



# Choosing the Right Path

## Get the Most out of Your Paralegal Education

Jan Hill

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 1,000 colleges and universities, law schools and proprietary schools offer formal paralegal educational programs. Some of these programs are short term and offer a certificate, while others take several years to complete and earn the student an associate, bachelor's or master's degree (see sidebar on page 25 for an overview of types of paralegal programs). Courses within the program may be offered on-ground, online or a combination of both. Although the focus of most paralegal programs is general in nature, some emphasize a particular area of law or competency, such as litigation, civil procedure or ethics. Some programs are approved by the American Bar Association, while others are not, but all paralegal students hope to gain marketable skills that will help them land a paralegal job and advance in their careers.

### Choosing a Quality Paralegal Program

According to Scott Hauert, president of the American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE), a topnotch paralegal program will provide education that is relevant to those seeking to enter the profession. "AAfPE encourages paralegal schools to take the students as they come to them," said Hauert. "That means assessing the level they are when they come into the program, and providing the skills necessary for them to get an entry-level paralegal job in whatever market they are in."

AAfPE recommends that the curriculum of a paralegal program include courses in legal research and writing, litigation, ethics, contracts, business organizations and torts. Hauert said that courses should develop students' critical thinking, communication, computer and organizational skills and competency in handling ethical issues (see the sidebar on page 24 for factors to consider in choosing a paralegal program). An experiential learning component such as an internship, practicum or clinical experience is also extremely important. "Paralegals need to not only have the practical skills but also understand the underlying legal theories of the matters they work on in the law firm," said Hauert. "A good program will help give them the skills to do that."

According to Hauert, AAfPE encourages students to enter paralegal programs that include some general education requirements. "Short term certificate programs that are not designed for students who have already earned an associate or baccalaureate degree often do not provide the foundation necessary to set the student up for employment opportunities or future educational endeavors," Hauert said. "A well-rounded education is always the best choice."

Approximately 260 of the nation's paralegal programs are approved by the American Bar Association (ABA). One mission of the ABA,



according to its website, is to “foster high quality paralegal education and training and the development of educational standards.” The ABA’s Standing Committee on Paralegals and Approval Commission conducts the approval process through an intensive review and on-site evaluation of paralegal programs that are seeking approval. According to the ABA, the goal of the approval process is to lead to the development of “superior paralegal education programs designed to raise the competence of those individuals who assist lawyers in the delivery of legal services.”

While the approval of the American Bar Association is a helpful indicator of the value of a paralegal program and graduating from an ABA-approved program can enhance a paralegal’s employment opportunities, the costs and demands of approval are sometimes outweighed by the needs of the particular market served by a program. “ABA approval should be one consideration in choosing a paralegal program, but it should not be the sole factor, or the determining factor,” said Hauert. “Potential students should also look at the reputation of the college and the program.”

Hauert, who is also the paralegal program coordinator for Phoenix College in Phoenix, Arizona, said a major part of offering an effective paralegal program is understanding the needs of a particular legal environment and positioning oneself for change along with it. “Litigation has been a constant, and all other areas tend to follow the market, so paralegals need to stay tuned in to the current legal climate,” he said. “I live in a major metropolitan area that is extremely technology-oriented, so training in e-filing, electronic court presentation software programs and litigation is essential. Bankruptcy and real estate paralegals are in demand in many parts of the country now because of the economy. In a more rural area, agricultural law might be a good area to explore; paralegals in Los Angeles

might focus more on entertainment law. It’s all about knowing your area and how to enhance your marketability within it.”

### Diverse Educational Paths

Not all paralegals take the same educational path to achieve career success. For example, Peter Buckley, a paralegal in the Office of Town Counsel in Arlington, Massachusetts, minored in paralegal studies and received his two-year certificate while earning a bachelor of science in criminal justice at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts. “By having a background in the criminal justice system, I knew what type of law I wanted to focus on – investigations,” said Buckley. “I have been able to use

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this background in every position I have had as a paralegal.” Since Buckley worked as a corporate paralegal before entering the government sector, his training made the transition smoother. “The beauty of being a paralegal is that you are taught to adapt quickly to any setting whether it be a firm, a corporate environment or a government entity.”

