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Women Make Up Majority of U.S. Law Students for First Time

By ELIZABETH OLSON DEC. 16, 2016

For the first time, women make up a majority of law students, holding just over 50 percent of the seats at accredited law schools in the United States.

The number of men and women enrolled in juris doctorate programs has been nearly equal for a number of years, but this is the first time women have moved past the 50 percent mark, according to data released Thursday by the American Bar Association.

Currently, 55,766 women nationwide are studying for a juris doctor degree, compared with 55,059 men, according to the bar association. First-year students are more than 51 percent women, or 19,032, and 48.6 percent men, or 18,058.

The A.B.A. requires accredited law schools to annually disclose data in a number of areas, including admissions, financial aid and employment outcomes, but law schools do not require students to identify their gender, so there may be some students who are not listed as women or men.

“There are more women than men based on data we have,” said Barry Currier, managing director for accreditation and legal education at the A.B.A.’s Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar. “It is a snapshot in time, and the numbers can be updated by the schools. But it is not likely to be large numbers.”

Over all, law school enrollment remains flat, with only a tiny increase of a few

dozen first-year students offering an encouraging sign. Enrollment is stabilizing after dropping almost 30 percent since 2010.

Law schools have been trying to broaden their base of applicants. At the same time, the field of potential recruits has been constricted somewhat by a much-debated new requirement. That requirement tightens the standard law schools must meet for bar passage rates for their graduates. The new requirement restricts the leeway schools have for accepting promising students who do not meet standard admission measures, including test scores and grade point averages.

Not every law graduate takes a state bar exam, but those who want to become a practicing attorney must do so.

At the same time, law school admissions scores have been slipping in recent years, especially from 2012 to 2013, although the decline seemed to have slowed more recently.

Amid all these pressures, some law schools have found that reaching out to women has yielded more qualified applicants. Historically, women earned 57.1 percent of college degrees, but lagged men in applying to law school.

Female enrollment passing the 50 percent “is a milestone, but one to view with caution,” said Deborah J. Merritt, a law professor at the Moritz College of Law at Ohio State University. She and a colleague, Kyle McEntee, the executive director of Law School Transparency, recently released data that showed that while the number of female law students was rising, a portion of women wound up attending lower-ranked schools.

That undercuts their employment possibilities and their earnings potential since higher-ranked schools generally have better track records for placing their graduates in full-time, long-term jobs requiring a law degree, they concluded.

So, while women may have the edge in enrollment numbers, it is less clear that will lead to an advantage in the profession.