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Distance Learning
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All-online law school challenges precedents

By Tony Mauro
USA TODAY

Ivy-covered buildings, looming law professors and quaking students are all part of the classic, *Paper Chase* image of American law schools.

At Concord University School of Law, a visitor would find no looming, no quaking and, for that matter, no buildings. The first all-Internet law school, Concord is causing a stir in the tradition-steeped legal world.

Concord is a year old; its 182 students worldwide view taped lectures via the Internet, discuss the law with instructors in online chats, and take tests via e-mail.

What they don't do is interact in person with their professors and fellow students, and that is what is triggering criticism, from the lofty levels of the Supreme Court on down through the profession. A hot debate over Concord has erupted on Jurist, a Web site for law professors. The American Bar Association, which accredits law schools, is convening a meeting next month to discuss issues raised by the "distance learning" that takes place at Concord.

Other law schools are venturing into online teaching, but none as completely as Concord.

"The process inevitably loses something vital when students learn in isolation," Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said in a speech at Rutgers University last month. "I am troubled by ventures like Concord, where a student can get a (law degree) without ever laying eyes on a fellow student or professor."

Ginsburg's speech focused not-unwelcome attention on the fledgling Los Angeles-based law school.

"We certainly respect Justice Ginsburg's opinion, but believe that if she were to tour Concord online, she would change her mind," dean Jack Goetz says.

Goetz and other school officials and students insist that the interaction between faculty and students online is at least as good as in the traditional classroom.

The classic law school classroom, characterized by intense questioning from all-knowing professors, is noto-

rious for intimidating students.

"It's not as if traditional law schools offer some sort of cozy intimacy between students and professors," says William Boletta, a Concord student living in Japan. "I get a tremendous amount of personal attention from professors that might be harder to come by in a face-to-face situation."

Concord uses renowned legal scholars, including Harvard's Arthur Miller, for its lectures. Students can access the lectures anytime. The chats take place at fixed times so they can capture some of the "live" interaction of traditional classrooms.

This kind of instruction is spreading rapidly in a range of graduate school disciplines, says Frank Mayadas of the Sloan Foundation, which is funding such programs at 60 universities nationwide. "There's a lot of nostalgia about the traditional methods, but this is not a fad," he says.

Ginsburg acknowledged in her speech that the Internet can be a positive teaching tool, but she said complete reliance on it for a law school education is troubling.

But Concord officials say the Internet format is making law school more available to people who cannot afford to take time off from work or family to devote three years to full-time legal education.

"You can put the kids to bed and go to law school," says Andrew Rosen, chief operating officer of Kaplan Education Centers, a test-preparation company that owns Concord. Kaplan is a subsidiary of The Washington Post Co.

Annual tuition for the four-year program at Concord is \$4,200, a fraction of the cost of most law schools.

Concord is not accredited by the American Bar Association — and cannot be, according to current standards. ABA rules prohibit "study by correspondence" and require more than 1,000 hours of classroom time.

But with more law schools experimenting with online instruction, the ABA is beginning to tackle the subject and tinker with its rules.

"Clearly this is something we're going to have to face," ABA spokeswoman Nancy Slonim says.

Russian firebrand's party out of election

Reuters

MOSCOW — Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy suffered a major setback on Monday as officials banned his party from running in parliamentary election in December.

The firebrand politician, infamous for outrageous comments on anything from sex to Russia's geopolitical might, was forced to sit and listen as the Central Electoral Commission rejected his Liberal Democratic Party's (LDPR) list of candidates.

The ruling meant Zhirinovskiy will have to draw up a new list of candidates and form an election bloc that will include the LDPR rather than have the party as a separate entity for the Dec. 18 election for the Duma, the lower house of parliament.

He said that he will appeal the commission's decision in court but that if the process took too long, he would set about creating his election union. "We have two election blocs registered at the Justice Ministry. We will create a bloc called 'The Zhirinovskiy Bloc' so people understand who we are," he said.

Under Russian law, an election union must consist of at least two parties registered at least one year before the vote.

"We will approve a list of candidates at a meeting of the bloc, but will only have poor and wretched people," Zhirinovskiy said.

One of the commission's main objections to the LDPR candidates was that they were not being truthful in their assets statements. Zhirinovskiy's own candidacy was put on hold by the commission. Controversy also had surrounded the party list amid allegations that some of the candidates had criminal records. The party said the allegations were groundless.

Zhirinovskiy, 53, burst onto the political stage in 1991 when he came in a shocking third in Russian presidential elections on the eve of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. His threats of nuclear attacks on Germany and Japan caused fears that extremist forces would come to power in a country with the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal.

His party won first place in a 1993 parliamentary poll, but his fortunes later declined and he dropped to fifth place in 1996 presidential elections.

The LDPR is the third-largest party in the Duma, elected in 1995, but some analysts predicted it might not make the 5% hurdle needed for the next Duma.

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Mudslide death toll could reach hundreds

By Mark Stevenson
The Associated Press

ACALANA, Mexico — In what could be the highest toll in a week of flooding across southeastern Mexico, a deforested mountainside collapsed on this remote village and killed all but 30 of the 150-200 residents, witnesses said Monday.

The official toll from the floods reached 344 Monday, but Mexican newspapers, which collected reports from witnesses and local officials, gave tolls as high as 600.

The Acalana deaths did not appear to be accounted for in the official toll.

Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo has called the flooding Mexico's worst disaster this decade. Area residents said that Thursday morning, a chunk of the hillside that had been planted with corn broke away and cascaded down onto Acalana, a remote, Nahuatl-speaking Indian village 90 miles northeast of Mexico City.

Many of the village's residents had been taking shelter to escape steady rains when the mudslide occurred.

"They had gathered there in the Catholic church when the

landslide occurred," said Lorenzo Martinez, a teacher who was at a shelter in Zempoala, a few miles away.

A few tried to flee when they heard the thunderous mudslide, and about 30 escaped, witnesses said.

The witnesses added that the exact number of survivors wasn't clear because they fled across the now-swollen river to a shelter downstream.

The rest are missing and presumed dead.

Soldiers reached the area Sunday and began to dig into the huge flank of mud. They found seven bodies on the edge of the mudslide, but the troops were forced to abandon their work when more mud began to fall toward the village.

"They couldn't even search. They went up, and as they started digging, the earth started to fall," said Domingo Martinez, who is not related to Lorenzo Martinez. "They found the bodies of seven people on the edge. Those were the ones who had tried to run."

Most of the 1,700 residents of Zempoala had evacuated Friday, just before a mudslide there covered most of the houses.

No one was killed, but the danger continues for the 250 people, mostly elderly and children, who could not evacuate.

The mudslide formed a dam on the Zacatepec River, creating a lake.

Authorities fear the dam will burst, which would threaten the remaining residents, who can't get out overland.

"The water continues to rise. It's about 15 meters (50 feet) high," said Tomas Martinez Rodan, a local official. "We have to find some way to get those people out because we don't know if it's going to break."

Army helicopters flew over Zempoala, but it was not clear if they would be able to land to rescue the remaining residents.

Acalana's mudslide appeared to have been worsened by deforestation.

Residents had clear-cut the surrounding forests and planted corn on top of the 500-foot hill. Houses were beneath the mountain.

Lorenzo Martinez pointed out across the broad, mist-shrouded valley and said: "Look, where there are still trees the earth didn't move."

The mountain had given way where corn was planted.