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Spong: Building on the Past, Planning for the Future

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Spong:

Building on the Past, Planning for the Future

by Susan Cary Watkins

The eighties will be a decade of dreams fulfilled and new beginnings at Marshall-Wythe. The class of 1983 will start its legal education wandering bewildered down the corridors of a new building with closed circuit television in the classrooms and multi-media audio-visual equipment in the moot courtroom. The new facility will be the culmination of some of the dreams

and plans of Dean William B. Spong, Jr., and others at the College of William and Mary.

Completion of the new building is not the end of changes for Marshall-Wythe, however. The new facility is just one change in response to the continually changing needs of the legal profession reflected in legal education. Dean Spong recently considered how legal education will be affected by the resolution of the issue of whether the legal profession will continue to be self-regulated. "Law schools don't like to be told what they should be teaching," he observed, "they have traditionally responded to bar examiners, and to judges on some occasions." An example of this reactive mode is the increased trial advocacy training offered in law schools.

If the legal profession becomes more government regulated, both at the state and federal levels, there is greater chance of more regulation within law schools, Spong pointed out. "I think the kind of profession we are going to have in the future will probably determine what kind of legal education we are going to have."

Admissions Increase, Applications Decline

While unwilling to speculate on trends for legal education overall, Spong did project some of the more likely changes to occur within the next five or six years at Marshall-Wythe. The state Council on Higher Education has asked that the law school increase its enrollment to 600 after the new building is opened. The increases would be gradual, about 25 more students in each class for six years. Because of decreasing applications at state law schools and the recent opening of the George Mason School of Law, Spong thought the Council might decide against immediate expansion at Marshall-Wythe.

Assuming the school eventually reached an enrollment of 600 students, then more faculty positions would be allocated. "I would think there would be a minimum of three or four new professors, full time," Spong said. There is no allotment of the number of visiting professors, however. "We don't like to use adjunct instructors for core curriculum courses," Spong said, "but in some instances we think adjunct instruction is probably better, particularly in those courses most closely related to new developments in the law and to the practice of law. In areas like energy law, government contracts and business planning, an adjunct instructor brings a preferred perspective to the classroom."

Specialized Courses Continue

The need for adjunct instructors to teach specialized areas of law depends on student interest and requests for those courses. "Our principal mission is to offer a core curriculum that is well taught with sufficient seminar and elective courses to allow students to get a broader perspective of the study of law beyond the core curriculum," Spong explained. "For a law school of our size, we probably offer more tax and as much environmental law or international law as most law schools around our size and larger," he added.

Other practice-oriented specialties, such as the volunteer income tax assistance program (VITA), legal aid, post conviction project and Eastern State Mental Hospital legal assistance program will be continued as long as there is student interest. In addition,



the proximity of the new building to the National Center for State Courts will offer possibilities for joint enterprises, Spong said. Students may have opportunities to perform research from the perspective of drafting legislation as well as the more pragmatic approach to law practice offered by legal aid.

Graduate Diversity

"I think there is less interest in helping the indigent through public service law," Spong continued. "Maybe six or seven years ago that was quite prevalent; I have seen much less of that." Spong was unwilling to predict any shifts in areas of law Marshall-Wythe graduates will be entering over the next five years. "You just cannot pigeonhole our graduates; they are doing almost every type of law," he

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on being asked,
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said. Because the trend has shifted away from legal aid work does not mean that Marshall-Wythe graduates are no longer entering that field, Spong pointed out. "We have recent graduates in every principal legal aid office in Virginia, I think. My guess is we have more in this area than any other law school in Virginia."

Availability of jobs has been a primary factor influencing the areas of law graduates will enter. Marshall-Wythe alumni are working in

Commonwealth's Attorneys offices all over the state. Some are in corporate law, and others entered private firms or state and federal government agencies, he said. "Young people are not inclined to pursue careers in which they do not think jobs are going to be available," Spong observed.

The crowded job market has not only influenced which areas of law graduates are entering. It has contributed to the decline in law

school applications, Spong said. Another factor affecting law school applications is the decline in the number of college graduates. Finally Spong pointed out that the increasing selectivity of law schools over the past 10 years has discouraged applicants. "You go through three years of turning down several hundred applicants and this has a spillover effect of discouraging those who feel they might not be competitively qualified," he said.

In spite of declining applications, Spong has been pleased with the quality of Marshall-Wythe's applicant pool. He attributed the change to "an experience that all law schools who are perceived to be becoming better institutions go through."

Overall, Marshall-Wythe can anticipate the eighties as a time for maintaining curriculum diversity, increasing faculty, and continuing the process of becoming better.