

Published: Aug 14, 2006 12:30 AM

Modified: Aug 14, 2006 05:34 AM

## Two new law schools join the mix Elon, Charlotte institutions to add competition in state

---

JANE STANCILL, Staff Writer

Legal education in North Carolina will take an innovative turn this month with the opening of two urban law schools in Greensboro and Charlotte.

Elon University welcomed 115 students Thursday to its new law school in downtown Greensboro, where civic leaders helped raise millions to renovate and equip a former public library. Later this month, the Charlotte School of Law will start with 75 to 100 students as the state's first for-profit law school.

The new schools will mean more lawyers and more competition in North Carolina, which for decades has had five law schools -- at Campbell, Duke, N.C. Central, UNC-Chapel Hill and Wake Forest universities. Elon's program will undoubtedly raise the profile of the university, which already has a rising reputation for its emphasis on active learning and study abroad.

Both new schools have drawn significant interest from prospective students and faculty. Both charge about \$26,000 a year in tuition. More than 500 students applied for spots in Elon's inaugural class, and more than 300 professors applied for six teaching jobs.

At Charlotte School of Law, Dean Gene Clark says 1,000 applicants sought seats. It is part of a for-profit consortium called InfiLaw System, which operates schools in Jacksonville, Fla., and Scottsdale, Ariz. The company boasts that its Florida Coastal School of Law has the best bar passing and career placement rates among 10 Florida law schools.

Both Elon and Charlotte are urban schools that promise a close connection to the local legal community and an emphasis on students' total experience. They have assembled impressive advisory boards with legal scholars, former state supreme court justices, former governors and other notables. Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor will speak at Elon's dedication ceremony Sept. 19.

### Changing the tone

Elon aims to change the way the law is taught by using volunteer lawyers to coach students. Dean Leary Davis, who was the founding dean at Campbell University's law school in 1975, said he hopes to change the tone from one of intimidation to one of support.

Davis cited the adage that law schools scare students to death in the first year, work them to death in the second year and bore them to death in the third.

"What makes it scary is you don't know about how you're doing," Davis said.

Davis has taken a cue from medical schools, where students have "preceptors" -- doctors who help guide them. Elon has signed up more than 60 lawyers as preceptors. Each has agreed to take on two students for coaching.

The volunteer lawyers will even show up in class for their students' "Paper Chase" moments, when a professor

calls on individual students to recite a case. Then the volunteers will critique students' performance.

Elon is the only law school in the country to institute such a formal coaching relationship, Davis said. "One of the things we think we can do to take legal education to the next level is to make sure the students get constant, constructive feedback," he said.

That approach appeals to Keayba McKenzie, 33, who until recently worked as a deputy clerk at the federal courthouse in Greensboro. Despite that foundation of legal knowledge, the Guilford College graduate is nervous about law school. A practicing lawyer can help ease the transition, she says, and that prompted her to apply to Elon.

"To have feedback from individuals who are out there doing it every day, I think that's going to be essential," McKenzie said.

Elon's approach extends to exams in that critical first semester. If students miss an answer, they will be required to rewrite it until they have mastered it. "We want everyone to experience what that 'A' answer looks like," Davis said.

Elon also focuses on leadership skills and a nurturing environment. Each Thursday, local lawyers and judges will mingle with students at afternoon tea. And although students will be miles from Elon's main campus in Alamance County, they will get free parking and a membership at the YMCA in Greensboro.

### **Preparing for practice**

Charlotte School of Law, which opens Aug. 28, will focus on students rather than on professors' publishing and research, Clark said. The goal will be to produce "practice-ready" lawyers.

"We are unashamedly practical in our approach," he added.

The school has not yet worked out its specialties but will likely focus on regional needs such as banking or sports and entertainment law. Clark insisted that "profit isn't our major goal." The school will offer part-time, full-time and night instruction.

Both schools are shooting for provisional accreditation from the American Bar Association by the time the first class finishes. Combined, they will probably turn out 200 or more graduates each year.

But does North Carolina need hundreds of new lawyers each year?

Davis said there is evidence that North Carolina is importing lawyers from elsewhere. Last summer and this summer, more out-of-state law students took the bar exam here than students who attended law school in North Carolina, according to the N.C. Board of Law Examiners.

Applications for law school dipped slightly in the past year, said Jack Boger, dean of the law school at UNC-Chapel Hill. Still, he said, the state's overall growth and focus on the financial and biotechnology industries will mean more work for attorneys.

"The complexity of our society means that we're likely to need more lawyers," he said.

The new schools also mean more competition in legal education.

"I think it will probably be very helpful for all of us to look at what we're doing and make sure we have our best game on," Boger said. "The students are likely to be the beneficiaries of that."

Staff writer Jane Stancill can be reached at 956-2464 or