Deborah Windsor, who has been a paralegal for 15 years in Columbia, South Carolina, recently decided to return to paralegal school because knowledge in other areas of law was not forthcoming in her job with a contract and probate law attorney. “Most law firms are now so specialized that you can get stuck in one area of law with very few opportunities to be proficient in other areas,” said Windsor. “When I was trying to decide which courses to take, I took the current marketplace into consideration. Foreclosures are really big here and there seemed to be a lot of attorneys looking for real estate paralegals. So I looked at which courses would make me more marketable as well as which areas I was interested in.”

Elona M. Jouben, MPS, a paralegal

and program assistant at the American Association of University Professors in Washington, D.C., graduated from college in 2000 with a B.A. in political science and the intention of going to law school. But life and finances derailed her plans and instead she took an entry level position in a small law firm. “Within six months I decided I no longer wanted to be an attorney, but was very interested in the paralegal role,” said Jouben, who went on to earn a second B.A. in legal studies/pre-law from the University of West Florida in 2006, and a master’s in paralegal studies from George Washington University in 2010. “I realized that my personality and what I wanted for work/life balance were better suited to becoming a

paralegal rather than an attorney.”

Jouben considers the analytical reasoning, critical thinking and legal research and writing courses she took to be the

most useful parts of her education. “Those skills are essential no matter what area of law or employment environment—law firm, corporation, non-profit—you work in,” she said. And the least helpful? “Honestly, the course I had in law office computer technology was probably the least useful,” she said, adding that the course focused on a few specific legal software programs that quickly became obsolete. “The use of specific legal software programs varies from firm to firm and region to region. Those skills are best learned on the job. I think the legal technology components of paralegal programs should focus more on general software programs that are used every day, like Microsoft Office suite, Adobe and e-discovery.”

### The Learning Curve

For many new paralegal graduates, negotiating the legal landscape can be trial by fire, even for a paralegal like Elona Jouben, who already had a year of law firm experience under her belt before beginning her paralegal program and a total of five years while earning her degree. “Shortly after com-



pleting my paralegal degree, I went to work for an insurance defense firm, which was a very different environment," said Jouben. "To some degree, I felt like I was starting over. While I believe formal education is very important, it cannot teach the practical paralegal skills that are essential for working in a law firm. There will always be a learning curve to any job, especially for novice paralegals entering the workforce with only a degree. Probably the most important practical skill I took from my education was how to find the answers to my questions."

When Fresno, California paralegal Sara Cooksey entered paralegal school at Fresno City College, she was positive that she was destined for a career in a criminal prosecutor's office. Instead, she interned for Attorney

Randolf Krbechek, a solo practitioner in Fresno who specializes in business litigation, real estate, wills, trusts and probate law, and later accepted a full-time position with that firm. "I didn't take any electives in those areas, so I had a pretty big learning curve," said Cooksey. "But my supervising attorney is extremely patient and didn't expect me to know everything right off the bat. He was actually looking for someone with less experience that he could train specifically for his practice."

Peter Buckley admits he encountered a learning curve during his first paralegal job, but believes that his education helped shorten that curve. "There will always be a learning curve no matter

Buckley. "Experience teaches you how to deal with that."

### Continuing Education

Buckley is a strong believer in education, both during paralegal school and beyond. "Continuing education should be a priority in this industry," he said. He notes that Continuing Legal Education (CLE) credits are critical to success as a paralegal.

While working for a large insurance company, Buckley was not always afforded the opportunity to ask questions and, in seeking avenues to learn more, he discovered LinkedIn. After networking in existing LinkedIn paralegal groups, Buckley started his own

### Tips for Choosing a Paralegal Program

According to AAFPE President Scott Hauert, AAFPE's discussion of "Evaluating Paralegal Programs" receives the most hits of any page on the organization's website. Here are some important factors to consider, according to AAFPE:

- What is the reputation of the institution and the paralegal program?
- What services are offered to the students?
- What facilities are available to students?
- What activities are available to students?
- What is the mission of the institution and what are the goals of the program?
- What is the content and nature of the curriculum?
- What are the graduation requirements?
- What are the backgrounds of the program director and faculty?
- What are the special considerations of enrolling in a distance education program?

Source: [www.aafpe.org](http://www.aafpe.org)

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if it is your first paralegal job or your twenty-first," said Buckley. "And with every position you have, you will take that curve and use it as an educational tool. We never stop learning in this field, and our education prepares us by supplying the fundamentals necessary to begin working as a paralegal." Buckley acknowledges he didn't learn everything about being a paralegal in school. "What the programs cannot teach is the actual work, as every matter will be different and bring with it its own unique challenges," said

group, Paralegal Network, in 2008. The group took off and today includes over 8,200 members worldwide. "The group has become a vital networking source for me which I have now made part of my daily routine," he said. "I learn something new every day with the group."

