

WHITTIER LAW SCHOOL: AN INSTITUTION TRANSFORMED

by Judy De Vine

Whittier Law School has seen many changes throughout its 48-year history. Formerly known as the Beverly College of Law since its founding in 1966, the school merged with Whittier College in 1975. Whittier Law School then moved from Los Angeles to Orange County in 1997 to become the first ABA-accredited law school in Orange County. The Costa Mesa campus has long been known for the landmark fountains in front of the school. However, the past five years have been the most eventful in the school's history.

It began with the hiring of Penelope Bryan, who became the Dean of the Law School in 2009. Recognizing that legal education was changing, she led the charge to make major changes in order to meet the challenges of today's legal education market. Below are some of the transformative changes Whittier Law School has undergone in the past five years.

Students receive practical training. In 2012, the faculty approved a dramatically unique curriculum, and in 2013 it was launched. This curriculum, called Experience the Law, gives students more hands-on practical training to make them more valuable in the workplace. Many classes simulate the tasks that new attorneys will perform upon graduation. In fact, more than half of the required course units will integrate experiential learning. Students also gain real-world experience by working in one of Whittier Law School's four clinics and participating in externships.

The new curriculum emphasizing practical training has garnered Whittier Law School national acclaim. *National Jurist* magazine named the school #6 on a list of the 15 most innovative law schools in the nation. In addition, in an article in *preLaw Magazine* titled "25 Most Innovative Law School Ideas," Whittier Law's curriculum was listed as #7, and its Lawyering Skills Institute as #8.

New Courtroom brings law community to campus. In 2013, Whittier Law School opened the Kiesel Advocacy Center, a state-of-the-art courtroom located on campus. The 4,400-square-foot courtroom provides a sophisticated environment for students to practice for mock trial and appellate competitions. The spectacular space has also



Whittier Law School

been drawing the legal community to campus for practice trials and alternate dispute resolution proceedings. This allows students to watch seasoned attorneys engage in advocacy without leaving campus.

Whittier Law School ranked most diverse law school in California. In the newest *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, Whittier Law School ranks as the

most diverse law school in California, and is tied for third most diverse law school in the nation. In addition, it was named the Fifth Best Environment for Law Students by *Princeton Review*. This year, Whittier Law School has the highest diversity rate in 14 years, with an incoming class composed of 52% students of color. There are 10 student clubs on campus dedicated to all types of diversity.

"Diversity is at the heart of our school," says Penelope Bryan, Dean of Whittier Law School.

"We are committed to increasing diversity in the legal profession."

Focus on the environment. To help students enter the field of environmental law, in 2013 Whittier Law School introduced a new Environmental Law Concentration, and opened the Environmental Water Law Clinic. Orange County Coastkeeper, a well-known non-profit organization, joined with Whittier Law School to operate the clinic. Whittier Law students assist OC Coastkeeper in preparing for litigation, using the federal Clean Water Act against polluters affecting the water quality in the Inland Empire and Orange County.

Keeping up with alumni. In 2009, the school hired an Assistant Dean of Alumni Relations, and staffed up the Alumni Relations department to keep in better contact with the school's 5,000 alumni. Hundreds of attorneys throughout the Inland Empire have ties to Whittier Law School. Over 10 alumni work in the Riverside County District Attorney's Office, and others are found in the Public Defender's Office and the Superior Court of Riverside. A variety of law firms employ Whittier alumni, including Best, Best & Krieger and Diederich & Associates.

Bar passage improves. Whittier Law School made dramatic changes to the bar passage preparation beginning

in 2011. In 2012, the first-time bar passage rate increased 14 percentage points, to 70%. The school is launching new initiatives for 2014 designed to push the bar pass rate above 75%.

Students acquire prestigious fellowships. Whittier students are increasingly nabbing competitive fellowships that are open to select law schools throughout California. For example, Whittier Law School students recently landed two of the nine Employee Justice Fellowships awarded by CELA. In addition, three recent alumni are performing post-graduate fellowships at the Orange County District Attorney's office.

Success attracts students. Law schools nationally have suffered an 11% average drop in enrollment in 2013, and some California schools have seen a drop as much as 37% from last year. Whittier Law School has been building its reputation, and has only experienced a 2.6% drop in enrollment this year. "We have seen a lot of interest from prospective students so far in 2014," says Tom McColl, Associate Dean of Enrollment Management. "Word has gotten out about the innovative things we're doing here at Whittier Law School. People have noticed we're on an upward trajectory."

Judy De Vine is the Director of Communications and Marketing for Whittier Law School.



Opened last year, the new Kiesel Advocacy Center at Whittier Law School is a state-of-the-art courtroom which draws the legal community to our campus for practice trials and ADR. It includes a jury room which is wired for sound to hear jurors' discussions, and a judge's chambers.

