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Correspondence law school scores in bar exam

By REBECCA KUZINS

The law students at Northwestern California University hardly ever meet their classmates or see the inside of a classroom. Some of the students are hundreds of miles away from the school's Sacramento office.

But many of them find the correspondence school program the best way to learn California law -- and to pass the state's grueling bar exam.

Six of eight Northwestern students who took the bar exam for the first time in February passed the test. The 75 percent pass rate was the highest of any law school in the Sacramento area, according to statistics from the State Bar of California.

In comparison, the pass rate for first-time test takers from McGeorge School of Law was 65 percent, with 13 of 20 students passing the February exam. The first-time pass rate was 50 percent at the University of California at Davis, at Lincoln Law School and at the University of Northern California's Lorenzo Patino School of Law and Paralegal, with one of two students from each school passing.

Statewide, the pass rate was 60.7 percent for first-timers and 43.3 percent for all takers of the bar exam.

McGeorge and UCD's King Law School are approved by the American Bar Association, while Lincoln Law School is accredited by the Committee of Bar Examiners of the State Bar of California. The Patino School is neither approved nor accredited.

Humphreys College of Law in Stockton, another accredited school, did not have any first-time test takers in February.

First-time takers tend to have higher pass rates than people who repeat the test. And the February bar exam is generally taken by fewer people than the July test, which was conducted last week.

Northwestern's high pass rate is unusual for a correspondence school.

But Delia Parker, Northwestern's director of student services, said the program fulfills the needs of "nontraditional students". You need to be highly motivated, committed and have good study habits.

The school has about 100 law students, 70 of whom are in their first year of the program. These students, said Parker, include "business professionals, people who travel a lot and can't fit into traditional school settings."

Other students are retired persons interested in pursuing a legal career, or residents of other states and foreign-born persons who want to learn California law.

Michael Clancey, a Sacramento attorney who's president of the Capitol City Trial Lawyers Association founded Northwestern California University in 1982 to accommodate these students. Parker, who was Clancey's paralegal before joining the university's staff, said her boss "worked his way through school himself. It was always a dream of his to offer a law school to students not in the traditional mode because of finances. He wanted to make another avenue available to them."

In keeping with that credo, the school's annual tuition is relatively low, \$1,200 a year, with additional charges for books, audiocassettes and other materials. By comparison, tuition at McGeorge is \$16,400 for the first year of its three-year program, \$15,870 for the second year and \$15,514 for the third.

Northwestern is one of five correspondence law schools that have registered their programs with the State Bar of California. The others are based in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

The State Bar requires correspondence law schools to register with the Committee of Bar Examiners, file annual reports and make other school records available to the committee.

The bar committee mandates correspondence schools provide 864 hours of preparation annually for four years. After the first year of course work, students are required to take a law examination administered by the State Bar.

This "baby bar" exam contains essay and multiple-choice questions on contracts, torts and criminal law. Students must attain a score of 70 percent or higher to receive credit for their first year of course work and to continue their legal education.

Students at Northwestern can enroll either in a four-year program, which prepares them to practice law in California, or in a three-year course, which allows them to earn a doctorate of laws degree.