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Thomas Jefferson School of Law exceeds enrollment projections

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Thomas Jefferson School of Law, which has faced financial challenges in recent years, exceeded its enrollment goal for this fall by about 18 percent.

The San Diego school reported that 218 students enrolled, while it had projected 185 would be part of the incoming class. The fall 2015 enrollment was also a six-percent increase over the year prior.

Thomas Guernsey, president and dean of Thomas Jefferson, said he was thrilled with the numbers in the midst of a climate in which law schools applications nationwide are down and enrollment has fallen.

He said the class demonstrates the school's effective work to do a better job promoting what Thomas Jefferson has to offer.

"What our enrollment reflects is our efforts to get out what is really happening here at the law school, to communicate about the excellent program we have, to communicate our commitment to diversity and to communicate about our skills programs," Guernsey said. "I think it is

starting to pay off."

The dean said he was particularly pleased with the diversity among the incoming class of students. More than 50 percent of the class identify as an ethnicity other than Caucasian/white, including a quarter of the class that identify as Hispanic, according to the school.

Thomas Jefferson has previously been ranked by U.S. News & World Report as the sixth most diverse law school in the nation.

"We are, in a sense, the farm team for the profession, so to the extent that the profession should be more diverse, we have to be diverse as well," said Guernsey.

This fall's class is the first since Thomas Jefferson announced late last October that it had reached a debt restructuring agreement that cut its annual payments to bondholders by 50 percent, from \$12 million to \$6 million.

The deal, which was needed to address the \$127 million in bonds that were issued to build a sparkling new campus on Island Ave., resulted in the bondholders becoming owners of the building and leasing it back to the school.

Guernsey said the restructuring has helped the school get back on solid financial footing and has allowed him to look more to the future.

The school is considering expanding its clinical offerings and increasing the number of local neighborhoods it serves with those programs.

The dean also said Thomas Jefferson is examining whether to offer degree programs for non-lawyers.

Despite those plans and the larger-than-expected incoming class, Guernsey stressed that the school still plans to gradually lower overall enrollment of J.D. students.

The plan to shrink enrollment to around 500 students, compared to having more than 900 a few years ago, is another element of the school's efforts to stabilize its finances by having a smaller operation.

Thomas Jefferson's leadership also hopes smaller classes will improve the student experience.

"We really believe the smaller we are, the better the educational programs are going to be, the better one-on-one the support we can provide," said Guernsey.