

LAW SCHOOL IN 2024: Accreditation, Tradition, and the Drive for Further Online Offerings



Trends in Law School Enrollment and Interest

The Juris Doctorate (JD) remains one of the preeminent areas of graduate education, marked by access to sought-after careers and importance in a wide variety of sectors. According to the National Conference of Bar Examiners, 62,951 people took the bar exam in 2022. With a pass rate of 59%, that means roughly 37,423 aspiring lawyers passed the bar and became eligible to practice law.¹ The legal field is increasingly lucrative; the BLS reports that the average wage for lawyers “jumped 10.6% in 2022 to \$163,770,” the largest year-over-year increase in two decades.² First-year associates at most “big law” firms (typically the largest and most prestigious firms³) now earn a median base salary of \$200,000, and even higher in certain metropolitan areas.⁴

There appears to be enduring student demand for JD degrees. According to the American Bar Association (ABA), the number of applicants to ABA-approved law schools was more than 27,000 for the 2024 enrollment year, up about 3.7% compared to 2023.⁵ The number of students enrolled in JD programs has increased by roughly 6,000 since 2018.⁶

The Need for Accreditation – ABA and Alternative Accreditors

ABA approval is an almost essential component of a JD program’s success. The ABA is a recognized by the US Department of Education as the premier organization for the accreditation of JD programs nationally, and requires universities meet certain curricular and post-graduate standards to achieve approval, which guarantees a high-quality education to the prospective student. Over 20 states offer no alternative pathways to legal practice without earning a degree from an ABA-approved program, and further study of the state-by-state requirements shows that commonly, aspiring lawyers who did not graduate from an ABA-approved program must have significant relevant work experience to practice law.⁷

Despite these regulations, there are 33 law schools that do not have ABA approval and are not currently seeking it. The majority of these programs are based in California, where programs are eligible for accreditation at the state level, as granted by the State Bar of California through the Committee of Bar Examiners (CalBar).⁸ Graduates of these programs are able to practice law in California, but would not meet the eligibility requirements in other states.

Importantly, the CalBar has been significantly more lenient in approving online JD programs than the ABA. Currently, many of the programs with this accreditation are offered online, including Thomas Jefferson School of Law and Purdue Global Law School.



As with other areas of education, availability of online degrees greatly increases accessibility for prospective students. Students who may be juggling various other commitments, such as work, family, or personal health may look towards online education to provide them with the flexibility that can fit their needs. However, the ABA has been relatively slow to adopt new policies that allow for the approval of online programs. In May of 2023, the ABA voted to allow accreditation to programs that offer up to 50% of the program in the distance format, allowing for the approval of hybrid programs.⁹ To this date, the only way for a fully online program to achieve ABA approval is through a granted “substantive change/variance.” There are currently 18 ABA-approved distance education JD programs; just six of these are offered fully online. Some examples of existing hybrid/online programs are shown in the following chart:

List of ABA-Approved Hybrid or Online JD Programs

University	Program	Total # of Days Required On-Campus	Estimated Total Tuition
Case Western Reserve University	Online JD	0	\$223,080
University of Hawai'i	Online JD Flex	0	\$83,037 in state \$ 169,901 out of state
Ohio Northern University	Online JD	0	\$ 139,080
Syracuse University	JDinteractive	30	\$ 187,050
Northeastern University	FlexJD	24	\$ 188,488

As the online JD market continues to evolve, there is ongoing discussion and debate surrounding the quality and rigor of online legal education. Critics argue that online JD programs may not adequately prepare students for the practice of law, citing concerns about the lack of face-to-face interactions, hands-on training, and supervision. Proponents, on the other hand, argue that online JD programs can deliver high-quality legal education when designed effectively, and can provide nontraditional learners a flexible pathway to achieve their career aspirations.

Opportunity for Universities to Tap Into a Growing Market

With student demand for JD programs on the rise and the increasing acceptance of online education, universities have a prime opportunity to tap into this growing market by offering high-quality, ABA-approved online JD programs. As the legal field evolves, so do the pathways to education.

However, navigating the complexities of program design and accreditation for online JD degrees can be challenging. Elsmere Education can be your trusted partner in this process. Don't miss out on this exciting opportunity to expand your university's reach and empower the next generation of legal minds. Contact us today to schedule a free consultation with our University Partnerships team.

Sources

¹ “2022 Statistics.” National Conference of Bar Examiners, April 21, 2023. <https://thebarexaminer.ncbex.org/article/spring-2023/2022-statistics/#:~:text=Jurisdictions%20reported%2062%2C951%20persons%20taking,reported%20by%20jurisdictions%20was%2064%25.>

² Association, American Bar. ABA profile of the legal profession - wages. <https://www.abalegalprofile.com/wages.html>.

³ What is “big law?” | explore law firms and legal advice | U.S. news. <https://law.usnews.com/law-firms/advice/articles/what-is-big-law>.

⁴ Zaretsky, Staci. “The Biglaw Salary Wars Increased First-Year Associate Salaries across the Legal Profession.” Above the Law, May 10, 2023. <https://abovethelaw.com/2023/05/the-biglaw-salary-wars-increased-first-year-associate-salaries-across-the-legal-profession/>.

⁵ Hill, Julianne. “More Aspiring Law Students Are Applying to Fewer Schools, New LSAC Data Shows.” ABA Journal, December 14, 2023. <https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/more-students-of-color-applying-to-law-school-despite-scotus-decision#:~:text=Overall%2C%20the%20current%20LSAC%20data,about%203.7%25%20compared%20to%202023.>

⁶ Statistics, n.d. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/statistics/.

⁷ Comprehensive guide to bar admission requirements 2021, n.d. https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/misc/legal_education/2021-comp-guide.pdf.

⁸ The State Bar of California, n.d. <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Admissions/Law-School-Regulation/Law-Schools#cbe>.

⁹ Leipold, James. “Access to Legal Education Expanded through Increased Distance Learning.” LSAC, August 17, 2023. <https://www.lsac.org/blog/access-legal-education-expanded-through-increased-distance-learning>.

