

# Self-Study on Admissions Policy

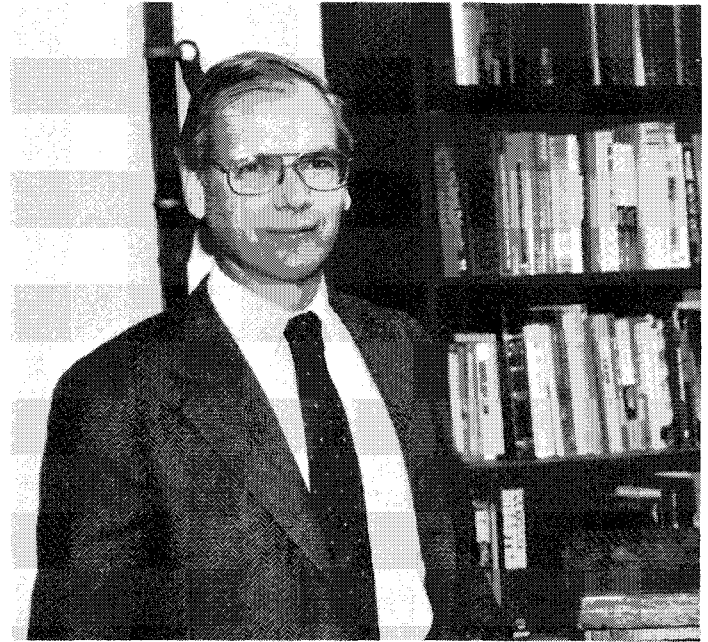
Dean Cliff F. Thompson

Few members of 1L, whatever their law school, have escaped the classroom warning, "Look to those on your left and right, because one of them will be gone by the end of the year." As an indirect exhortation to hard work, the traditional utterance remains sound advice, even though its statistical prediction became false long ago. At a meeting held by the national Law Schools Admissions Council for deans, however, the words took on new life. A speaker cautioned the deans that the sharp decline in student applications could threaten the existence of some law schools. With malicious good humor, he paused dramatically, and said to the deans: "Look to those on your left and right, because one of them will be gone by the end of the year."

Nothing so extreme has occurred yet, but the predicted drop in applications is real. Compared to four years ago, applications to the country's 175 accredited law schools are one-quarter fewer, and the figures at our Law School approximately mirror this trend. Because the University of Wisconsin has substantially more applicants than enrollments, we have not had the big problems faced by many schools. For some 15 years, the UW Law School has had a cap of 285 entering students. For a few years after the faculty decided on the limit, there was talk of the need for another public law school in the state. But the wisdom of the decision has been confirmed by events, including the absence of any need on our part to panic as we adjust to the national decline in applicants.

In 1985, for example, we had 1407 completed applications for the 285 first-year places. Applicants, moreover, are generally those who believe they have records sufficiently strong to meet the high standards required for admission. But a closer look at the admissions' process provides reasons for our close attention and concern. Using the average of the 1977-78 years as a base, the 1985 applications dropped 29.4%, and the acceptances were much less selective. Although non-quantitative factors are important in our decisions for admission, the first-year predicted average (FYP) is a significant framework for determinations. The FYP is a combination of the LSAT and undergraduate grade average. This past year we had a substantial increase in admissions of persons with a FYP of 81 rather than 83. This might seem to be a small difference until the representative LSAT and grade point averages for the two groups are noted: for a FYP of 83, the LSAT score is in the 87th percentile and the grade point is 3.42; for a FYP of 81, the LSAT drops to the 57th percentile and the grade point to 3.15.

Because the national downward trend in applications is likely to continue, the faculty is undertaking a self-study of our admission policies, in order to plan systematically before any real problems overtake us. No one can



predict usefully about what might be changed, if anything. The issues are many, and complicated, but the enrollment restrictions self-imposed by the faculty will inevitably be considered. These are the 285 enrollment figure, and the resident/non-resident admission ratio of 80/20. At least three factors are relevant to the first-year enrollment: the standard and number of applicants; projections as to law-related work; and the availability of resources to provide a high quality of legal education. Many of the criticisms of legal education in the past decade have one feature in common, the need for more individualized training. Fewer students might help to achieve what pleas for more resources to handle the current number of students could never accomplish. As to the 80/20 ratio, it obviously helps to serve more state residents than does the ratio used by other states (Michigan, for example, uses approximately 50/50). Our ratio, however, was enacted at a time of maximum numbers of applications and virtually unlimited numbers of highly qualified resident applicants. Careful thought must be given to this and all admissions issues, which are always likely to provoke strong and contradictory sentiments.

An alumni committee will assist the faculty in the study and planning: Jeff Bartell (Chair); David Collins; Chief Justice Nathan Heffernan; Howard Pollack; Vel Phillips; and Judge John Reynolds. You may have thoughts which you would like to share. You are cordially invited to contact me or Jeff, or any member of the committee.