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'Scam Prof' bites the hand that feeds him

Professor wages a provocative (by design) campaign against the legal academy.

The professional and financial struggles of recent law graduates prompted University of Colorado Law School professor Paul Campos to take a closer look at the changing economics of a law degree — an inquiry that convinced him that law school is a raw deal for many.

Karen Sloan
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Paul Campos had heard plenty of hard-luck stories from unemployed and underemployed law school graduates. Then one of them killed himself.

"I thought well of him, and I even helped him learn a few things worth learning," the University of Colorado Law School professor would write following the 2010 tragedy. "In the end I could do nothing for him — or rather I took part in a process that, it seems, led him down a path that ended in a very dark place."

The professional and financial struggles of recent law graduates had already prompted Campos to take a closer look at the changing economics of a law degree — an inquiry that convinced him that law school is a raw deal for many. The suicide, Campos said, pushed him to abandon academic manners in favor of a full-throated, sometimes rude, assault on the system of legal education.

Campos hit upon a medium for this critique in August: a blog. He called it [Inside the Law School Scam](#). "I've gotten considerable blowback from within legal academia because I'm speaking very frankly on these matters and, of course, I'm doing it in a way that deeply offends some people," he said. "But that's just the nature of the enterprise."

Campos was hardly the first to complain that law schools overpromise and underdeliver when it comes to high-paying legal jobs. The so-called "scambloggers," who take to the Internet to anonymously lambaste law schools, make essentially the same argument. So have a small number of law professors including Indiana University Maurer School of Law – Bloomington's Bill Henderson and Washington University in St. Louis School of Law's Brian Tamanaha.

Inside the Law School Scam offered something different: a no-holds-barred indictment of legal education from a law professor who has spent more than two decades teaching constitutional law, legal philosophy, property and legislative process.

The blog created a stir when it debuted and has since left its author in a curious position. Campos has been embraced as a champion by a contingent of disenchanted law graduates and condemned as a shameless attention-seeker by colleagues within the legal academy. The strong reaction demonstrated both a disconnect between some consumers and providers of legal education and the delicate balance would-be reformers must maintain if they hope to retain credibility within the academic establishment.

That his approach has been provocative was by design, he said, intended to shake legal educators out of complacency. This includes, for example, calling specific law deans "outrageously clueless" and "fantastically dishonest," or claiming that "there was already a massive oversupply of J.D. degree-holders relative to the market for legal employment prior to the present crisis."

To his critics, however, these are sweeping generalizations, couched in an aggressively negative tone and unsupported by evidence. This, they argue, undermines any larger message Campos seeks to deliver.

"It's really disgusting to refer to legal education as a scam," said University of Chicago Law School professor Brian Leiter, himself the author of the blog [Brian Leiter's Law School Reports](#) and one of Campos' most ardent critics. "That's just ignorant ugliness." As for the suicide, Leiter considers it "tasteless" that Campos blogged about it because there was never proof that law school played a role. Campos, who has never identified the student, conceded that the circumstances were complex.

A QUESTION OF TONE

Beyond the personal animosity, some regular readers remain unclear about what Campos hopes to accomplish. "I think the blog was well positioned to get a quick response, but I think the tone limits his effectiveness in the discussions that are happening now," said University of Georgia School of Law professor Usha Rodrigues, who organized an online discussion of "Scam Prof," as Campos has come to be known. "It's branded him as an outsider."

Campos has made legitimate points about the need for more transparency in postgraduate job statistics, said University of Alabama School of Law professor Paul Horwitz, but those arguments are obscured by his decision to cater to the angriest voices in the law school debate. *Inside the Law School Scam* readers never hear about the reform discussions already happening within the legal academy, he said.

"His readership is extremist," Horwitz said. "It's useful to hear from these people, who are having extremely difficult personal experiences. But it's difficult to convince the angriest people that we aren't a bunch of villains. We also need to reach out to the people who don't hate law school but feel disengaged."

Few legal educators have publicly climbed on Campos' bandwagon, though he said he has received plenty of support privately. He never expected a warm reception, he said. "The kind of diagnoses I'm putting forward — I could sugarcoat it more, certainly, and that may be a wise thing to do. But, substantively, what I'm saying is extremely unpalatable to the powers that be. I really don't see how it couldn't be," he said.

Campos has written, for example, that law school administrators are indifferent to the financial and employment struggles of graduates; that they purposefully mask the reality of postgraduate employment; and that the easy availability of student loans sets graduates up for financial ruin.

Nothing went over with legal academics quite as badly as an Aug. 7 post accusing law professors of being lazy and recycling the same lecture notes they have used for years. Critics fired back that Campos was projecting his own shortcomings.

Inside the Law School Scam received a lot of attention when it debuted, especially because the author's identity at least initially remained a mystery. Campos outed himself after nearly a week, but not before several critics had guessed his identity. Media attention to the blog has waned, although, according to Campos, traffic has held steady, generating 300,000 visits since it was launched and more than 5,000 comments.

"I think this is a place for people to talk about subjects that are largely repressed," Campos said. "Very often, any conversation about this topic ends up being constrained by certain norms of legitimization. You basically can't call anything fundamental into question."

Still, a large number of site visits does not necessarily mean that the law school administrators with the power to make real changes are paying attention, Horwitz said. Among the administrators who say they don't read *Inside the Law School Scam* is Phil Weiser, the newly appointed law dean at Colorado. "I understand Paul's critique, and I accept his right to say it," Weiser said. "But I wouldn't have taken this job if I didn't believe we could provide our students with a high-quality education and provide them with opportunities going forward."

'SOME ANGER'

According to Weiser, the school has increased its investment in career services staff, including a new assistant dean responsible for reaching out to employers and promoting Colorado law students. Weiser has appointed Campos to a special task force examining the challenges facing law schools. He declined to discuss whether other Colorado faculty members have raised concerns over Campos' blogging, but professor Robert Nagel reported that his views haven't always been popular on campus.

"I think there's been some anger expressed occasionally at Paul," said Nagel, who credited Campos for his willingness to raise difficult questions. "He's taking some professional risks, and people have taken offense at some of what he has written."

Nagel recalled a faculty meeting last spring when Campos "carefully" raised several points of concern over graduate employment rates. When he was done, no one spoke in response, and the meeting moved on to the next item of business. "That's got to be uncomfortable," Nagel said.

Campos readily acknowledged that he has put himself in an awkward position. "Professionally, you can imagine, it's not a pleasant situation to be telling the people you work with on a daily basis that you have very serious problems with what you're doing here," he said. "People don't like that. To a certain extent, it makes you a pariah. How could it not?"

His crusade has taken an emotional toll, he added, leaving him questioning how long he can remain in his job. He said that he has opened himself up to the accusation of hypocrisy because he collects a paycheck from the very institution that he has so roundly criticized.

"The fact of the matter is that there is nothing that structural institutions that need reform would like more than for people like me within those institutions to just quit," he said.

"They think, 'Why don't you just quit so we can go back to our cozy little business where nobody was saying the kinds of things you're saying?' Of course they want me to quit."

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