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Executive's Desk: Law school a wellspring of future U.S. leaders

By Kevin Washburn

Recent media reports have described falling law school applications and a tough job market for graduates. While such cycles tend to occur in all professions, a little perspective is in order.

People sometimes ask me if our country has too many lawyers. Well, yes, and it has led to our success.

Of the seven men considered the “founding fathers” of the United States, five were lawyers. These lawyer-architects built the strongest democracy and most powerful nation the world has ever known. The American economy is the largest in the world, in part, because the rest of the world feels comfortable investing here.

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That trust is based on the best judicial system in the world and a strong commitment to the rule of law. One might think that our economy is strong because of American ingenuity. And it is! But look closely and you will see that lawyers and judges create the intellectual property rights that fuel innovation.

Lawyer jokes are older than Shakespeare and new ones are minted each day. But people turn to lawyers when the chips are down, such as when they are arrested, when they are seriously hurt, when they face a divorce, or when they want to take care of their family after their death.

We also turn to lawyers for leadership in difficult times. Exhibit A is the presidency. A large majority of the presidents of the United States have been lawyers, including our current president. Imagine the United States without Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln or FDR. This fall, voters will choose between two Harvard law graduates, one who used his degree as a community organizer, senator and president, and one who used his degree successfully in the private sector and became a governor. Law school was a good investment for these men and for our country.

Of course, the national story is obvious, but lawyers play an important role here in New Mexico too. Lawyers help run all three branches of state government, including our governor, several of our key legislative leaders, and, of course, the entire Supreme Court. Even the “fourth estate” in New Mexico is led, in part, by a lawyer: The editor of this fine newspaper graduated from the UNM School of Law.

Voters have also chosen lawyers for other positions, even when it is counterintuitive. It is understandable that you chose a lawyer as governor, but consider that UNM alum Hector Balderas is the state auditor. Audits are usually handled by accountants, but New Mexicans entrusted a lawyer with this important job. Who hires a lawyer to perform an audit? No one in the private sector would. But you did.

Another UNM alum, Martin Esquivel, is the president of the Albuquerque Public Schools Board. Instead of an educator, the people of Albuquerque chose a lawyer to lead the schools.

At UNM Law, we are not surprised. UNM has produced so many of the people who serve in the most important government positions in the state: currently the chief justice, the attorney general, one of our U.S. senators, the U.S. attorney, the state Senate majority leader and minority whip, the chief judge of the Court of Appeals, and several of our federal judges. The list goes on and on.

Of course, leadership does not always come from government. Another UNM alum, Matthew Coyte, has recently used the law to address serious injustices in jails and prisons in our state and to make government work better. Coyte is merely one shining example.

We predict that leaders will continue to choose law school. Indeed, today's hard-working UNM law students are tomorrow's leaders. The job market is as tough as it has ever been, but most of our graduates seem to be finding work. Our students have an advantage because our legal education is among the best in the country on several metrics. Our school's small size, terrific faculty-student ratio, and mandatory clinical education are the keys to a successful and rigorous education. Moreover, in a state in which 300 to 400 people annually take the bar exam, UNM Law graduates only 100 to 110 students a year. Our students have a natural advantage and they like the odds.

Law school applications may be down and the legal job market may be tougher, but we know that the demand for leaders will grow as our state and nation confronts ever more difficult challenges.