Like Cars, Law Schools Need to Get Smaller and More Nimble

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When my brother and I were teenagers, back in the 1970s, our parents were kind enough to allow us to have our own cars. Not the good stuff, mind you, but hand-me-down vehicles that our parents had bought used and then worn down. I drove a 1967 Oldsmobile F-85 with 125,000 hard miles on it. The engine had an unfortunate tendency to flood, a problem I addressed by keeping a pencil on the dashboard. Whenever the engine flooded, I would pop the hood, unscrew the air filter, stick the pencil into the butterfly valve of the carburetor to admit air, then turn over the engine until it started. The car lacked air conditioning, of course. If you were hot, you rolled down the windows, and if the engine temperature started to creep up on a blistering hot day, no problem, just turn on the heater and blast yourself to cool the engine.

My brother drove a 1970 Dodge Polara, an enormous beast of a car that weighed a couple of tons and had an eight-cylinder engine of ridiculous power. The car accelerated like a demon but got perhaps 12 miles per gallon. Its brakes needed a country mile to stop the car, and it spewed barely processed gas and particulates out of its rusting tailpipe. This boat was about 80 inches wide, with a pathetic turning radius, so forget about parallel parking.

Today’s vehicles couldn’t be more different. They’re smaller and much more nimble, and come with high-technology safety features like antilock brakes and airbags. They have much smaller and more fuel-efficient four-cylinder engines that barely pollute compared to those earlier models. Today’s cars have technological amenities like backup cameras, hands-free telephoning and Bluetooth capability. The seats are comfortable and the interior is quiet and climate-controlled. These cars may not carry as many passengers or as much gear as their predecessors, but they are considerably smarter pieces of machinery.

I mention this because the evolution that law schools are now undergoing reminds me of the evolution of cars over the last 40 years. The law school of the 1970s was big and wide, with plenty of room for many occupants and all their baggage. Its powerful engine churned out graduates, tossing them into every conceivable occupation. Its mechanics were cheap and simple. A bare-bones admissions operation. Big classrooms, seating hundreds of students. Minimal career guidance. Graduates most often secured their own jobs and managed their debt without difficulty. By the 2000s, law schools had retained the basic chassis, but were even bigger, with more faculty, more staff performing more tasks, and more students.

Just as the 1973 OPEC oil embargo irrevocably changed the economics of the automobile industry, the 2008 recession launched legal education on a dramatically new course. The legal economy shrank by nearly a third. Applications to law schools plummeted by 40 percent between 2011 and 2015.

Like cars, law schools need to get smaller and more nimble. Here at UB, an entering class of 248 in 2006 has been whittled down this year to 141. Our tenure-track faculty, which as recently as 2014 stood at 45, is down to 34 by next year, and may dip below 30 by the end of this decade. In 2012, our staff included 46 full-time and 9 part-time workers. Today the numbers are 38 and 7.

But the point is not merely to get small; we must get smart and efficient. Like the new generation of automobiles, we need to deliver comparable comfort and power, along with greater maneuverability, at lower cost. Over the next year, we will be introducing numerous innovations designed to hit this sweet spot. Keep reading the Forum for news as we roll out these exciting new initiatives!

And, as always, please don’t forget to stay in touch; I’d be very grateful to hear your thoughts and concerns.

With all best wishes,