

Memorandum

To: John A. Sebert, ABA Consultant on Legal Education

From: Peter W. Martin, Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School

Date: 5/27/2004

Subject: Report on the On-line Social Security Law Course Offered by Cornell's Legal Information Institute, Spring Term 2004.

I. Background

Interpretation 306-1 to the accreditation standard on distance education, Standard 306, calls for an annual report from schools offering distance courses. This report is submitted on behalf of Cornell Law School and the four other ABA-accredited schools that participated in the 2004 Social Security Law course offered by Professor Peter Martin through Cornell's Legal Information Institute (or LII). Those other schools are: Nova Southeastern, Rutgers-Camden, Rutgers-Newark, and William Mitchell College of Law.

It follows the same format as our report on last year's course.

This was the fourth year for the course, one of two the LII has created for on-line delivery. The principal components of the LII course design include:

- digital readings (with a print-on-demand option)
- scheduled progression through a sequence of topics paced by Web-based discussion and mandatory written exercises
- hypermedia presentation (streaming audio linked to assigned texts and supplementary materials)
- computer-based tutorials and exercises (similar to those CALI has long distributed) tightly integrated with the readings and presentation material
- asynchronous but paced teacher-student, student-student written discussion
- short writing and problem-solving assignments submitted via the Net for teacher evaluation and feedback
- an end-of-term exam for final evaluation of student performance

The Social Security course was first created by and is annually revised and conducted by Peter W. Martin of the Cornell faculty. This course has now been through three revision cycles, giving the LII unique perspective on the relationship between course architecture and ease of course maintenance. Annual revision is essential to take account of changes in the field – caused by adjustments to the benefit formula, amendments to the act and

regulations, and important new cases – and to make improvements of other kinds to both content and pedagogy.

For background on the LII's approach to distance education and further detail on how the Social Security course is structured and conducted and why, see the LII's 2001 distance education report, available at the ABA Web site

< <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/distanceeducation/distance.html> >. The 2004 version of the course itself – syllabus and schedule, readings, hypermedia presentations, interactive problems, and mastery exercises – is accessible online at

< <http://www.law.cornell.edu/socsec/course/> >. While a login name and password are required beyond the first topic, a guest login will be furnished any member of the Council, Standards Review Committee or ABA staff requesting it. A full set of responses to the student questionnaire summarized below is also available upon request. (To receive either send email to < martin@lii.law.cornell.edu >.)

The 2004 Social Security course enrolled eighty-seven students from six law schools (including one non-ABA-accredited school, Concord) spread across four time zones in the U.S. and at least one in Asia. The participating institutions, like the nine others who have joined with us in past on-line courses, viewed this as an economic way to enrich to their upper-class offerings while also becoming familiar with a fully developed model of asynchronous legal instruction.

The terms and conditions for participating schools remained as described in our 2001 report. Each school was responsible for such logistical matters as course registration and exam administration vis-à-vis its own students. Non-Cornell students registered not with Cornell but with their home institution and received local grades and credits. Their performance was graded in relation to that of other students from the same institution.

The Legal Information Institute's responsibilities included: preparation and distribution of course materials (free in digital format to the students), all instruction, performance monitoring (the on-line analog of attendance), student evaluation and grading. Cornell's charge was \$500 per student, with a minimum fee of \$2,500 per school. Institutions concerned about the fiscal impact of uncontrolled enrollments were free to set an enrollment cap.

II. Student response to the course

As in years past, the student response was, in general, quite positive. A course questionnaire to which 75% of the class responded confirmed that for a substantial majority the model worked as envisioned.

Most of the responding students would take another course offered in this format. That is not, however, because they found this one easy. Eighty-one percent of the respondents rated the time and effort required by the Social Security course as either much more (22%) or slightly more (59%) in comparison with other upper-level law courses covering similar content at their institutions; only 5% rated it “less.” Concerning the quantity and quality of teacher feedback and discussion with teacher and other students, 69% judged it greater than that in conventionally taught law courses with similar enrollment, an

additional 24% rated it comparable. Asked to characterize their ultimate success in mastering the course content, 83% reported that they had achieved levels of mastery at least equal to those they achieved in a classroom-taught course.

Did the students from the several institutions respond at all differently? Only to a modest extent. Students from Concord were more likely to characterize the level of effort required as "average" for a specialized upper level course than students from other schools and proportionately more students from Rutgers-Camden (over 50%) labeled it "much more than average". The dominant response from all schools was an "average" level of mastery; however, one-third of the Cornell students reported less than average mastery (Over half the Cornell students took the course on a pass/no pass basis.) while over forty percent of the Rutgers-Newark students reported above average mastery. A majority of the students at all the schools judged the level of feedback and interaction either "slightly more" or "much more" than in other courses of the same size.

As with any course, some students found the material dry; others were fascinated by it. Presentations that many judged to be "perfect" or "easy to listen to" and "at a good pace" struck others as "monotonous," "too rapid," or "too slow."

A large number of students commented on distinct advantages in the course structure, online delivery, and pedagogical design. One student in this group wrote:

I really enjoyed the online format because it allowed me to schedule the work myself. I was thus more efficient. I would definitely take another course in this format.

