When Gabriel Galanda, an associate at Williams, Kastner & Gibbs, was elected president of the Seattle-based Northwest Indian Bar Association two years ago, the group had 21 names on a largely dormant e-mail list. Today, membership includes 175 lawyers who meet monthly to discuss how to increase opportunities for American Indians, and others, to study and practice Indian law. In that time, they've distributed $20,000 in scholarships—a modest beginning, especially considering how quickly the field of Indian law has grown lately thanks in part to the sprouting of slot machines and craps tables. But it's a start.

Groups like the NIBA reflect efforts by law schools and firms across the country—and by Indian reservations themselves—to improve the quality and expertise of lawyers who practice Indian law. Rather suddenly, there are plenty of hours to be billed to the nationally recognized tribes in some 30 or so states. According to the National Indian Gaming Association, casinos generated an estimated $16 billion in 2003, and that money has enabled Native Americans to wage legal battles.
for their land and water rights and to pay for energy licensing and infrastructure development. All of that requires the services of lawyers, who need to be as well-trained in the unusual world of Indian law as they are in more mundane disciplines like contracts and torts.

"The new battles for Indian lands, sovereignty, and rights are happening in the courts, and there's a lot more at stake today given Indians' increased wealth," says Jill Tompkins, a clinical professor at the University of Colorado School of Law and director of the school's Indian Law clinic. That wealth has its roots in the Supreme Court's 1987 decision that state regulatory laws do not apply to tribal conduct on Indian reservations, followed by Congress's passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988. But the new money has spread beyond the poker tables. Statistics from a U.S. Census Bureau survey show an 8.4 percent increase in American Indian-owned businesses between 1992 and 1997—12 times the growth of all U.S. businesses in the same period.

Law firms are hustling to keep up with Native Americans' legal needs. "Tribes now have the option to utilize larger full-service firms that can service the multitude of issues that arise within Indian country," says Barry Brandon, cochair of the Indian law practice group at Akin Gump in Washington, D.C. In 1997, when it started to work in this area, Akin represented one tribe on a lobbying matter; today, the practice includes about 60 separate matters for between 10 and 15 tribes. Minneapolis's Dorsey & Whitney launched its practice in 1993 with eight lawyers. Today it has 20.

Law schools, for their part, have been busy adding Indian law programs or beefing up the ones they already have. Funding often comes from the Indian nations themselves. The 1,100-member Oneida Indian Nation in central New York donated $3 million to Harvard Law School last year to endow a professorship in Indian law. Shortly afterward, the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians gave $4 million to UCLA School of Law for a tribal learning center, which will fund internships and develop courses on Indian law issues. "Students are specializing in the field by taking a broader selection of courses, from cultural property to treaty rights and sacred lands protection," says Robert Williams, a professor at the University of Arizona's College of Law. Not surprisingly, many of the students enrolling are Native American: According to the Law School Admission Council, applications by American Indians rose to 737 in 2003 from 577 in 2001.

Part of the nationwide crash course in Indian law has been the addition of questions to state bar exams. New Mexico has already amended its test, and the Indian law sections of the Idaho and Washington bar associations passed resolutions in February that could add Native American-related questions next summer. Similar efforts are underway in Oregon and Oklahoma.

"The bar exam issue is intimately related to the training that law schools are starting to offer," says the NBA's Galanda. "Educating law students ultimately protects the interests of everyone involved in those states where lands and rights are prevalent, but it needs to be tested." Of course, the real test—in which America's law firms try to handle the overwhelming flow of business created by the new wealth of Indian reservations—is already underway. 

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