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Massive, Free Online Classes Catch on With Law Schools

Karen Sloan

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Massive open online courses—or MOOCs—are all the rage in higher education. But law schools are only starting to test the waters with these free, Internet-based classes that can reach thousands of students around the globe.

Three law schools and universities will offer law-related MOOCs this fall for the first time, and [Harvard Law School](#) plans to again offer an online copyright course it debuted last year. [Northwestern University](#), [The John Marshall Law School](#) and the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) are among those joining the MOOC movement, although participants won't earn credits for the classes just yet.

Legal educators have good reason to begin experimenting with online teaching formats. The American Bar Association's Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar is contemplating increasing the number of credits that law students can take via distance education, in a bid to spur innovation and help lower costs.

These legal MOOCs generally are geared toward both lawyers and non-lawyers interested in specific areas of the law. Online lectures that can be viewed whenever convenient for students form the backbone of the courses. Some courses augmented taped lectures with quizzes, discussion boards and other interactive features.

Northwestern University's Law and Entrepreneur MOOC is geared toward students interested in launching a business, plus lawyers or prospective lawyers who want to counsel entrepreneurs. The six-week class, which will launch on October 23, will be taught by law professors Esther Barron and Steve Reed. More than 13,700 participants have already signed up.

"We're really excited about being able to provide information on legal issues to entrepreneurs who might otherwise be intimidated by lawyers and the complexity of the law," Barron said. "We hope entrepreneurs who might give up because of legal worries will have the confidence to move forward after taking this course."

The course is based on a case study involving two entrepreneurs starting a business, and covers many legal issues they might face, including intellectual property, owner agreements and venture financing.

The John Marshall Law School on August 15 launched its first MOOC, called Military Service and Civilian Law, which aims to educate service members and lawyers alike on key legal issues facing military personnel. The recorded lectures focus on four key areas: family law, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

"It's really designed for everyone," said Brian Clauss, director of the school's Veterans Legal Services Clinic. "It's an overview for attorneys, because most have never dealt with a military case. And for a nonlawyer, it's the same idea—we're taking legal terms and putting them in layman's terms."

John Marshall offers the class on a rolling basis, meaning students can take it whenever they choose, and the school plans to make it available online for the foreseeable future, Clauss said.

The University of North Carolina's Introduction to Environmental Law and Policy MOOC is not being offered through the law school; it is a more general version of an existing undergraduate course, said professor Don Hornstein. But the content may appeal to lawyers or anyone interested in the environment, he said.

"I really want to introduce people to environmental law and give them a sense of what the body of environmental law looks like," Hornstein said.

The course will begin on September 16 and will last for six weeks. Each week, students will have access to four 15-minute-long video lecture segments. They will have weekly readings available for free—typically, a legal opinion that has been condensed and edited to make it more accessible to nonlawyers. (For students who lack even the time for that, Hornstein will post a minute-long segment that covers the gist of the readings.)

Students will take a weekly quiz on the material and may opt to complete a short essay or research assignment. (The assignments are graded through a peer review system, with students evaluating each other's work.)

Even with interactive components, Hornstein understands that the vast majority of the 20,000 people who have registered for the class will not complete it.

"In general, with MOOCs, you get a huge number of people up front, but the dropout rate is staggering," he said. "It's even more shocking when you break it down. Half the people who sign up never even take the first class. I'd be happy if 15 to 20 percent of my students stayed."

The fact that students aren't paying for the course and won't receive credits makes the decision to drop out much easier, Hornstein added.

Few legal educators understand how difficult it is to engage MOOC students as well as Karl Okamoto, a professor at Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law. He was one of the first law professors to design and offer a MOOC, as part of his LawMeets initiative, which teaches transaction skills to law students via online courses and interactive competitions.

Last fall, LawMeets hosted a two-week MOOC called the Basics of Acquisition Agreements, which combined online lectures with four interactive simulations allowing students to submit videos of themselves counseling hypothetical business clients. The simulations were intended to engage students, but few actually participated. Of the 800 people who signed up, 500 watched at least one of the video lectures, 120 submitted a video exercise and 30 completed all four of the simulations, Okamoto said.

"The usual complaint about MOOCs is that it's just taping people's lectures, which is not a particularly effective teaching method," he said. "We found that people were vaguely interested in watching the lectures, but the drop-off in the number of people who actually did the exercises was significant. We think the exercises are the most important part."

Okamoto is trying to convince law professors to incorporate the MOOC into their regular classes, to provide an incentive for students to complete all of the exercises.

[LawMeets is once again offering the course](#), which is open for enrollment now and will run through November 17.

Harvard Law professor William Fisher III, who heads the university's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, took a different tack with the free Internet course on copyright that he debuted in January. That 12-week class was limited to 500 students, and participants had to apply for a slot. Thus, it was not a MOOC, but an online class designed to mimic a traditional law class.

He broke the students into sections of 25 for small group discussions, facilitated by former and current students. The course incorporated pre-recorded lectures, live webcasts and a three-hour test.

Of the 500 students enrolled, just shy of half took the final exam and 39 percent passed, according to statistics released by the Harvard. Fisher plans to offer the class again in January of 2014, although the school is not yet accepting applications.

Contact Karen Sloan at ksloan@alm.com. For more of *The National Law Journal's* law school coverage, visit: <http://www.facebook.com/NLJLawSchools>.

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