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USC Jumps Into the Online LL.M. Competition

Karen Sloan

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Are fully online masters of law programs for foreign-trained attorneys the wave of future? It's starting to look that way.

The University of Southern California Gould School of Law announced on Tuesday that it would launch an online program that will allow lawyers from around the world to obtain an LL.M. in U.S. law without ever setting foot on the Los Angeles campus.

USC becomes the third U.S. law school—and the highest ranking one—to offer such a program.

"The online program allows international students to pursue a graduate degree focused in American law while meeting their professional and personal obligations in their home countries," USC Law dean Robert Rasmussen said. "Classes offered online mirror those taught in the residential program. The program will also offer workshops on writing résumés, interviewing skills and networking practice—all online."

USC already hosts about 170 international attorneys each year in its residential LL.M. program.

Florida Coastal School of Law was the first to offer an online LL.M. in U.S. law in 2010. Washington University in St. Louis School of Law followed suit in 2012, effective at the start of 2013. Administrators initially expected to enroll about 20 students, but 51 are participating, law school spokeswoman Jessica Martin said.

It's not surprising that law schools are exploring new ways to bring in foreign LL.M. students. Residential programs for foreign attorneys at U.S. law schools have proliferated over the last decade. The total number of non-J.D. students—of which foreign-trained LL.M. candidates comprise the single largest group—increased by 52 percent between 2000 and 2012, according to the American Bar Association. By contrast, J.D. enrollment grew by just 1 percent during that same period.

LL.M. programs are financially appealing to law schools. Most foreign students pay full tuition, which can run as high as \$70,000. Plus, LL.M. programs generally don't require many new faculty members, since students often take open seats in J.D. classes already on offer.

Revenue from LL.M. tuition has also become something of a lifeline for some law schools as J.D. enrollments plummeted during the past three years. They face little oversight from the ABA and law schools are not required to report the incoming academic credentials of students or their employment outcomes. Neither are LL.M. students a factor in *U.S. News & World Report's* influential law school rankings. (*U.S. News* ranks USC at No. 18)

The rapid rise in the number of foreign-trained attorneys on U.S. law campuses has led some to question the quality of the education received and whether those students are being fully integrated into the law school community.

In a fairly recent change, it appears the pool of foreign attorneys willing to come to the United States and shell out for an LL.M. is beginning to shrink. U.S. schools face more competition from each other and from similar programs in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom.

"In talking with other institutions, residential LL.M. program enrollments seem to have been fairly static over the past couple of

years,” said Deborah Call, associate dean for graduate and international programs at USC Law. “There has been an increase in competition, and I think we’ll continue to see that.”

An online LL.M. program likely would appeal to a relatively untapped pool of potential students: foreign-trained attorneys who want the credential but are not willing to leave their jobs, families or home countries for a year to earn it, Call said.

In a further bid to break out of the pack, USC’s online program will offer students the opportunity to concurrently earn a certificate in entertainment law or business law at no added cost. They also may spend four weeks on campus to attend the summer law program, in which international LL.M. candidates work on their English or prep for a bar exam.

As with the program at Washington University, tuition for USC’s online LL.M. will be the same per credit as for the residential program—for a total cost of about \$42,000. USC will start accepting applications for the program, which will start next fall, early next year. Administrators hope to start with 35 students and grow the program slowly over time.

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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