



Feature

Catch Me If You Can

By Megan Rellahan

With today's vast technology, times are changing; and it is mainly the Internet that is responsible for change. Along with a whole slew of new online jobs, markets, media sources, etc., it isn't surprising that along with other traditional "old-school" ways of doing things, law school is on the verge of changing, as well.



In the old days, an accredited law school consumed with top-notch professors and competitive students was the only card you had to play in order to become a lawyer. The grueling hours of studying, taking notes, passing tests, and working amongst the best of the best for three

whole years was what kept many potential players out of the game.

Statistics show that while 22% of law school applicants are age 22 or younger, 34% of applicants are 23-25 years of age, and 21% of law school applicants are 26-30 years old. What this means is that although a portion of potential students are fresh out of college, the majority are not, which further indicates that they most likely have existing careers and/or families, leaving a full-time education out of the equation.

The Internet has offered an abundance of information to all of us, and this, in turn, has slowed down the "aging process" amongst generations. Forty is the new thirty, and twentysomethings are comparable to teenagers. There is no longer a straight-and-narrow path in any career choice, and that includes becoming a lawyer.

Online schooling has become a highly popular option for older students looking to complete their undergraduate degrees. However, the Los Angeles-based Concord Law School is the first online school to begin a law program. With more than 2,000 students, Concord Law School is one of the largest part-time law schools in the nation and the second largest overall, behind Georgetown's Law Center, according to Law.com.

Although Concord is a non-accredited school because the ABA's Legal Education Council won't accredit any school that offers substantial "distance learning," the Council has just established rules allowing some online education at ABA-accredited schools, which is only the beginning of this futuristic transformation in attaining a law degree.

Traditionalists argue that Concord's non-accredited law program restricts students from practicing in states other than California. According to Law.com writer Michael Ravnitzky, "Internet law school means a tough road for nontraditional students, many of whom study outside of California and must return to Los Angeles for a special first year and the regular bar exams and who may wish to practice in other states."

However, with Harvard Law School professor Arthur Miller (also known for his television show that helped explain the law to non-lawyers, *Miller's Court*) creating videotapes of his courses and selling them to Concord, the school's reputation is about to skyrocket, with followers on its tail.

Concord's online law school now brings its students their very own Harvard professor right to the comfort of their own home via the Web. In fact, Harvard itself offers various graduate online degrees, including an M.B.A., writes a *Wall Street Journal* staff reporter.

"Traditional curricula doesn't encourage critical thinking on the part of the law student about how to craft their own practice and desensitized students often don't take responsibility for their approach to law practice," states Heidi Bogosian, executive director of the National Lawyers Guild.

As the ongoing debate continues to determine whether or not online schooling is efficient, other changes are in progress, including the "law office study program." States such as California, Vermont, Virginia, and Wyoming have some form of this type of program, according to legislative staff reports. And in Phoenix, AZ, State Senator Dean Martin wants to create something similar. Rather than going to law school, if an individual has worked in a law office or with a judge or has studied law through an online law program, in Martin's opinion, he/she should be entitled to take the bar exam and become a lawyer.

Unenthused with Martin's idea is president of the State Bar of Arizona Perry Grimwood, who said that it would lead to "a



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bunch of unqualified people practicing law—and hurting their clients,” according to Capitol Media Services.

Similar to New York and Maine, Arizona used to require some course work via a law school approved by the American Bar Association prior to taking the bar exam. However, times have changed, and the current requirement is to have graduated from law school, which Martin said is unnecessary.

“Those people who have had experience in business or the private sector or other ways— it’s very hard for them,” claims Martin. “The result is that only a certain class of folks go to law school.

“We need to bring more practical experience into the practice of law and provide those who have worked in the private sector another path,” Martin said.

“The bar exam tests people on certain substantive aspects of law,” replied Grimwood. “But it would be no training for the legal analysis that goes on during the course of three years of attending an accredited law school.” For example, she continues, “They would have no experience in making arguments on behalf of clients.”

Along with change comes conflicting opinions; regardless, more doors are opening for future lawyers. Just like in the movie *Catch Me If You Can*—the true story of a professional con man named Frank Abagnale, Jr., who pretends to be a lawyer and actually passes the bar exam, giving him the green light to practice law—in 2006, this is becoming a legitimate way of becoming a lawyer. As time progresses, traditional law schools may become a thing of the past.

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