

Guide to Choosing a Paralegal Education Program



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Introduction

This brochure has been prepared by the Cincinnati Paralegal Association in response to the growing concern for individuals to meet the educational criteria mandated by employers when seeking a paralegal position.

In the early years of the paralegal profession, most paralegals were trained on the job. The first paralegal courses were offered in the late 1960's. Today over 800 programs are in existence in the United States.

Formal education is now required to prepare future paralegals. There is a variety of formal educational programs available. It is extremely important to evaluate any prospective paralegal program prior to enrollment.

NFPA

Recommendations

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations ("NFPA"), of which the Cincinnati Paralegal Association is a member, supports quality education for paralegals and favors minimum formal educational criteria for paralegals. Current trends indicate that a four-year degree is the hiring standard in many markets.

Types of Programs

Law firms, corporations, governmental entities and other paralegal employers utilize the services of paralegals differently and require various educational criteria for hiring. Presently, there is no governmental regulation of paralegals nor mandatory accreditation of paralegal programs. Paralegal programs fall into one of the following categories:

FOUR-YEAR (BACHELOR'S DEGREE) PROGRAMS

A baccalaureate degree is awarded after the successful completion of four-years (about 120 semester or 180 quarter units) of formal education. A student usually majors in paralegal

studies. The remainder of the coursework is comprised of general education and electives.

POST-BACCALAUREATE PROGRAMS

The student has a bachelor's degree in any major before entering the program. Post-graduate programs ordinarily lead to a certificate in paralegal studies in one year or less.

TWO-YEAR (ASSOCIATE DEGREE) PROGRAMS

An associate degree is conferred after the successful completion of two years (about 60 semester or 90 quarter units) of formal education. These programs are offered at community colleges and universities. The curriculum generally includes liberal arts coursework in addition to paralegal courses.

PROPRIETARY PROGRAMS

These programs are offered by private profit-making schools which generally offer a certificate upon completion. The length and curriculum varies, but can usually be completed in three to eighteen months. A high school diploma is usually required for admission.

ABA Guidelines

The American Bar Association ("ABA") has issued guidelines for institutions to follow when establishing a paralegal program. These guidelines serve as the criteria upon which the ABA evaluates and approves programs. To be considered for approval, a program must meet the following standards which have been adopted by the ABA. The guidelines for approval require a college-level program which:

1. Is part of an accredited educational institution.
2. Incorporates at least 60 semester or 90 quarter units of classroom work, which must include general education and at least 18 semester or 27 quarter units of legal specialty courses.
3. Has an advisory committee with attorneys and paralegals from public and private sectors.
4. Has qualified, experienced instructors.

5. Has adequate financial support from the institution.
6. Has adequate student services including counseling and placement.
7. Has an adequate library available.
8. Has appropriate facilities and equipment. Seeking ABA approval is voluntary on the part of the institution; therefore, non-approval does not necessarily mean that a program is not of good quality.

Evaluation of Programs

In evaluating a paralegal program, the following factors should be considered:

1. The educational objectives of the program should be stated clearly in the program literature.
2. The reputation of the program should be considered.
3. Admission standards and the level of education required for acceptance into the program shows the academic level of the program and your eligibility.
4. ABA Approval indicates that the program has met the standards prescribed by the American Bar Association.
5. Membership in the American Association for Paralegal Education ("AAFPE") shows that the administration is interested in current developments in paralegal education.
6. Look at the qualifications of the administrator and for faculty members who are experienced attorneys utilizing the services of paralegals or who are experienced paralegals.
7. Examine the required and elective legal courses for both theory and practical skills and legal courses in your area of interest.
8. Read any contract carefully.

Questions to Ask the Program Director

1. Is the program ABA approved? If not, how is it accredited?
2. Do your previous college credits transfer? Can you receive credit for "life-experience" or advanced placement? Will the credits earned at this institution transfer elsewhere?
3. What is the cost of tuition, registration, books and other fees? Are scholarships available?
4. Are student services available such as orientation, tutoring, student associations, counseling and financial aid?
5. What is the length of the program, and are classes offered at times convenient for you?
6. What type of degree or certificate is awarded upon completion?
7. What are the class sizes?
8. What type of library is available for legal research?
9. Is an internship or co-op program offered and/ or required?
10. Is there a placement program? What type of work do graduates perform and what firms or other business entities employ them?