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NCCU's law school rated as top bargain

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DURHAM - Law students at N.C. Central University pay low tuition, pass the bar exam in droves and get jobs quickly.

As preLaw Magazine sees it, that is the legal triple crown. The magazine, a common presence in collegiate offices where pre-law students can be found, has tabbed NCCU the nation's top value among law schools.

The magazine's Back to School 2007 issue ranks 62 law schools on the basis of tuition, bar passage rate and job placement rate. It cites NCCU's diverse student body, low tuition and accessible faculty in placing the Durham institution at the top of the list. The law schools at UNC-Chapel Hill, No. 29; Campbell University, No. 49, and Wake Forest, No. 52, are the other North Carolina schools on the list.

The magazine considered tuition and fees at the 2006-07 rates. To make the list, tuition and fees at public law schools had to be less than \$25,000 a year, or less than \$30,000 at private universities. Duke's highly-regarded law school doesn't make the cut; tuition and fees there total \$42,337 this year.

NCCU's law school tuition for state residents is about \$5,700.

The magazine's goal is to identify law schools that provide quality, practical educations, often without a lot of frills, said Michelle Weyenberg, the magazine's associate editor. Not surprisingly, the rankings list leans heavily toward public law schools, where tuition is generally more affordable. Law schools at the University of Alabama, Georgia State, Florida State and the University of Memphis -- all public institutions -- follow NCCU in the top five.

"It kind of goes against the most popular or most prominent, like Yale," Weyenberg said.

In North Carolina, the statewide passing rate on the bar exam is 71 percent. The passing rate among NCCU graduates is 81 percent. Nearly 90 percent of NCCU's law graduates are employed, according to the magazine.

Raymond Pierce, dean of NCCU's law school, points to the rankings as proof that students need not attend "name" colleges to get a good education.

"It shows that public higher education is doing it right in terms of keeping it affordable and providing bang for the buck," Pierce said. "My argument is that it doesn't cost that much to deliver a quality law education."

On the magazine's Web site, www.njplonline.com/bestschools.html, readers can hear audio clips of interviews with students. NCCU students told the magazine that faculty accessibility was a particular strength. The school mandates office hours.

"A lot of students stressed that the professors are there for them," Weyenberg said.

NCCU's law school is among the nation's most diverse, with African-Americans making up 45 percent of the student body and white students composing another 45 percent.

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