

LOCAL

First students from Mitchell Hamline's online 'hybrid' law school graduate

Online degree program is first of its kind in the U.S.

By Maura Lerner (<http://www.startribune.com/maura-lerner/10645281/>) Star Tribune |

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For Briana Al Taqatqa and her classmates, Sunday's graduation was a relatively modest affair, with friends and family cheering them on as they got their law degrees.

But in some ways, she knows, the whole world was watching.

Three years ago, the Mitchell Hamline School of Law broke with tradition to launch the nation's first "hybrid" law degree program, allowing students like her to do most of their work online with only occasional visits to campus.

Ever since, the hidebound legal profession has been waiting anxiously to see how these "hybrid students" fare in the real world.

Now, it's about to find out.

On Sunday, Al Taqatqa, a 29-year-old from Mound, became one of the first graduates of what Mark Gordon, the dean of the law school, calls "the evening and weekend program of the 21st century."

Technically, Al Taqatqa and 15 of her classmates are finishing a year ahead of schedule; the program is designed to take four years.

But that's one of the advantages of the new model, Gordon says. "We found that a lot of students just wanted to accelerate," he said. "And the way the program was structured, they were able to."

Already, Al Taqatqa has learned what it means to be a trailblazer in the legal profession. During job interviews, she could see the skepticism on the faces of recruiters who came to the St. Paul campus. "They had no idea what the hybrid program was," she said. "So I had a lot of explaining to do."

Instead of face-to-face classes, the hybrid students spend 11 or 12 weeks studying online each semester. Officially, half of their credits are earned online; the rest are crammed into one intensive "capstone" week on campus. First- and second-year students also spend a week on campus before classes begin.

It's a far cry from the traditional Socratic method, where a professor might stand in front of a lecture hall and randomly pick out students for public grilling. That practice, of challenging students to think on their feet, has long been a pillar of law school, and one reason the profession is wary of online degrees, said Andrew Perlman, dean of the Suffolk University Law School in Boston.

"The argument, I think, is that at least some pieces are lost if you move too far in the online direction," said Perlman, who chairs the Center for Innovation for the American Bar Association (ABA). "But the Mitchell Hamline experiment is certainly one that a lot of people are watching."

Exceeding expectations

So far, Mitchell Hamline is the only American law school to offer this option, out of more than 200 accredited by the ABA. It needed special permission to do so; normally, the ABA limits law students to no more than 15 online credits, about a sixth of their total.

In this case, it meant revamping much of the course work to fit the new format.



(<http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/Hybrid.JPG>)
LEILA NAVIDI, STAR TRIBUNE

Mitchell Hamline student Brian Kennedy, from El Paso, Texas, attended a class in person during an intensive "capstone" week.

"I don't know that any of us had a clear idea how it was going to turn out," said Michael Steenson, a professor at Mitchell Hamline who has taught for 45 years. "But it really exceeded my wildest expectations."

Since 2015, each hybrid class has drawn 400 to 500 applications for the 96 available slots, according to the law school. The students, who come from all over the country, tend to be older and more accomplished than the typical first-years, said Gordon, and include venture capitalists, doctors, airline pilots, teachers and even a Major League Baseball umpire. For many, including people living in rural Minnesota, it's a chance to fulfill a dream without uprooting their families or giving up their jobs, he said. "You talk to these students — without this program, they could not have gotten a law degree."

The hybrid program's tuition is \$30,346 a year, the same as the law school's part-time on-campus program.

The law school promised to monitor student progress and report back to the ABA. "So far," Gordon says, "all of the indicators are that they are learning the material as well as our traditional students."

In fact, two members of the first class — Al Taqatqa and Brian Kennedy, 62, from El Paso, Texas — won international recognition at a law student competition in Oslo, Norway, last summer. The classmates, who practiced on Skype because they were rarely in the same city, were named world champions of the International Negotiation Competition, which pits students from around the globe in a contest to show who could negotiate the best contract.

"We were absolutely aware that we were carrying the banner for the genre, the hybrid genre," said Kennedy, a former Minnesotan and concert promoter who graduated with his law degree Sunday. But the judges, he noted, "were not aware that we were anything other than just law students."

Testing the investment

The hybrid program wasn't without drawbacks, Gordon admits. "The truth is, it's a huge financial investment to do this and do it right," he said. The law school hired three full-time designers to convert classes online, and it needs technical troubleshooters round-the-clock to handle emergencies. "We are," he said, "a 24/7 law school."

But one of the biggest tests is still to come: seeing how well the hybrid grads do on the bar exam. If they score as well as — or better than — other students, that could be a turning point, Perlman said. "I think we'll see a lot of law schools move in that direction."

Al Taqatqa agrees. "If we pass, that's going to be a really good sign," she said. "It's going to show that you don't have to do law school in a traditional way."

Just last fall, an ABA advisory panel recommended easing the limits on online courses at law schools. And a second school, Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles, won a waiver in November to launch a similar hybrid program in 2019.

Law schools may never go fully online, Gordon says. But "I think that more blended learning is the wave of the future," he said. "The benefits are just too great for legal education to pass up."