

WILLIAM BYRNES and Adjunct Professor George Mentz, demonstrate Thomas Jefferson School of Law's online program.



BYRNES' SCREEN

1. live feed of Mentz
2. the participating students
3. a list of participants
4. a live chat field
5. a presentation area



The future is now

Online programs are growing at a record pace and changing legal education in the process. But not every program is designed the same way or uses the same technology.

BY MIKE STETZ

Think of the movie, “The Paper Chase.” Think of cold, stern John Houseman telling his rebellious first-year Harvard Law School student before a stunned and silent class: Mr. Hart, here is a dime. Call you mother; tell her there’s serious doubt about your becoming a lawyer.”

(For all of you young people, the iconic scene from the 1973 movie is on YouTube.)

But how would that scene unfold if the rebellious young student were sitting at home, in his underwear, eating Cheerios and taking the class in an online program?

“Mr. Hart, here is an email link to your mother...”

Well, the world is changing, and law schools are changing with it. Just a few years ago, there were only a handful of online programs available at the nation’s

law schools. Last year, that number grew to more than a dozen.

This year? It will eclipse 30.

The change is rather dramatic, given that law schools are said to be rather fond of the “The Paper Chase” world, where students gather in hallowed halls, hearing from distinguished, graying professors dressed in worn suits and bow ties, their hands stained with chalk.

“The old school thinks online sucks,” said a blunt William Byrnes, who’s a leader in the online field, working at Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego as the associate dean for graduate and distance education programs.

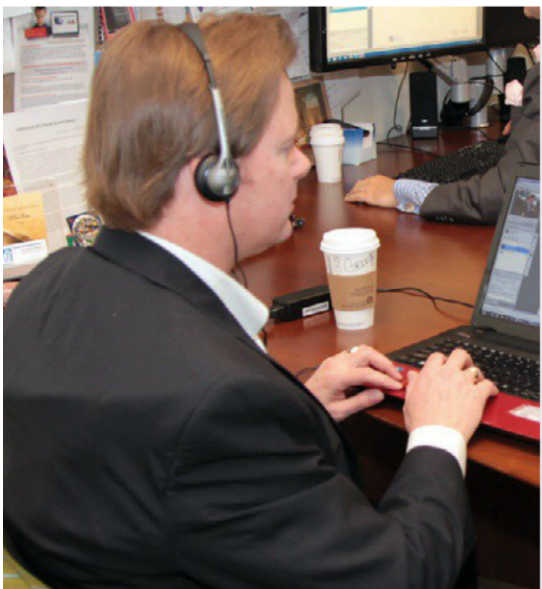
But law schools are going in this direction to help offset revenue drops from decreasing enrollment, Byrnes said. And the technology is becoming increasingly

more sophisticated, enhancing the online learning experience.

The students are also demanding that schools adapt to the technology, Byrnes said. They want the freedom and flexibility online courses bring. They’ve grown up with such technology and feel comfortable using it. Right now, many of the online programs are Master of Law programs designed for practicing lawyers, but law school students are allowed to take some classes online as well.

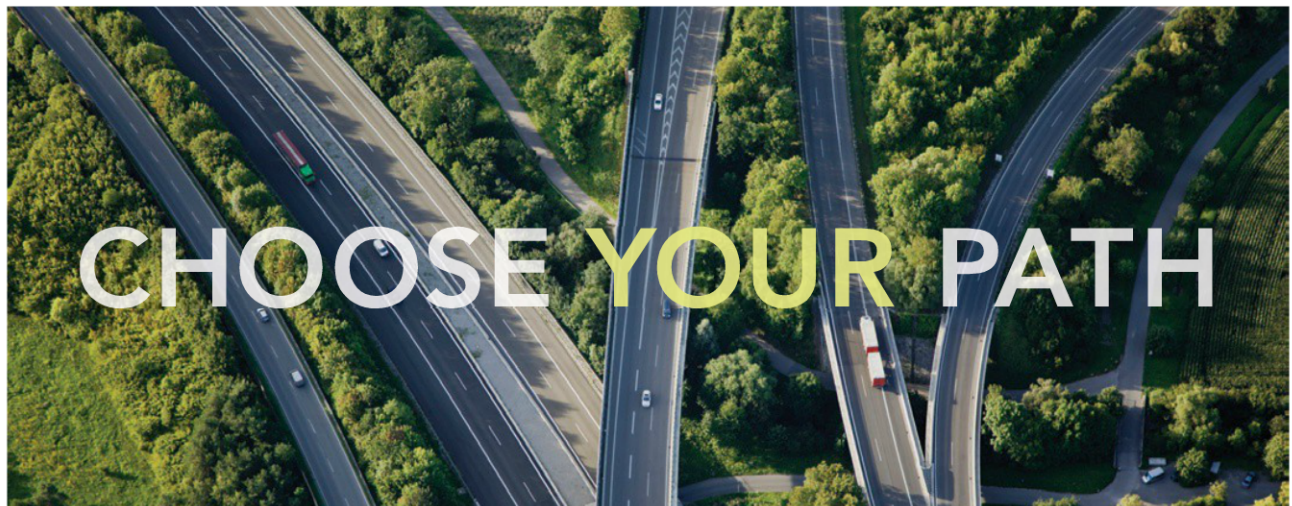
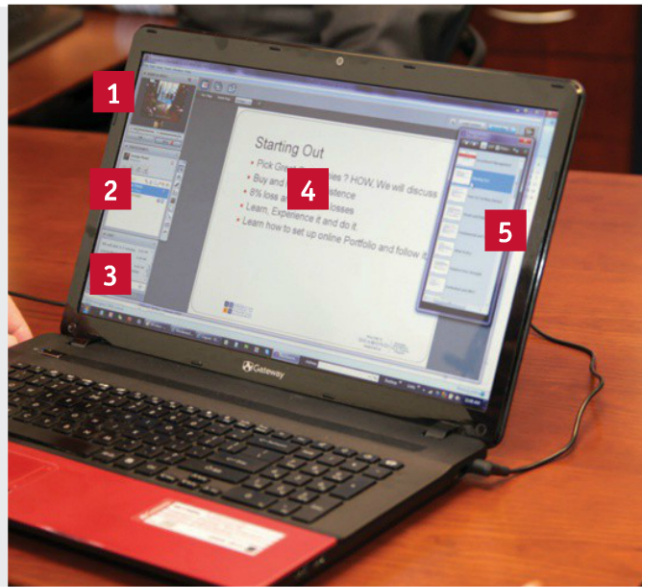
While there are a handful of online schools that offer law degrees, the American Bar Association has yet to accredit them. But there is a host of online LL.M. degrees, summer offerings for J.D. students and degrees for non-lawyers now in operation.

