

LAW WEEK COLORADO

Legal Education: The Unofficial Theme Of The ABA's 2013 Annual Meeting

By **Alli Gerkman**
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THE AMERICAN Bar Association's 2013 Annual Meeting in San Francisco was a sprawling event with thousands of attendees spread out over 20 hotels and attending more than 200 continuing legal education programs and countless other meetings. Given all of this, it was interesting to watch as common themes began to emerge and thread the event and its participants together. One of those themes was legal education.

Of course, I'm a bit biased. As the director of a national legal education initiative, legal education is my theme every day, so it only makes sense that I would key into the topic. But the problems facing legal education have captured the attention of a national audience. Issues like law student debt, low employment rates, and inadequacies in law school curricula have settled comfortably into the front pages of major newspapers and play a near-daily role in online news and blogs.

Given this backdrop, it should not be a surprise that these problems have also captured the attention of the ABA, its leaders and its speakers. When Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy took the stage at the opening assembly he started with a nod to the ABA Task Force on the Future of Legal Education, urged the ABA to make law school an attractive option for students, and said the law



ALLI GERKMAN

school curriculum should preserve the "language of law."

Later in the meeting, ABA President James Silkenat assured his audience in the House of Delegates that legal education will continue to play a role in his presidency when he presented a plan that seeks to address two critical challenges facing the legal profession — access to justice and low employment rates for recent graduates — through the newly created Legal Access Jobs Task Force.

Meanwhile, the Section of Legal Education and Admissions and the Task Force on the Future of Legal Education met in packed conference rooms full of legal educators,

law school administrators, lawyers and reporters. The section tackled big-ticket items like tenure requirements and employment reporting, voting to change the reporting requirement from nine to 10 months. The task force heard comments on its working paper from representatives of several organizations (including Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers) and announced that a final draft will circulate before the end of the year.

Representing nearly 400,000 members, the American Bar Association is the largest association of lawyers in the country. Its growing interest in legal education signifies a commitment by members of the profession that is heartening. After

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all, the profession has a big stake in the future of legal education. Law schools train lawyers for three years, but their graduates will be part of the legal profession for the rest of their working lives. How can law schools prepare students for a career that is committed to clients, the legal system and society? And how can the profession inform that?

These are questions we intend to answer.

In fact, legal education will be our theme in October, when we bring approximately 100 legal educators, law school administrators and practitioners to Colorado to identify the core competencies entry-level lawyers need, model structural and curricular changes to ensure students are learning those competencies, and consider how accreditation and bar admission standards can facilitate innovation. We will also hear from law school deans who must manage the practical implications of pedagogical innovation, and from former Indiana Chief Justice Randall Shepard, who chairs the ABA's task force.

We hope the conference will be a turning point for collaboration between the legal educators and practitioners. The challenges facing legal education pose risks not just for law schools and recent graduates, but for the profession and those it serves. If we're going to solve them, we're all going to have to make legal education and the future of the profession one of our guiding themes. •

— Alli Gerkman is director of Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers, a national initiative that facilitates innovation in legal education in order to train new lawyers to the highest standards of competence and professionalism. Learn more at <http://educatingtomorrowslawyers.du.edu>. Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers is an initiative of IAALS, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System.