

Memorandum

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

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

Date: 8/22/2003

Subject: **Report on the On-line Social Security Law Course Offered by Cornell's Legal Information Institute, Spring Term 2003.**

I. Background

Interpretation 306-1 to the new 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 three other ABA-accredited schools that participated in the 2003 Social Security Law course offered by Professor Peter Martin through Cornell's Legal Information Institute (or LII). Those other schools are: Rutgers-Camden, Rutgers-Newark, and William Mitchell College of Law.

This was the third 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 two 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. (Another ABA-accredited school has been forced, at least temporarily, to shelve a successful 2001-02 distance course because of subsequent changes in the law and course materials.)

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/distancededucation/distance.html> >. The 2003 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 2003 Social Security course enrolled sixty-five students from five law schools (including one non-ABA-accredited school, Concord) spread across four time zones in the U.S. and at least one in Europe. 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 a remarkable 82% 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. Seventy-five percent of the respondents rated the time and effort required by the Social Security course as either much more (43%) or slightly more (32%) in comparison with other upper-level law courses covering similar content at their institutions; only 6% rated it "less." Concerning the quantity and quality of teacher feedback and discussion with teacher and other students, 81% judged it

as comparable to or greater than that in conventionally taught law courses with similar enrollment. Asked to characterize their ultimate success in mastering the course content, 74% 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 slight extent. Students from William Mitchell were less likely to characterize the level of effort required as "much more" than students from other schools. While a majority of students from all schools reported average or greater levels of mastery, the balance at Cornell was quite close, with 5 of 11 Cornell students reporting "slightly less" mastery. (Nearly half the Cornell students took the course on a pass/no pass basis.) Rutgers-Camden students were the only group in which a majority did not judge 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 long," or "too brief."

A majority of students found distinct advantages in the course structure, online delivery, and pedagogical design. One student in this group wrote:

Overall I enjoyed the experience and found it as informative as a traditional law school course. It was superior in many ways as I could go back and listen to the lectures again and all of the primary law was sorted out for me by topic and it was just a click away.

I would take another online course if one were available.

Another commented:

I think this approach to learning takes a certain amount of discipline. Overall, it worked for me. I was diligent, however, about listening to the lectures every week. I also love the fact that when it was time to study for the exam, I could go back to any given lecture on a topic I was confused about or had questions about and review the material. This is not an option in the regular classroom situation, and I found it extremely helpful.

Others discovered that they missed the stimulation and discipline of classroom meetings. One student expressed this reaction as follows:

Unfortunately, while the idea of an online course was very appealing, I don't think it worked for me. I thought the benefit of not having to attend a class would outweigh the prospect of sitting in front of the computer, but in the end I realized that to succeed in the course I needed to have the focus that physically attending a class requires. I thought I could handle the "only on my own schedule" aspect of the online course, but in the end it just didn't work. So, I would have to say that in the future, I would likely spend the time in the classroom.

Having pre-recorded presentations that one can pause and replay is not an unmixed blessing. A student who responded very affirmatively to the online structure of the course, noting that "the time-shifting advantages to an evening student with a full-time job are great," observed that material in this format demands more time from a serious student:

[P]er unit time, the [recorded] lectures of this course contained at least twice the information as a live class lecture; there are no interruptions by students questions and the professor never has to slow down or repeat a point for emphasis, because the student has the ability to rewind or pause a lecture at any point.... The canned nature of the lectures also allows for more speaking perfection and less repetition than extemporaneous lectures.

Twenty-one percent of the responding students indicated that their regular approach to the online presentations included pausing them for note-taking and reflection; forty percent ran them more than once. Seventy-two 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.

Students appreciated the multimedia nature of the presentations. One wrote: "What I like very much about this course is that as you went along in the lecture, it would take you to relevant places on the Internet or bring you back to the outline so it was easier to follow along in the discussion." From another: "I did truly enjoy how you've had the pop-ups and how the text flowed with the lecture. That is a key element that cannot be removed."

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 really hold this course together, since they force one to proceed through the lectures in a timely fashion and focus on practical examples. In this matter, this course outshines traditional courses." Another commented: "The mastery exercises were good tests of all that we'd been studying. I definitely appreciated the encouragement we had to be brief (three paragraphs) and not too technical." A third: "The mastery exercises were an incredible tool and I recommend them for any of your courses. They reproduce the 'feel' of an exam taking process while allowing one to delve into the material. Although, it was frustrating trying to keep up, I must say that I felt challenged and in the process learned accordingly." 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 spoke for numerous others: "The feedback for the mastery exercises were extremely helpful!!!"

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, considered it "a good medium to explore and expand on the material" and "a lively place to share ideas." But for others the asynchronous nature of the discussion and the fact that a few students were very active and swift to participate led to a feeling of frustration: "Often the most straightforward responses were posted very soon after questions posed, and there was very little left to add." (In the controlled environment of the classroom a teacher can limit "gunners" by not always calling on them.) Some students who responded less favorably to the discussion area referred to the already heavy workload and a preference for upper-level courses that don't demand regular, active engagement: "I didn't find the course discussion area very helpful. Very few courses have that much class participation and I generally prefer the lectures and teacher's comments over that from other students."

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.

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 2004). We hope to have all this year's schools participating again, and a few others are likely to join.