

ABA Explores Accreditation for Fully Online Law Schools: A Paradigm Shift in Legal Education



In a landmark decision, the American Bar Association's (ABA) legal education arm is contemplating extending accreditation to fully online law schools, departing from its longstanding emphasis on in-person teaching. The ABA's Council of the Section of Legal Education and Admission to the Bar took a significant step on Friday by voting to seek public comments on proposed changes to its standards. These changes would allow new and existing law schools without a physical campus to apply for accreditation if implemented.

Embracing Change: A Shift in Accreditation Standards

Currently, only law schools with brick-and-mortar locations are eligible for ABA accreditation. While the ABA has permitted many of these schools to offer fully or mostly online Juris Doctor (J.D.) programs alongside their residential counterparts, fully online schools have remained ineligible for ABA approval.

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Daniel Thies, Chairperson of the ABA Council's Strategic Review Committee, described the proposal to accredit online law schools as a "significant change" that could potentially reduce the cost of legal education. This highlighted that online J.D. programs offered by ABA-accredited law schools generally charge the same tuition for online and residential students. This equality in tuition fees is attributed to the fact that they are all offered by traditional brick-and-mortar law schools, which have comparable expenses.

Potential Impact: Lowering the Cost of Legal Education

Accreditation by the ABA would prove advantageous for the existing cohort of online law schools. Graduates from these schools would be eligible to sit for the bar exam in any state, a privilege currently restricted to graduates from ABA-accredited law schools. Presently, California is the only state offering the bar exam to graduates of non-ABA accredited law schools.

This acknowledged that some traditional law schools may resist this change, fearing increased competition. However, the perception that distance education is of lower quality than in-person teaching has diminished significantly due to the rapid shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted by several ABA council members.

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Pioneering Institutions: Purdue Global Law School and Beyond

Purdue Global Law School, founded in 1998 as the Concord Law School and acquired by Purdue in 2017, is the oldest online law school. While a handful of other fully online law schools are scattered across the country, the potential for ABA accreditation opens new avenues for these institutions.

Purdue's part-time online J.D. program, with an annual tuition of about \$13,500, sets a precedent. In comparison, ABA-accredited Southwestern Law School's new fully online J.D. program mirrors its residential program with an annual tuition of \$38,944 for part-time students.

Purdue Law Dean Martin Pritikin expressed enthusiasm, stating, "I am thrilled that the ABA is finally considering moving in this direction. Virtually every other field of higher education has been quicker to embrace online learning."

In conclusion, the potential accreditation of fully online law schools by the ABA signifies a significant shift in the landscape of legal education, with broader implications for accessibility and affordability. The proposed changes, if enacted, have the potential to reshape the future of legal training and further integrate online learning into the traditional legal education framework.

