Law dean skeptical of ‘second tier’ ranking

by Clayton Wakida
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U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Hawai‘i law school in its March 29 issue as a “second tier” school in its annual rating of graduate schools. Out of 181 accredited law schools, a “second tier” school occupies the top 54 through 89 ranks. However, everyone in the second tier is considered similar and equal.

Lawrence C. Foster, the dean of the UH law school, has mixed feelings toward the report. Although the ranking gives the UH law school national exposure, Foster said that the methodology used in the report is flawed and not representative of what students look for in a law school.

“Most law deans have been very critical of the ranking,” said Foster. The UH law school hands out a brochure to all applicants called “Law School Rankings May Be Hazardous To Your Health!” It is an informational pamphlet signed by 164 law school deans explaining the flaws in the rankings. Newsweek editor Kenneth Auchenlloss is quoted as saying in the brochure, “Rankings generate huge hype, which is far more likely to serve the publisher’s purpose than the reader’s.”

Foster contends that each law school is so different that rating the law schools is near to impossible in an objective manner.

Quoting an argument used by law deans, Foster said, “Comparing law schools is like comparing religions. How can you compare them? They’re so different.”

One major concern that Foster has is the weight that the report puts on reputation. Foster questions the accuracy of this attribute because of its subjective nature. Reputation accounts for 40 percent of the rank (see sidebar).

In spite of all that law deans have done to educate the public, Foster said that people still use magazine rankings as a major resource in choosing a law school.

“Despite all the problems there are with law school rankings, the reality is that the public loves them,” said Foster.

Foster shared the story of one student who called him and was deciding between the UH law school and a “first tier” law school. Foster informed the student of the strengths and weaknesses of each program. Foster also told the student that the ranking was not sufficient enough and that the student should look at other factors not included in the ranking.

In the same March 29 issue, U.S. News & World Report offered a rebuttal to the criticism by law school deans. Harrison Rainie countered the criticism of law rankings by showing that the deans use a similar system of ranks.

Rainie explained that law deans use LSAT test scores and grade-point averages as a main way to evaluate students applying and that this system is just as flawed as the ranking system.

“Our defense of the rankings is the same as the dean’s defense of theirs: Students should be able to compare schools with each other using the most comprehensive measures available,” writes Rainie. “Our rankings are not perfect, but neither are theirs.”

Foster explained that the UH law school does not admit students based solely on GPA and LSAT scores. However, Foster said that GPA and LSAT scores should not be totally discounted. For example, in the past, LSAT scores have been a good indicator to how students will do in the first year of law school.

“Low GPA and a high LSAT score implies that the student could be an underachiever,” said Foster. “High GPA and LSAT implies an overachiever. We prefer the latter.”

Foster also said that the UH law school gives equal weight to the “personal factors” of an applicant. This includes a person’s work history, participation in community service and letters of recommendation.

“To review a file solely on LSAT and GPA is a big mistake as it would not give you enough of a picture of the person upon which to base an admissions decision,” said Foster.

The William S. Richardson School of Law is located at 2515 Dole Street. The office of Admissions and Student Services is in Law 119 or can reach at 956-7966. For a catalog and an admissions application, students can call 956-3000.

U.S. News & World Report can be found on newsstands everywhere or at www.usnews.com.