As bullish as Byrnes is about online



MENTZ'S SCREEN

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education, he doesn't think it should fully replace the J.D. experience. The social experience that students gain from a traditional classroom setting is invaluable, he said. Students interact and network, all of which are important skills to hone. However, he sees no reason why a larger portion of the law school education should not be offered online. A student interested in socio-economics in the Bahamas could actually go there, get real-world experience and continue his or her law education online.

"I'm not saying that online is the perfect world," he said. "I think a blend is best."

Online learning offers too many advantages to be ignored, he said. Students learn to interact via the latest technology, a skill they will likely be using in professional settings, as more communication is being done that way.

It's for all of the above reasons he thinks the number of schools offering online courses will double by next year.

Online learning is not the future, he said. "It's now."

Indeed, such prestigious schools as Harvard Law School and New York

Law Schools with online LL.M. programs

Atlanta's John Marshall	Labor and Employment Law; American Legal Studies
Boston University School of Law	Taxation; International Business Law
Chapman University School of Law	Prosecutorial Science
Florida Coastal School of Law	U.S. Law
Georgetown University Law Center	Certificate in State and Local Taxation
The John Marshall Law School	Intellectual Property Law; Employee Benefits; Estate Planning
Loyola University Chicago	Health Law
Michigan State University	Global and Food Law
New York Law School	Mental Disability Law; Real Estate
New York University School of Law	Executive LL.M in Taxation
Penn State University	Master of Laws
Stetson University College of Law	Elder Law; Advocacy
Temple University School of Law	Taxation
Thomas Jefferson School of Law	International Taxation & Financial Services
Thomas M. Cooley Law School	Intellectual Property
University of Alabama School of Law	Concentration in Taxation; Concentration in Business Transactions
University of Connecticut School of Law	Insurance Law
University of Denver Sturm College of Law	Taxation
University of Miami School of Law	Real Property Development
University of Nebraska College of Law	Space, Cyber, and Telecommunications Law
Vermont Law School	Energy, Environmental or Natural Resources
Washington University in St. Louis	U.S. Law
Western New England	Estate Planning and Elder Law

University School of Law have introduced online courses. New York University notes that it uses the latest technology, offering courses "in high resolution video." Courses

are recorded by a number of camera operators and "not by a fixed camera in the back of the room."

Different schools use different tech-

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niques. Some offer live, interactive sessions. Some record lectures and send them to students who then watch them at their convenience. Through discussion boards, email and phone, they can interact with fellow classmates and their professors.

Chicago's John Marshall Law School offers four LL.M. and M.S. degree online programs. School officials said there was a need because it is the only law school in the nation offering an LL.M. in employee benefits, and students from across the country were interested in the program. Before, if they wanted to take it, they had to move to Chicago. For some, that wasn't possible, given careers and families.

"It's an access issue," said Kathryn Kennedy, associate dean for advanced studies and research at John Marshall. "If it weren't available online, a person would have to take a year off and move here."

The students seeking the advanced degrees are in many cases practicing lawyers and have demanding schedules. The online program is designed to be flexible and to allow students to access the course work when they have time.

Here's the way it works at the John

Marshall Law School: A faculty member produces lectures, which are made available to the students enrolled in the class. They can watch when they so choose, and as often as they want. Students can interact with each other via computer. They can also ask questions privately to the instructor. At the end of each week, students are given an assessment exercise to judge how they are absorbing the material.

The most demanding part of the process is developing the course, said Malcolm Morris, associate director of graduate tax law programs, who teaches online at John Marshall. Since the courses are new, there was a measure of trial and error in creating the most effective practices.

"To some degree, we're pioneers," Morris said. "That's pretty exciting."

The students also get a lot of personal attention because the class sizes are normally small, containing just a handful of students.

The Washington University School of Law, in St. Louis, started its first online program this year, an LL.M. called U.S. Law for Foreign Attorneys. The students live in Brazil, China, India, Mexico and

Pakistan.

The school decided to use this program as its first online course because it made the most sense: What better way to reach students from all over the globe? For students who are interested, it can be daunting "financially and personally" to travel to the school, said Tomea Mersmann, the law school's associate dean of strategic initiatives.

The school believes that an interactive program works best and has managed to schedule a weekly class in which all 10 students can participate. It's held Tuesday mornings at 7 a.m., Central time. For some students, that's as early as 6 a.m. or as late as 9 p.m. in their time zones.

"It's fun to watch the students chit-chatting from all over the world," Mersmann said.

The classes are recorded, so students can review them at a later date. The school also encourages students to develop social groups to interact further. It wants to create a campuslike setting for the students as much as possible, regardless of the geographic hurdles.

"That's what we believe in," he said.

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