



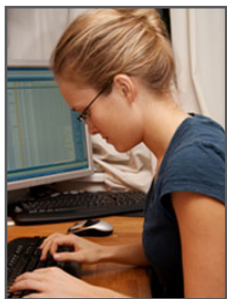
Feature

## Distance Education: Bringing Law School into Your Living Room

By Heather Jung

What is distance education, and who is offering it?

Personal computers and the Internet have provided people with opportunities they never before dreamed they would have: the chance to shop from the convenience of one's home, the chance to meet the love of one's life, the chance to become a superstar (thanks to YouTube and the like), and, now, the chance to further one's education. Many law schools have realized the true potential of the Internet and have jumped on the distance education bandwagon.



"Schools are waking up to the fact that they can do classes online" said Bruce Eatroff, a member of Halyard Capital, a private equity firm in New York that launched Halyard Education Partners, which maintains sites that offer information regarding online education.

In order to address the growing demand for distance education, sites such as eLearners.com and GradSchools.com

are providing students with the means to get good educations from the comfort of their homes at their own convenience. These sites provide students with the information they need to make informed decisions about whether distance education is right for them.

According to Andrew Gansler, CEO of eLearners.com, the site is like a Google or Yahoo for people looking for online education. It has a comprehensive list of programs and courses offered by reputable colleges and universities as well as online educational resources.

The site currently represents more than 140 schools offering a wide variety of programs in the social sciences, arts and humanities, business, and education. Students interested in studying law can look under the social-science category to find a list of schools offering J.D., criminal justice, and paralegal courses.

Law schools across the country are finding that distance education can be beneficial when it comes to providing highly specialized classes and topics. Starting this fall, Stetson University College of Law will offer an online LL.M. program in elder law.

According to program director Rebecca Morgan, students will take 24 units over the course of three semesters. Classes on ethics, disability law, taxes, and housing for the elderly

will be prerecorded and posted online for students to view at their convenience. A virtual-class component will allow for discussion of the week's topic and will give the professor a chance to respond to any questions students may have.

"We thought that it would be the best vehicle for this program because a number of elder law attorneys are solo or small firm, and this gives them the convenience of studying around their work schedules," Morgan said.

According to Ellen Podgor, the school's associate dean of faculty development and distance education, Stetson University College of Law has offered a few courses to J.D. candidates in the past and will continue to offer specialized courses such as International Criminal Law online. After Hurricane Katrina, Stetson offered a few online classes to Loyola New Orleans College of Law students who were unable to return to their school.

"We see this as a way to be on the forefront of technology, which I think is very important for students to be knowledgeable about," Podgor said. "I think it also provides a way to give education to people who might not normally be able to come back to school."

While most major law schools are offering distance education courses as supplements to their J.D. programs, schools such as American Heritage University and Concord University offer programs that are completely based on online courses.

While they are not recognized by the ABA, the programs offered by American Heritage and Concord allow students to take all of their courses online and, upon completion of their programs, take the California bar exam. Students in both programs must also sit for California's "Baby Bar," a test given during the first year in order to prepare them for the bar exam.

According to Steve Burnett, Concord's associate dean for



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business development and information services, the program is completed over the course of four years. During the first year, students take courses that prepare them for the Baby Bar, and the curriculum is more limited than a typical first-year curriculum. The following three years cover the same kinds of material that would be covered at any other law school, but courses are taught online.

American Heritage University, which has a physical location in San Bernardino, CA, is certified through the California State Bar and the California State Council for Secondary Education. Julie Ell Lugar, a professor at the school, said that the classes she teaches change from semester to semester.

"It just depends on what the school decides to offer," Lugar said. "It's a pretty new school, so the student body sort of fluctuates. They come in at different times. I guess they kind of matriculate at very different times. So sometimes I will have four students, and they will say, 'These are all first-year students, so we need a first-year class,' so it will be contracts or torts. Then, one time, I had a bunch of students who were third-year students, so I taught community property. It just really depends on what they need."

### What are the benefits of distance education?

While there is no denying that face-to-face interaction and classes are probably the ideal means of learning, the benefits and quality of distance education continue to grow. According to Gansler, the benefits will vary from person to person.

"You can sum them up in a number of different ways, and if you ask 20 different people why it works for them, you may get 20 different answers," Gansler said.

For the majority of people, the most obvious benefits are time and flexibility. According to Eatroff, distance education lets students manage their courses within their own schedules. It allows people to pursue degrees while maintaining full-time jobs, taking care of their families, or handling other demanding commitments they may have. Since lectures and reading assignments are posted online, students do not have to be in a classroom at a specified time as they would for a brick-and-mortar class.

"There are lots of people out there who either [have] financial [limitations] or are place-bound or job-bound and can't quit their job and go to a full-time law school, or even go to a part-time law school, because they don't live in the same city or they can't afford to go to law school," Burnett said. "Our tuition is about a third of the tuition of the typical private ABA

law school. So there's a lot more opportunity for people to get access to the program, and I think that's a huge part of this."

People such as Nancy Brownell have benefited greatly from distance education programs. In 2002, this former M.D. closed her California-based medical practice in order to move to Switzerland with her family when her husband was offered a job there.

Brownell said that because they moved to a German-speaking part of the country, she could not practice medicine, so she decided to study law, something she had always wanted to do. (She said she almost chose law over medicine as a career 20 years ago.) She completed her degree last year, something she could not have done at the time without Concord's online law school.

"I chose Concord Law School because it would allow me to sit for the California bar after obtaining my J.D.," Brownell said. "I knew that our family would be returning to California someday, and having the option of having a license to practice law was important to me. So not only did the distance-learning format appeal to me because I was a mom with two small children for whom I was the primary caretaker, but it also was the only way that I could study U.S. law abroad."

Professors benefit from the flexibility of distance education, as well. Take Lugar, for example. As the mother of a 17-month-old, Lugar did not want to quit working altogether, but she did not want to have to leave her son in someone else's care. Teaching for American Heritage allows her to spend time with her son while maintaining a career. Since she has no office hours, students can email her questions, and she has a 24-hour time frame within which she can respond.

Lugar feels that distance education also offers students more personal attention. In traditional law schools, students are on their own; they go to class, study, and take exams. Distance-education classes tend to be very limited in size, which allows professors to focus their attention on their students.

According to Gansler, online education often lets students interact more than they would in the classroom because the format allows for more dialogue, whereas at typical law schools, professors tend to lecture and talk at students.

### Is distance education right for me?

Despite its convenience, distance education is definitely not for everyone. According to Gansler, it requires a certain learning style. People often assume that getting a degree online will be



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easier and faster than getting a traditional degree, but this is not always the case.

Students who take online classes must be extremely disciplined and organized since they do not have the same level of accountability that they would if they were to take classes at a physical location. According to Brownell, time-management skills and dedication are necessary for students wishing to study online.

"I did sacrifice some 'fun' things to study law at Concord, but my goal of earning a J.D. and being eligible to sit for the California bar were enough to balance those sacrifices. It was the perfect decision for me. It was also nice (although not determinative) that the tuition was reasonable," Brownell said.

In order to determine whether distance education is right for you, eLearners has an [assessment test](#) available.

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