Elona Jouben mentors new paralegals through a student mentoring program that she developed. Her approach to mentoring is to empower others to help themselves. "This can range from offering suggestions on practical skills such as obtaining, tracking and summarizing





records, to sending sample forms and charts I've developed over the years, to directing them to resources that will help them find answers," said Jouben. "Formal paralegal education is certainly an essential foundation to a successful paralegal career, but it is not a panacea to learning the practical paralegal skills."

### Hot Trends in Paralegal Education

According to Hauert, as e-discovery becomes more main stream, it will be increasingly more effective for law firms to put paralegals in charge of this growing niche. "Technology in general is going to open more doors for paralegals. The ability to manage technology, along with substantive legal knowledge, will continue to make paralegals an extremely valuable member of the legal team," said Hauert.

Paralegal programs are moving toward more online teaching techniques and technologies in the form of social media, online classrooms like Blackboard and Desire2Learn, and online quizzes and homework, all of which will free up classroom time for live discussions and interpersonal skill development. "Our students have, in many cases, grown up with an iPad in their hands, and online teaching keeps them engaged and allows them learn at their own pace," said Hauert. "People learn better when they're doing something interactive with the content."

Since paralegal internships can be hard to find, schools are starting to offer virtual internships that are provided through vendors, Hauert said. These virtual internship programs, such as the one offered by USLegal.com, typically connect those who are seeking an internship with attorneys who are looking for in-house or virtual paralegal interns. Because virtual internships are not limited by location, internship opportunities are often greatly expanded.

According to Hauert, the outlook is bright for today's paralegal students. "If you're willing to learn, work hard and have good basic skills, you'll get that first job, and the ability to move into different areas of law as well," he said. "Just know that the legal job you have today may not be the legal job you

have in ten years."

*Jan Hill is a certified paralegal for the Office of General Counsel of National American University, and*

*also a freelance writer. She enjoys writing on legal topics as well as education and careers for newspapers, magazines, websites, and on her personal writing blog, [www.raisedwrite.com](http://www.raisedwrite.com).*

## Paralegal Programs At-A-Glance

Many public and private institutions offer paralegal education programs, including community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, business colleges and proprietary institutions. Such program diversity makes it possible for individuals from diverse backgrounds to enter the paralegal profession. The most common types of programs include:

### Associate Degree Programs

- Offered by two-year community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and some business schools.
- A student earns an associate degree after successful completion of 60 to 70 semester units. The ratio of the curriculum is usually one-half paralegal courses and the other half consisting of courses in general education and related areas. When selecting an associate degree program, prospective students should consider the possibility of continuing their education to earn a four-year degree at another college and, if so, they should examine the transferability of credits to and from the programs they are considering.

### Baccalaureate Degree Programs

Some four-year colleges and universities offer a paralegal studies major, minor or concentration within a major. These programs are usually about 120 to 130 semester units in length, and include 30 to 60 semester units in paralegal and related courses.

### Certificate Programs

Numerous kinds of educational institutions offer paralegal certificate programs ranging from 18 to 60 semester units. Longer programs usually include both general education and paralegal courses, similar to associate degree programs. Certificate programs are usually intended for students who already hold an associate or a baccalaureate degree and want to enter the paralegal profession.

### Master's Degree Programs

Several colleges and universities that offer undergraduate paralegal degree programs are now offering an advanced degree in paralegal studies, and in law-related areas such as legal administration and legal studies.

### Online Programs

A growing number of educational institutions and other providers are offering paralegal courses and/or entire paralegal programs through distance education. Some questions prospective students should ask regarding distance programs include:

- What type of distance delivery system is used - interactive video broadcasts to distant sites, telecourses or web-based courses on the Internet?
- Do you have the proper equipment, or will you need to upgrade your system?
- Does the institution provide training to students in using the system and technical assistance while taking the course?
- How much interaction takes place among teachers and students during courses and through what medium?
- How well suited are you to learning through a distance delivery method, which usually requires a high degree of self-discipline, self-motivation and independence?

Source: [www.aafpe.org](http://www.aafpe.org)