law school application numbers, however. [Early data \(https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2017/12/07/law-school-applications-on-the-rise/?back=law\)](https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2017/12/07/law-school-applications-on-the-rise/?back=law) from the Law School Admission Council showed the number of law school applicants was up by 12 percent while the number of applications was up by 15 percent as of Dec. 1. There's also been a [sharp spike \(https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2017/11/10/lSAT-takers-trending-up-following-five-year-plunge-why/?back=law\)](https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2017/11/10/lSAT-takers-trending-up-following-five-year-plunge-why/?back=law) in the number of people taking the Law School Admission Test.

"It may be with the increased number of applicants, that in the fall of 2018, we'll see a 5 or 6 percent increase—maybe more—and that would be the lifeline that many law schools are looking for," Brophy said. "One thing it may suggest, the increasing LSAT administrations and applicants, is that the law as a profession is making a comeback. People are

looking to law as a response to recent politics.”

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