Concord Law School

[by Tom Horne]

For prospective law students who feel that rigid schedules and rising tuition prices may have put a legal education out of reach, Concord Law School provides an (increasingly popular) alternative solution.

Concord Law School is the nation’s first fully online law school, offering a J.D without requiring that a student ever go to a single class. The education process is conducted entirely online, with streamlined lectures and chatroom discussions. Because of its novel way of teaching law, some might question the effectiveness or even the validity of a Concord J.D. or of its Executive Juris Doctor (E.J.D.SM) degree. But rest assured of Concord’s fine credentials.

It’s authorized by the Bureau of Private Post-Secondary and Vocational Education in California. The school also has complied with the registration requirements of the State Bar of California, which permits its graduates to apply for the California Bar. Upon passing the California Bar Examination, Concord grads will be qualified to practice in California courts. They may also apply to practice in many Federal courts. Graduates who want to practice in other state courts may be eligible under reciprocity rules.

In January 2000, after a rigorous review of the faculty, curriculum, finances, facilities and technology, Concord received accreditation under a pilot program from the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). Listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency, the DETC is also a recognized member of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and strives to identify schools that offer high-quality distance education. In 2001, Concord launched an online Trial Advocacy Program in conjunction with William Mitchell College of Law, which was our featured law school here on LawCrossing.com a few weeks ago.

Students take regular interactive exams on the Internet that assess their retention and understanding of material. They receive instantaneous feedback on their performance, with directions to study the material that will address their individual needs. The exams mirror the content and language on the Bar Examination, preparing students throughout their education for the final hurdle to licensing. Students receive regular feedback on written assignments via e-mail.

The four-year program costs about $28,000. This makes it quite an affordable option to some who may not otherwise be able to pay for their legal education. It also caters to those who are geographically removed from other law schools, making it difficult or impossible to commute to a brick-and-mortar institution.

Concord first “opened it doors” in 1998 and has been serving working professionals, family caregivers and others whose circumstances prevent them from pursuing a legal education at a fixed-facility law school. The typical student is a mid-career professional with an undergraduate GPA of 3.0. More than 1,700 students currently study at Concord, including alumni of such prestigious universities as Harvard, Yale, and MIT. More than 40% of the students already hold advanced degrees and hail from all U.S. states and at least nine foreign countries.

Many students look to Concord’s legal education as a way to bolster their already-established role in the corporate marketplace or the community. For example, many students are educators, physicians, bankers, and police officers.

The Concord Law Program works much the same way a traditional law school would. Students view lectures over the Internet via audio-visual streamlining. It offers the added convenience of being available 24 hours a day, whenever a student feels like studying. Professors lead dialogues where legal concepts are discussed and debated, following a curriculum that corresponds to that of most leading ABA law schools. Professors are available via e-mail or telephone.

Concord also assigns mentors to oversee the progress of students as they work their way through the curriculum. By monitoring “logins” and completion of assignments, the mentors [the Dean of Students and Assistant Dean of Students] can reach out to students who are falling behind or who have not checked in frequently for classes. This outreach, in the form of an e-mail, commences an exchange between the student and a counselor on non-academic study issues.

Oftentimes, these counselors work with students to alter study habits or devise additional methods to motivate them to “catch up” on assignments. These counselors, trained in academic support, can also provide additional writing help for students who are having difficulty with their essay assignments.
The school also provides many amenities that are offered at traditional schools. These include a law library and bookstore, career services, and technical services. Two internal newsletters, The Concord Connector and The Concord Reporter, keep students informed. Concord’s Law Library enables students to become proficient in performing legal research and provides links to all material necessary for completing assignments to fulfill the curriculum.

Students are also trained in electronic methodologies and have access to online systems used by practicing attorneys nationwide, such as Westlaw. Concord’s career services help students explore employment opportunities in law and law-related fields.

So despite its relative new and unorthodox way of teaching, Concord has already begun to be taken seriously as a viable means of obtaining a legal education. With 1,700 students, Concord may be paving the way for other legal programs to reconsider the way they’re doing business.