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Get that master of laws degree online

By Karen Sloan

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Earning a LL.M. degree no longer requires showing up on campus.

A growing number of traditional law schools are offering master of laws degrees entirely or primarily through online classes.

Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Southwestern University School of Law and Florida Coastal School of Law are all starting LL.M. programs next fall that will consist entirely of online coursework. Those schools join New York University School of Law, the University of Alabama School of Law, Boston University School of Law and a handful of others that already offer at least one LL.M. program completely or primarily through online classes.

"We really think it's the wave of the future," said Holly Barnhill, spokeswoman for Kaplan Legal Education, which develops technology platforms to host online courses and is working with Loyola Chicago and Southwestern. "A lot of law schools are seeing that it's in their interest to offer online programs."

Online juris doctor degrees have been available for years from nontraditional law schools (including the Kaplan-owned Concord Law School), but so-called brick and mortar schools have only recently begun to enter the arena of online programs.

Improvements in technology are making it easier for students to interact through their own computers much as they would in an actual classroom, said Dan Powell, assistant dean for graduate law programs at Alabama. His law school started offering a fully online tax LL.M. program in 2008; it represents the next generation of an earlier program that relied on video conferencing. The program now draws between 100 and 120 students at any given time, most of whom work full-time.

"There will be more and more of these online programs in the next few years," Powell said. "The technology is getting to the point where more schools are attracted to it."

Technological improvements are one reason Southwestern will start an online entertainment and media law LL.M. next year, said professor Bridgette de Gyrfas. The school has had a comparable on-campus LL.M. for years, but the expansion of the entertainment industry has increased demand for the program.

"Within the past couple of years, the need has extended from Los Angeles to Bollywood and Canada, Nashville and Atlanta," de Gyrfas said. "It was a natural fit to offer the program online because the need has blossomed."

Going online means that students from around the country and the globe can participate, she said. Southwestern anticipates that most of the 20-or-so students who enroll in the program will be practicing attorneys who will complete their studies in about two years.

Florida Coastal is thinking globally with its fully online LL.M. in U.S. law. The program will only be available to international students, said LL.M. Program Director Aron Mujumdar.

"There is a real market globally for attorney who can't afford to take a whole year off and come to the U.S. to complete an LL.M program," he said.

Instead of coming to the United States, students will participate in real-time lectures via their computer. Professors will give the lectures early in the morning in Florida, so that most students around the globe can watch them in real-time in the afternoon or evening, Mujumdar said.

Loyola Chicago has a few more rules about who will be able to participate in its new health law LL.M., said Larry Singer, the director of the school's Beazely Institute for Health and Law Policy. Only attorneys with three years or more of legal experience or other comparable professional experience in the health care industry will be eligible for the online program, which debuts in the fall. Attorneys with less experience will be directed to the traditional, on-campus health law LL.M. that the school has offered for 20 years, he said. Beyond an externship requirement and easier access to mentoring with the on-campus program, there will be no difference between the two programs.

Another explanation for the growing number of online LL.M. programs is that they don't face the same accreditation hurdles as online J.D. programs. Fully online law schools don't meet American Bar Association accreditation standards because they lack libraries, clinics and other elements that the accreditation standards measure. Students in online J.D. programs must first pass the First-Year Law Students' Examination, also known as the "baby bar."

By contrast, LL.M. programs offered by fully accredited, traditional law schools face no additional restrictions.