Admissions Office Goes Green

At a university that is putting forth considerable efforts to be environmentally conscious, Washington University Law is leading the way in “green” admissions practices. In committing to a paperless application process, the Admissions Office also saved a major portion of its budget in 2008–09.

“We receive close to 4,000 applications a year, and they used to all come in paper form,” says Janet Bolin, associate dean for admissions and student services. “Not only did that mean a lot of paper was being used, but somebody in our office had to file it. We would have stacks and stacks of paper that all had to be processed. With our new online system, it’s done so much more easily.”

The law school is using admissions software accessed through the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) Web site. The process is much more streamlined. Instead of mailing in an applica-

Law Students Focus on Environment, Sustainability

Five Washington University Law students have taken the school’s environmental policies into their own, carbon-reducing hands. Elizabeth Fehder, Tobias Gillet, Jennifer Mansh, Theresa Mohin, and David Sokol form the Sustainability Committee, which is part of the Environmental Law Society. “These students devote tremendous time, energy, and creativity toward helping our law school reduce its carbon footprint,” says Maxine Lipeles, co-director of the Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic and senior lecturer in law. “They started with the first step of upgrading the school’s recycling program and encouraging students, faculty, administrators, and staff to participate. With their energy, and Dean Kent Syverud’s strong support for this initiative, I look forward to bigger and more substantial changes in the months and years ahead.”

Now a second-year student, Sokol became involved with the Sustainability Committee when he noticed a surprising lack of sustainable practices in St. Louis compared to the San Francisco Bay Area where he had lived the previous year.

“I have always been an avid backpacker and climber, and so I have a natural concern for the environment,” Sokol says. “Following several law student events in which hundreds of cans were thrown in the trash due to a lack of adequate recycling bins, I decided to get involved. I learned of the newly formed Sustainability Committee and asked to join.”

The students’ efforts came at a time when the law school was considering environmental and sustainability practices as part of its strategic plan. The law school also asked to be included in the University’s energy audit, which is being conducted by Tao & Associates, of a number of campus facilities—a measure the students strongly support.

While the law school had been promoting recycling, the group discovered that containers were not always in convenient places or in enough supply, and were often inconsistently labeled. Additionally, there was a fair amount of confusion about what could be recycled. The group lobbied for additional recycling containers; made presentations to students, faculty, and staff; and created and posted recycling and sustainability guidelines on the Web site at law.wustl.edu/recycling. They also distributed

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tion, students now upload their material online, including their completed application, personal statement, application fee, and résumé. LSAC next uploads the applicants’ LSAT scores, transcripts, and letters of recommendation. The Admissions Office staff then reviews the candidates’ files on their computers, without having to print out any paperwork. Once the file is deemed complete, it is ready to be evaluated by an Admissions Committee member.

Chancellor Mark Wrighton notes: “I am very proud of the law school admissions team members for their commitment to reducing the impact of their work on the environment. Changes to their admissions process maximize the benefits of current technologies while reducing paper waste.”

The law school is among the 35 (roughly 15 percent) of LSAC member law schools that went paperless last year. The process also creates cost savings and environmentally friendly practices at LSAC, since LSAC previously would print out any material that was submitted online through the common application and mail it to the appropriate schools.

In rare instances, paper applications are still available upon request at Washington University Law. These applications are scanned into the computer and then shredded, with the shreds being recycled.

Although the change from paper to paperless took some getting used to, it was not a difficult transition, notes Mary Ann Clifford, assistant dean for admissions. “Once we began the process, the advantages far outweighed any disadvantage of not having paper files,” Clifford says. “It is great to have quick access to the application documents and be able to review the files from anywhere at anytime.”

The acceptance process is also “green.” Correspondence with the applicants is initially done via e-mail. Additionally, the acceptance packet is considerably downsized from the previous acceptance binders. Admitted students now receive a “Washington University in St. Louis School of Law” inscribed flash drive in the mail. Although the law school still sends out a small amount of mail to candidates, any brochures that were previously sent are now in PDF form on the storage device. The flash drive also includes admissions videos and provides space for the applicant to save further correspondence with the law school.

“Going paperless coincides nicely with the fact that it’s a very technology-driven age, especially among students coming straight from undergraduate schools,” says Anna Donovan, admissions and communications assistant. “Most have multiple e-mail accounts, and they’re on their BlackBerrys, cell phones, and laptops all the time. They really seem to like the speed with which everything flows in the admissions process.”

### Collaborative Technology Enhances Learning

Law students in the Advanced Legal Research class are using some of the latest digital technology in the form of “wikis”—to both enhance the collaborative learning experience and better prepare for the practice of law in a world shaped by social media.

Last spring, Philip Berwick, associate dean for information resources and senior lecturer in law, and Aris Woodham, director of Web services and lecturer in law, began having students in their co-taught course submit assignments using the wiki technology. The Web-based collaborative tool enables multiple people to edit a single article or document.

“Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia where anyone can edit the contents, is a well-known example of a wiki,” Berwick says. “In our Advanced Legal Research class, law students use wikis to create individual and group pathfinders, which are traditional legal research documents that explain how to approach research on certain topics. In addition to the ease of shared editing capabilities, another advantage is that on the wiki, as opposed to a paper copy, the students can provide links to additional online resources.”

Law student Michael Schwalbert found the use of the wiki enhanced the research course, which, overall, he says was extremely useful. “As lawyers, especially young lawyers, we will rarely know the answer to tough legal questions. The art is knowing where to look, or at least having an idea of where to look. Perfecting that art takes practice, and creating the wiki was definitely good practice.”

Aside from being environmentally friendly, the transition from paper to electronic assignments mimics the current trend toward the use of the Web as a communications tool in a variety of circumstances, Woodham observes.

“It has a useful place in teaching legal research, particularly if you want students to work in a group,” she notes. “By their very nature, most legal documents need to be edited by multiple people. Especially for our current students, familiarity with this kind of social-media, collaborative technology—using digital forums, both private and public—is critical since it is part of how the practice of law is evolving.”

Woodham and Berwick say they plan to use wikis in their course again in spring 2010. “The students did a great job employing this tool,” Woodham says. “We’d like to use it again in our course and make it available to other faculty members.”

By Laura Miller