WHAT IS IT THAT CHARLES DICKENS SAID? Oh, right: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

In many ways, the Law School is stronger than ever. Our faculty continue to inspire with their brilliance, their inventive teaching and their sheer commitment to our students. Walk into Ben Gershman’s almost theatrical Criminal Procedure lectures—or Bridget Crawford’s astonishingly engaging Taxation class (yes, you read that correctly: Taxation)—or Jay Carlisle’s master class in lawyering, a.k.a. New York Practice—or Emily Waldman’s methodical dissection of Constitutional Law—peek into any of these classrooms and you will experience the quiet thrill of seeing young minds learning to “think like lawyers.”

Our alumni—you!—are another core strength. Many have advanced to leadership positions throughout the profession: partners at law firms both large and small, judges, in-house corporate counsel, senior government officials and public-interest attorneys—and are now in a position to help guide the next generation of Pace Law graduates.

But alongside these strengths, Pace and other law schools have been facing unprecedented challenges. The Great Recession caused a sharp drop in legal hiring—many firms even laid off young attorneys. These past few years have been painful economically for many lawyers, especially recent graduates struggling to launch their careers. These difficulties have also directly impacted the amount of people applying to law school; nationwide applications have fallen by more than 50% since 2010 (it is worth noting Pace has reacted to this with a “quality supersedes quantity” mind frame and has maintained the credentials of our entering classes). Even now, as legal employment has rebounded along with the economy, the marketplace looks markedly different than it did before the financial collapse. The big law firms are hiring fewer traditional associates, while a larger proportion of jobs are at smaller firms, “outsourcing” providers like discovery shops, contract-attorney suppliers, and in corporate legal and compliance departments.

Law schools must evolve along with these changing conditions—and Pace is leading the way.

First, law schools must focus more than ever on practical, skills education. Small firms simply don’t have the capacity to train new attorneys—they need every new hire to begin contributing on day one. Similarly, contract attorneys are expected to come with practice skills, not just a law degree. Even at larger firms, clients are demanding ever-more efficient service, meaning that law firms can no longer afford to spend months—much less years—training new associates. Law schools must fill the gap by ensuring that students graduate with the skills and knowledge to provide value to clients right away. It is not enough to teach students to “think like lawyers”—we must also show them how to act like lawyers.

At Pace Law, we have always emphasized skills education—and now we are doubling down on that historic strength. To ensure that our graduates are truly “practice ready,” we are introducing a series of “concentrations”—prescribed courses of study ensuring that a student is prepared for a specific field of practice, such as Real Estate and Land Use, or Criminal Practice, or Family and Matrimonial Law. We are buttressing our nationally recognized clinical program with supervised field placements, and making these “experiential learning” courses a more integral part of the curriculum. Most notably, we have developed a full “semester-in-practice” opportunity for students in their final term.

Second, law schools must also prepare students for a much broader range of careers than in the past.
Much of the growth in lawyer jobs will be not in the traditional occupations of litigation and deal-documentation, but in regulatory lawyering: helping banks and hedge funds comply with financial regulations, drug companies and hospitals comply with health regulations, tech companies—and pretty much everybody—comply with privacy regulations. We are designing two new concentrations—financial institution compliance and health law—to help our students compete for these jobs.

Third, the changing job market requires us to do more than adjust the curriculum—law schools must also offer much more robust career development services to our students. In the past, a career development office served mostly as a clearinghouse for law firms seeking access to students. Today, our career development professionals offer intensive counseling to guide students through the more fragmented job market, and they spend much of their time outside the Law School, building and strengthening relationships with employers. We recently hired a superb new Assistant Dean for Career and Professional Development, Jill Backer, to lead this effort—you can read more about Jill on page 14.

You, too, have a role to play in helping to launch the next generation of Pace Law alumni. There are endless ways for you to support your alma mater—check out the last page of this publication for starters. Of the moment though, if you can help guide new graduates in seeking to join your firm or corporation, please pick up the phone and introduce yourself to Jill—that is, if she hasn’t already called you!

Finally, law schools must recognize that many jobs in the current marketplace—smaller law practices and discovery firms, in-house and compliance jobs, government and public-interest organizations—may have a lower salary scale than larger law firms. At Pace, we are determined to keep the cost of our education affordable. To that end, we are freezing tuition for at least the next year—and we have more than tripled our scholarship budget over the past three years.

With all of these plans underway, I am confident that Pace Law is not just meeting these challenges—we are ahead of the curve. As we approach our 40th birthday, our fifth decade promises to be our best ever.

And speaking of anniversaries: I will soon complete my first year as Pace Law’s 10th Dean. While still a newcomer in some ways, I am enormously proud to be part of the Pace Law family. I know you share that Pace Pride, and one of the great pleasures of my job is seeing our students (your future colleagues) develop it day by day. For all the changes afoot, the Pace Law classroom remains a very special place. Or as one 3L put it recently when I asked how she felt about her time here at Pace Law: “’Tis a far, far better thing I have done here than I have ever done before.”

Well, I’m paraphrasing—but you get the idea.

David