

# Going the Distance

*Distance education at the Thomas M. Cooley Law School*

Our world is changing. The pace of technology races past the pace of the profession. With e-mail, video-conferencing, high-speed internet access, on-line legal libraries, and the like, our profession—as well as the world—is quickly melding into a new shape. Practitioners are not alone in their quest to keep up; law schools, too, must adapt in order to attract the “modern” student—the one who seems to have every gadget from a smart phone to a PDA. And while keeping pace with new hardware and software is tough, so too, has it been tough to keep pace with the changing environment.

Just as the law profession must face the reality that many lawyers can work effectively from their home offices, law schools must face the reality that many students can learn effectively from their homes. But unlike the profession, which allows lawyers to work from home or on the road, one very important force has prohibited law schools from doing the same for students: the ABA’s accreditation standards that, until recently, did not allow for courses to be offered as purely distance education courses.

## Newly Proposed ABA Standards Regarding Distance Education

The American Bar Association has recently made a small step to allow distance education in the law-school context. In June 2002, the ABA’s Council of the Section on Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar proposed permitting law students to take a maximum of 12 so-called distance-education credits as a part of their overall law-school education. While 12 credit hours obviously does not mean a law student can earn a JD purely online (nor should it), the ABA’s step is in the right direction.

For some of us, imagining going to school online is difficult. Admittedly, our standard

notions about the first-year law-school experience, including the Socratic Method, must be adapted to an entirely new environment. But other graduate and undergraduate institutions have been doing distance education for quite some time now.

For example, the University of Maryland University College has more than 25 years experience in distance education and offers 14 bachelor’s and 10 master’s degree programs online.<sup>1</sup> Those years of experience in distance education in the non-law school context puts law schools at a significant disadvantage. Not only do law schools need to play the catch-up game to meet students’ expectations, law schools must be good at it too, so they do not disappoint the seasoned distance-education learner.

## Cooley’s Online Course

One Michigan law school, Thomas M. Cooley Law School, already offers a non-credit prelaw course purely online. Since May 2001, Cooley’s online course, Introduction to Law School, has been offered over the internet to 334 students.

The course contains two distinct phases. Phase I, which is offered over the Internet, provides a general overview of what to expect in law school. The four lessons in Phase I: How to Prepare for a Legal Education, What to Expect When You Enroll, What Will Courses be Like?, and The American Legal System, are free and available to anyone who wishes to visit the website at <http://introlaw.cooley.edu>. So students can work at their own pace, Phase I does not involve personal interaction with a professor, and students may enroll at any time.

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The course design of Phase II, slightly more rigorous than Phase I, is also online, and involves interaction with Cooley professors, alumni, and a librarian. Students may enroll for a small fee (currently \$50). Enrollment presently is limited to incoming Cooley students who already have paid their tuition deposit. The course is offered three times per year through The West Education Network (TWEN), an online education platform designed for law schools. Phase II covers the remaining five lessons of the course: Reading Cases, Briefing Cases, Reading Statutes, Synthesizing and Outlining, and Legal Reasoning.

Cooley previously offered a similar course for incoming law students, but it was not online. In the fall of 1996, Cooley began offering its prelaw course as a correspondence course. Its designer, Professor Eileen Kavanagh, quickly learned that mailing out registration forms and personalized feedback on students’ papers through first-class mail was not only time-consuming but expensive. Cooley, the second-largest law school in the nation, has roughly 70 percent of its student population from out of state. Mailing materials to students and providing individualized feedback was, therefore, slow.

Cooley President and Dean, Don LeDuc, urged Kavanagh to seek a solution to the problem by offering the course online. Kavanagh organized a “prelaw team” to address the problems with the old correspondence course and to offer new solutions online. The team consisted of the Director of Information Technology, Sally Backofen; Librarians Alice Hotchkiss and Sharon Bradley; Web Designer Kim Smith; Assistant Professor Mara Kent; and Associate Professor Eileen Kavanagh. Soon the team understood that offering a successful online class required much more than simply taking the material from the correspondence course and posting it on the Web. To be successful, the course

needed to be interactive and dynamic. The solution was to offer a course that had a little bit of everything: personalized feedback from professors; discussion boards for interaction between students, professors, and alumni; quizzes with immediate feedback; and lessons containing the core reading materials.

The result has been positive. Since 2001, students from 41 different states have taken the course. Further, of the more than 300 students who took the course, 12 students were from foreign countries, as well as from Guam and Puerto Rico. Cooley has even received an inquiry about the course from as far away as Australia. The overriding benefit of the course is the interaction the students have with each other. They have connected with each other through the discussion-board postings and even planned their own get-togethers for when they arrive in Lansing. The course has helped the students feel more comfortable by giving them a better

idea of what to expect when they begin their first term.

Putting the course online has not addressed all concerns. It still takes an extraordinary amount of time to answer hundreds of e-mail inquiries from the students. In fact, one student logged on to the course more than 700 times in two months. But even though the course may require more attention from its professors than before, the benefit to the student in receiving immediate feedback far outweighs the detriment. On the whole, Cooley's limited experiment with distance education has helped to resolve many issues the modern student and professor may face. It has allowed students from all over the world to participate in an interactive environment that prepares them for law school, and it provides students with an immediate source for feedback and evaluation. It has helped the school prepare to offer more distance education courses in the future, and most impor-

tantly, it has helped achieve the goal of the prelaw team: to help the students feel more at ease in their first term of law school. ◆



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#### FOOTNOTE

1. "Quality On the Line—Benchmarks for success in Internet-Based Distance Education." Prepared by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, National Education Association. April 2000.