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New Lawyers, Seeking Jobs, Are Advised to Think Small

By ASHBY JONES

A small but growing number of Midwestern law schools are sending a new message to their graduates: Look beyond the lure of high-paying, big-city law firms and consider launching careers in rural towns.

The law schools at the University of Iowa, Drake University in Iowa and Creighton University in Nebraska have teamed up with the Iowa State Bar Association to place students in summer internships and permanent jobs in small Iowa cities such as Fort Dodge (pop. 25,000), as well as small towns including Garner (pop. 3,100) and Britt (pop. 2,100) in the state's sparsely populated northern counties.



Jenn Ackerman for The Wall Street Journal

Kay Oskvig, who completed her first year of law school, in Garner, Iowa, where she is a summer clerk.

Last year, the University of Nebraska's law school created a special program of study for its students focused on practicing solo or in small firms after they graduate. University of Kansas's law school a few months ago launched a "rural and solo practice program," which teaches students the basics of each.

The rural areas' biggest selling point is jobs, which have been hard for law graduates to land in recent years due to a nationwide glut of lawyers and a slump in the legal industry since the 2008 financial crisis. As of February, the employment rate for students who graduated in 2011 was about 86%, the lowest for a class since 1994,

according to the National Association for Law Placement.

"The state of the current market...is the new normal," said Arturo Thompson, dean of career services at the University of Kansas School of Law.

But in parts of the rural Midwest, communities are itching for lawyers. "The job market is good for lawyers in the western and more rural parts of Nebraska, in towns like Ogallala and Scottsbluff," said Susan Poser, dean of the law school at the University of Nebraska. "We're trying to make students more aware of those opportunities," she said.

In many ways these law schools are following the lead of the medical profession, which has long encouraged students to practice in rural settings with doctor shortages, and often subsidized them

to do so.

The shortage of lawyers in the rural Midwest largely boils down to demographics: Educated young people raised in the region are fleeing for the cultural and financial opportunities of larger cities, both in their own states and farther afield.

"Twenty years ago, Chadron had 10 lawyers; Alliance had a dozen," said Howard Olsen, a lawyer in Scottsbluff, Neb., and a former president of the Nebraska Bar Association. "Now, they each just have two or three."

Mr. Olsen said that clients in rural Nebraska who used to find a lawyer across the street may now drive "50, 60, sometimes 100 miles" to find one.

Phil Garland, a lawyer in Garner, Iowa, and the head of the state bar association's rural-practice committee, said he was prompted to help launch the internship program in January, after he was approached for job advice by Kelsey Hollingshead, a second-year law student at the University of Iowa.

Mr. Garland helped Ms. Hollingshead find a summer job with a solo practitioner in Britt, about 35 miles south of the Minnesota border. The program has since managed to place law students from each of the three participating schools with rural practitioners.

One potential advantage to small-town practice: getting to work in all sorts of legal areas. Kay Oskvig, who finished her first year at the University of Iowa law school last month, took a summer internship with Mr. Garland in Garner, about 120 miles north of Des Moines. She said that in her several weeks on the job, she has worked on a contract dispute, a tax case and helped with some criminal-defense work. "I've been amazed at how broad small-town practice is," she said.

In addition, mentoring opportunities in solo or small practices can be intensive—and rewarding. "I work one-on-one with a single attorney all day long," said Ms. Hollingshead. "A guy who's been working for 40 years is teaching me literally everything he knows."

Whether the program can keep up the momentum is uncertain, especially if the job market for lawyers improves nationwide. After all, small-town life has its challenges. Cultural attractions might be few. When compared to big-city legal practice, rural practice can offer fewer intellectual challenges.

"If you're not from a small town, or already know that you want that environment, there might not be a whole lot to recommend it," said Ms. Hollingshead.

But for many students, the largest impediment to a small-town legal career is the debt they carry from law school, according to Allan Vestal, dean of the law school at Drake. "Small firms in small towns just don't have the same kind of pay structures that larger firms in larger cities do," he said.

Salaries at firms in big cities can start around \$160,000. But in Midwest small-towns, salaries tend to start in the low-to-mid-five figures, said Mr. Garland.

Still, for the students who can shoulder the financial burden, there can be significant advantages. "The cost of living, the pace of living and the variety of practice, to name a few," said Marianne B. Culhane, dean of the law school at Creighton. "Plus, no long commutes."

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Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the rural Midwest has a surfeit of lawyers, instead of a shortage.

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