



Cooley Weekend Program

NATION'S FIRST AND ONLY ABA-APPROVED WEEKEND PROGRAM

After a three-year period of review, The Thomas M. Cooley Law School's proposal to add a unique weekend alternative to its program of legal education was approved.

On Jan. 11, 2000, the American Bar Association (ABA) officially "granted acquiescence in the application of the Thomas M. Cooley Law School for the continued operation of its Weekend Option Program." The weekend scheduling option operated under a variance from the ABA during the review period.

The approval makes Cooley the only ABA-accredited law school in the nation with an officially recognized program for earning a law degree by attending class exclusively on Saturdays and Sundays. The standard weekday and evening programs continue to thrive at Cooley as well.

"It's long overdue," commented attorney Wallace Riley, senior partner at Riley and Roumell in Detroit, Mich., and a former ABA president who was retained as special counsel by Cooley in the quest for approval of the weekend option.

"This is a great victory for the school and people who want an opportunity to study law," Riley said.

The weekend scheduling option was created in September 1996 by Thomas E. Brennan, founder and president of Cooley Law School.

"For more than 25 years," Brennan said, "Thomas Cooley Law School has been America's leading program of legal education for full-time employees. Students from as far away as Denver, Colo., and St. Louis, Mo., are commuting to Lansing to study law on Saturdays and Sundays. Our program brings

together executives, professionals, homemakers, and secretaries who step away from their regular jobs each weekend for three years in search of new and exciting careers."

Brennan and another lawyer from Cooley's original days, George Warren, taught the original term of classes before the program was turned over to Cooley Dean Don LeDuc and Cooley Associate Dean of Faculty John Nussbaumer to incorporate and build into the regular Cooley program. Saturday and Sunday classes have been an integral part of the Cooley curriculum since that time and literally hundreds of students since September 1996 have chosen the weekend scheduling option.

The school's success on the matter, noted Nussbaumer, proves that "the weekend program has a legitimate place in American legal education. And, more importantly, it represents an affirmation of Cooley's long-standing and continuing commitment to increasing access to the legal profession for men and women who otherwise would not be able to attend law school. The President and the Dean decided to implement the weekend scheduling option because they thought it would provide access to legal education to a group of potential students who — for whatever reason — were not able to attend a traditional program."

The whole idea, Nussbaumer explained, was to open up legal education to another group with the ability and the desire to study law, but for whom the standard daytime or evening schedules did not meet their needs.

What the school found, when news of the weekend scheduling option spread, was a pool of students who, but for

this option, would not be able to earn a law degree.

Margaret Philpot-Baditoui, who graduated from Cooley January 2000, was one of those people for whom the weekend option opened the doors to legal education. Philpot-Baditoui, one of the original 18 weekend option students, recalls signing up for Cooley the very day she heard about the program. Trying to pack law school into a weekday schedule already filled with the needs of two young children just would not have worked, she explained.

Under the weekend scheduling option, Philpot-Baditoui was able to stay home with her children during the week, then commute to Lansing on the weekends when her husband could watch the family. Philpot-Baditoui became very involved with the program, traveling with a contingent of Cooley representatives to make the case for the weekend option at the ABA convention in Nashville. She was accompanied by fellow students Don Engel and Jim Scott. Cooley student Mike Centala, of Alpena, Mich., was also a leader in organizing student support for the weekend scheduling option.

Philpot-Baditoui and another original weekend option student, Joan Schlender of Manchester, Mich., both graduated with honors from Cooley. Philpot-Baditoui graduated *cum laude* and Schlender graduated *magna cum laude*.

"I just want to say thanks to all the great teachers," Schlender said a few days after graduation. "They really cared about whether we learned!"

Engel graduated *cum laude* in January 1999 and passed the Indiana bar. A university professor in Anderson, Ind., Engel wanted to study the law, but traveling that far on weekdays was out of the question. Engel would make the three-and-a-half-hour trip to Lansing Friday afternoons, returning home on Sundays.

"For me, making one trip during

the week anywhere, and being able to concentrate, is better than trying to commute three times a week," he explained.

Engel is now corporate counsel for Ontario Systems Corp., a software development company in Muncie, Ind. He continues to teach one night a week.

Nussbaumer had high praise for the students who put their faith in Cooley by being the first to try the unusual scheduling option. The students' willingness to grow with the program as it tested its wings, and their success academically, played a large role in Cooley winning acceptance for the option.

Nussbaumer told Cooley students, "All of you who have taken weekend classes have played a part in helping us convince the ABA that this was a quality program. Without you, we quite literally could not have accomplished what we have done."

Winning acquiescence on the weekend scheduling option was an arduous task. Riley said the ABA was concerned that students attending only two days per week would not be immersed enough in their legal studies for the law to "seep into their minds." The students proved that concern unwarranted with their academic performance.

Another expressed concern was whether students would have the opportunity to become involved in extracurricular activities available to weekday students such as Moot Court and Law Review, or access services such as Career Services. That concern was addressed through faculty, staff, and students making sure that activities and student-service offices were available on a consistent basis on the weekend.

Another concern was quality. Would students on the weekend get the same caliber of education as their weekday counterparts? Absolutely, proved

Cooley. The same 63 hours of required classes taught by the full-time faculty during the week are taught by full-time faculty on the weekend.

Nussbaumer said Cooley's full-time faculty, and adjunct faculty (who teach electives), deserved significant praise for their part in making the weekend scheduling option a reality. "They made it happen. The idea of teaching on the weekend doesn't come naturally, but they've made the sacrifices. We couldn't have done it without them."

Cooley is unique in offering a scheduling option where students can earn their degree by attending class on the weekend year-around. Students taking three classes each weekend graduate in four years, while those taking four classes each weekend graduate in three years. Still others have begun combining weekend and weekday classes in order to accelerate their graduation date or accommodate their work or family demands. And many weekday and weeknight students add weekend classes to their schedules.

"Cooley's Weekend Option completes an effort to make its program of legal education the most flexible and accessible in the nation," commented Dean LeDuc. "With alternatives available for full- or part-time study, for taking as little as two years or as much as five years to complete the curriculum, and for enrolling in the morning, afternoon, evening, or on weekends, Cooley removes many barriers to legal education."

LeDuc added that, "coupled with an open admissions policy, Cooley makes it possible for anyone who dreams of a legal education to have an opportunity to realize that dream. The rest, including satisfying the academics and ethical requirements of the school, is up to them. Our weekend graduates prove that it can be done." ■