

South Dakota's Only Law School May Be Struggling but There's Hope



Summary: *The University of South Dakota School of Law has been struggling over the past few years with bar passage rates and finances but they are plowing through.*

The economic downturn took a big hit out of law schools. The top law schools with their prestigious reputations were able to ride the wave but more modest law schools have struggled to keep up. The [University of South Dakota School of Law](#) is one of those schools that has seen challenges unprecedented in its 117-year history, according to [Capital Journal](#).

The academic and financial repercussions from these challenges have caused the school to get creative. With application numbers down and incoming money shrinking, the law school has been forced to lower its admission standards. Doing this has put the law school on the accreditation agency's watch list.

The South Dakota is the primary producer of lawyers for the state. What is troubling about that is the percentage of graduates from the school passing the bar exam has declined over the past five years. Once boasting a 90 percent passage rate in 2010 now only 50 percent of USD grads passed last year.

This drop in the number of students passing the bar has prompted the law school to form a task force to look at if moving the law school from the Vermillion campus to Sioux Falls may be a better option. The school has since rejected the proposal but is still looking at other options to help improve the law school. State House Speaker Mark Mickelson, who led the relocation task force, said, "The skeleton of the institution is very strong but I make no bones about it. It's a good institution with good people, but if they don't change they'll be out of business."

School administrators are taking the school's future seriously. They have increased admission standards, modernized course offerings, expanded opportunities for practical experience, and are offering new scholarships. The law school will also be introducing a new leadership. Current Dean Thomas Geu will be stepping down this year to return to teaching after being in the position since 2011. He is being succeeded by Sheila Gestring. He said, "This is a tremendous opportunity because it's a time of transition in all of legal education and the practice of law, and locally at this school. While that causes uncertainty, it certainly creates a huge opportunity and it's just a matter of how we take advantage of that opportunity."

The 2017 bar results were particularly disturbing since not only did only 55 percent of USD students taking the exam for the first time pass, but 77 percent of non-USD graduates who took the exam passed. Geu claims the school never reduced admission requirements. They just admitted more students with minimum standards on things like grade point average and Law School Admissions Test scores. He does not understand why their bar passage rates declined so drastically.

The South Dakota bar did raise its passing score in 2015, so that may have had an effect. Others speculate that the method of the bar may not fit well with the generation of students taking it. Millennials struggle more than previous generations with long testing sessions. Whatever the reason and despite the lower rates, students are still selecting USD Law for its cost and location.

First-year law student Beau Sullivan of Iowa said, "I think it's been a great choice so far. The bar-passage rate horrified me when I saw how much it dropped, but as long as you study hard for it, and with the education here, I feel like I'll be in a good position."

USD Law is fully accredited by the ABA but in danger because of their low bar-passage rate, lack of financial sustainability, and low incoming student credentials. Previous issues also included problems staffing the law library, lack of diversity among students and staff, lack of academic support for students, and lack of hands-on experience for students.

What do you think law schools should do to better prepare students and attract more to law school? Share your thoughts with us in the comments below.

To learn more about South Dakota Law School, read these articles:

- [University of South Dakota Law School Searching for New Dean](#)
- [South Dakota School of Law Receives \\$1 Million Gift from Orrin Estebo](#)
- [Several Changes in Best Value Law Schools List](#)

Photo: [tinyurl.com](#)

