

# Beyond the JD: How MLS Degrees are Fueling Enrollment Growth

Our legal system is deep and complex, with interconnected legal structures that affect and regulate many sectors of business and society. While many seek to develop mastery in one or multiple aspects of the law through earning their JD, passing the bar, and practicing as a lawyer, others in various roles deal with the law throughout the course of their day-to-day work. The Master of Legal Studies (MLS) degree was created for this population and bridges this gap.

## Designed for Non-Lawyers, Boosting Careers

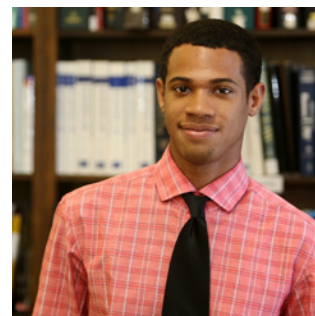
The American Bar Association (ABA) reports various naming conventions (e.g. Juris Master, Master of Jurisprudence) for these non-lawyer-focused master's degrees. For clarity, we will refer to this grouping of degrees as “Master of Legal Studies,” or MLS.<sup>1</sup>

The MLS is designed for individuals who do not have a Juris Doctor (JD) degree and are not seeking to become practicing attorneys. This program is well-suited for professionals from various fields who wish to gain a comprehensive understanding of legal principles and concepts without the intention of practicing law. Curriculum can cover a broad range of legal topics or focus deeply on one specific aspect of law, providing a foundation that can be applied to their existing professions. Graduates of an MLS program may work in compliance, business, healthcare, or other fields where legal knowledge is beneficial.

## MLS vs. LLM: Understanding the Difference

An important distinction to make is the difference between Master of Legal Studies and Master of Laws (LLM). The terminology can be confusing. From a high level, LLM programs allow lawyers to specialize in a particular area of law, deepen their legal knowledge, or gain expertise in a different legal system (for international lawyers). LLM programs often offer a wide array of specializations, including tax law, international law, environmental law, or intellectual property law. Unlike the MLS, the LLM is often a stepping stone for lawyers seeking advanced legal education to enhance their career prospects or specialize in a specific legal field.

In this report, we will focus primarily on MLS degrees, what specific areas we have seen high student demand for, and how to develop a strong market research strategy to create new degree offerings in this space.



## Driving Enrollment with MLS Programs

Our research shows MLS degrees are significant enrollment drivers for universities. The ABA tracks total non-JD enrollment on an annual basis across all ABA-approved institutions. Keep in mind that the following metrics reference aggregated enrollment across all MLS and LLM programs the university offers; however, our research indicates that their MLS programs are significant drivers.

In the chart below is a detailed breakdown of three of the largest universities by total MLS/LLM enrollment in 2023, as reported by the ABA.

University	2023 Enrollments	MLS Offerings	LLM Offerings
<b>University of Arizona</b>	2,143 Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance and Legal Risk Management</li> <li>• Criminal Law and Policy</li> <li>• Environmental Law and Policy</li> <li>• Family and Juvenile Law</li> <li>• Health Law and Policy</li> <li>• Human Rights</li> <li>• Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy</li> <li>• Intellectual Property</li> <li>• International Trade and Business Law</li> <li>• Mining Law and Policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General</li> <li>• Indigenous Peoples Law &amp; Policy</li> <li>• International Trade &amp; Business Law</li> </ul>
<b>Texas A&amp;M University</b>	1,236 Online/Hybrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Law and Compliance</li> <li>• Cybersecurity Law and Policy</li> <li>• Energy, Oil, and Gas Law and Policy</li> <li>• Environmental and Energy Law and Policy</li> <li>• General</li> <li>• Health Law, Policy, and Management</li> <li>• HR and Employment Law, Policy, and Management</li> <li>• International Tax Law and Policy</li> <li>• Real Estate and Construction Law, Policy, and Management</li> <li>• Risk Management and Compliance</li> <li>• Wealth Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General</li> <li>• Intellectual Property</li> <li>• International IP Rights</li> <li>• International Tax</li> <li>• Risk Management</li> <li>• Wealth Management</li> </ul>
<b>Arizona State University</b>	807 Online & On Ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Law</li> <li>• Conflict Resolution</li> <li>• Contract Management</li> <li>• Construction Law</li> <li>• Corporate and Health Care Compliance</li> <li>• Criminal Law</li> <li>• Indian Gaming</li> <li>• Intellectual Property Law</li> <li>• Law and Sustainability</li> <li>• Legal Paraprofessional</li> <li>• Sports Law and Business</li> <li>• Tribal Self-Governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General</li> <li>• Biotechnology and Genomics</li> <li>• Tribal Policy, Law, and Government</li> </ul>

As shown, the three top-performing institutions in this space have large and diversified master's-level law program portfolios, as well as multiple LLM options. A few disparate factors appear to have importance in driving success in this space:

1. Consider offering several popular MLS concentrations with steady student demand.
  - a. Some of the most common concentration options across the entire MLS market are business law, compliance, human resources law (all related), healthcare law, and cybersecurity law.
    - i. There appears to be resilient student demand for these programs.
2. Find the regional drivers based on localized markets/industries.
  - a. We believe that a large driver behind the success of these three universities, and the broader MLS landscape is the ability to identify regional needs and develop/launch a program to match.
    - i. Examples of this are Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy from Arizona, and Energy, Oil, and Gas Law and Policy from Texas A&M, and Tribal Self-Governance from Arizona State.

## Developing a Market Research Strategy for High-Demand MLS Programs

So, how can a university think through and develop program offerings in this diverse and competitive space? By leveraging market research to create successful MLS programs. As mentioned, there are some standard and appealing options to offer, surrounding compliance, healthcare, business, and more. However, the differentiating program in terms of marketability and applicability will likely be something more focused to the region, something that hasn't been done many times before.

Studying and responding to current and ongoing trends will be the key factor in the creation of a new degree option. If your state has a burgeoning aerospace/defense industry, consider mapping a degree against that. If there is an increase in regulations surrounding environmental impact and/or renewable energy development, consider building a program that relates to these new regulations and laws. These regional differentiators provide universities with a unique opportunity to create high-demand MLS programs and further drive enrollment growth.

Partner with Elsmere Education to learn about the strategic advantages of offering diverse MLS concentrations tailored to meet regional needs and industry demands. We can help your university develop competitive programs by identifying emerging trends, responding to industry shifts, and creating innovative degree offerings. Our expertise in market research and program development positions universities as leaders in delivering innovative MLS programs tailored to meet the demands of non-lawyer professionals. Contact us today to schedule a free consultation with our University Partnerships team.

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Source

1. "Post-J.D. & Non-J.D." American Bar Association, n.d. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/llm-degrees\\_post\\_j\\_d\\_non\\_j\\_d/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/llm-degrees_post_j_d_non_j_d/).