Another:

I enjoyed the online format and the organization of the course. I'd be interested in taking another course in this format. ... The presentations were pleasant to listen to and well-organized. The feedback problems were a great way to measure mastery of the subject and to focus thoughts and readings.

Several qualified their endorsement of the online structure. For example, one student wrote: "I would take another online course, but only in another course in which I had a great interest, since you have to be pretty self-policing about doing the work." Another observed, after complimenting the instructor: "I think it's important to have an experienced professor ... and [I] am not sure I would take such a course from [just] anyone."

But the course didn't work for everyone. Some discovered that they missed the stimulation and discipline of classroom meetings. One student expressed this reaction as follows:

I learned that I do not learn well in this environment. The process and procedure worked well, but I learned that I am a student that requires going to a class and actually hearing the course material and the questions and answers. This is not the fault of the course, but rather my ability to learn under the circumstances.

Another expressed ground for preferring the more familiar classroom format was the way it organizes study time. Wrote one student:

I prefer to have a lecture where I know up front what portion of my time will be used to read and participate. I guess I like having my lecture, doing my reading, and being done for the week.

Forty-one percent of the responding students indicated that their regular approach to the online presentations involved pausing them for note-taking and reflection; thirteen percent generally ran them more than once. Wrote one student: "I would not pause the presentations as much as I would ... rewind them back a little to catch something I missed while I was taking notes. While it can be frustrating to try and take notes while having to stop and imprecisely rewind the lecture, it is a great benefit over traditional in-class lectures where you get it or you miss it." Eighty-three percent took advantage of the opportunity provided by the "hypermedia" environment to block and copy presentation outlines and "visited" portions of the Social Security act and regulations into their notes. Forty-eight percent said they did so "often".

Students appreciated the multimedia nature of the presentations. One wrote: "I thought it was great how when you listen to real player, it automatically opens the browser to the section we are discussing." From another: "I liked that the course window would automatically link to the relevant provisions of the act." A third (who found my voice monotonous) commented "the synchronization of the text and spoken content was excellent, and the popup window feedback was fantastic."

Two features of the online course structure continue to draw close to unanimous student endorsement: (1) the interactive problems coming at the end of each topic, which allow students to assess their own level of comprehension immediately after completing the readings and online presentations, and (2) the four mastery exercises spaced at equal intervals through the term.

About the former one student observed: "The interactive problems were great because they would get me thinking about the material I just read. Plus, I like the immediate responses to my answers. Thus I'll know if I missed something in the reading or not." From another: "The practice problems were my favorite part of the course. They were extremely helpful to see where I was with my level of understanding."

About the mastery exercises one student wrote: "The mastery exercises were good because they gave me a chance to see how much I actually understood the material – by applying it. The feedback memos were great." Another observed: "The Mastery Exercises provided a great means of assessing my level of understanding of the material. Your written responses and general comments helped a great deal in reaffirming what I knew and emphasizing areas I didn't quite understand. I feel exercises throughout the semester are critical in an on-line course such as this." A third: "The mastery exercises were the best thing you incorporated in this course. This forced someone like me (a slacker in keeping up with the assignments, mainly due to obligations outside of school) to deal with the material so I could answer the questions, and in turn I learned at least something." Not always mentioned in these comments on the mastery exercises but

implicit in the favorable response was appreciation of the generic feedback all students received by email 48 hours after the exercise deadline. One student gushed: "As I hit the send button, I really felt I had mastered the material. I could hardly wait until Wednesday to see if there was anything I missed, and seeing my answer on the ... email was very satisfying."

Students were of mixed views about the value of the online discussion area (to be distinguished from the material they submitted for programmatic or teacher feedback). A significant number of students, whether or not they participated in discussion, expressed positive views. But from others came views like: "People seem to post things just to see their own words and name! A lot of things posted went off on tangents and were not at all beneficial to me after I spent so much time reading through them." The asynchronous nature of the discussion and the fact that a few students were very active and swift to participate led some to a feeling of frustration: "I found it more difficult to participate, especially so when there was a wide variety of responses. With 85 people in the class, there were enough responses that were well thought out and prepared and researched as opposed to a class where I feel you can do the reading, follow along and add in a comment here or there." (In the controlled environment of the classroom a teacher can limit "gunners" by not always calling on them.)

Substantial numbers of students indicated that while having all of the readings for the course online was a great asset, they would have liked to have the option to acquire them printed out and bound at the beginning of the course. Several expressed the same view about the audio presentations, wishing they were available on CD for purchase at the beginning of the course which would among other things, they noted, permit listening to the lectures while commuting. Both would be possible at additional expense plus some sacrifice in the currency of the readings and presentations. I am contemplating change in this direction for next year. Another possible addition to which there was fairly widespread approval the questionnaire termed "real-time chat office hours".

III. Holding the course against Standard 306

Based on the quality of the student work, the regular monitoring of student participation and effort through weekly pre-discussion submission, the online discussion itself, and the four mastery exercises, we are confident the course meets the requirements of Standard 306(c). Cornell's LII shall offer the course again next year (spring term 2005). We hope to have all this year's schools participating again, plus one or two additions.