

Online Classes Preferred By Students from Non-Elite Law Schools, Older Students, and Caregivers



A new report released by the AccessLex Institute, a nonprofit organization advocating for accessibility and affordability in legal education, sheds light on the receptiveness of different student groups towards online law classes. The study surveyed over 1,700 law students from 147 schools in the spring of 2021, followed by a subsequent survey of 820 students in the spring of 2022 to gauge their perceptions and experiences with online learning.

According to the findings, students attending law schools ranked 150th or below by U.S. News & World Report expressed a higher preference for online classes, with 35% indicating a preference for remote learning. In contrast, only 24% of students from top-ranked schools within the top 50 expressed a preference for online courses. These results suggest that students from less-prestigious law schools are more receptive to online education, potentially due to flexibility and convenience.

The study also emphasizes the impact of demographics on students' attitudes towards online classes. Older students and those with caregiver responsibilities were found to be more inclined towards remote learning. This highlights the potential benefits of online education in accommodating the needs of non-traditional students who may have additional responsibilities or limitations in attending in-person classes.

Tiffane Cochran, the vice president of research at AccessLex and co-author of the study, suggests that institutions considering the expansion of distance education should recognize that student preferences for online courses can vary significantly. The findings emphasize the importance of understanding students' diverse needs and motivations when implementing online learning initiatives.

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While overall satisfaction with remote classes improved over time, 78% of respondents rated their program as good or excellent in the 2022 survey, compared to 57% in 2021, in-person classes still received higher ratings. However, the study found that certain student groups reported differing experiences with online classes. Approximately 63% of students taking online courses reported feeling emotionally drained, compared to 48% of students attending in-person classes.

Notably, students from racially underrepresented groups, caregivers, students over the age of 30, and those attending lower-ranked law schools reported higher levels of emotional drain caused by online classes. Additionally, students from underrepresented groups and lower-ranked schools faced challenges in accessing career services compared to their counterparts from top-ranked law schools.

The study's findings shed light on the nuanced experiences of students with online legal education and the potential implications for enhancing accessibility in legal studies. By recognizing the varying preferences and challenges faced by different student groups, institutions can design and implement online learning programs that better meet the needs of diverse learners.

The study reveals that students attending less-prestigious law schools, older students, and those with caregiver responsibilities are more receptive to online classes compared to their counterparts at elite schools. These findings underscore the potential of online education to broaden access and improve flexibility in legal education, while emphasizing the importance of considering the unique needs and preferences of diverse student populations.

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