

American Association for Paralegal Education
Statement on Academic Quality
October 9, 1998

The American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE), established in 1981, is an organization dedicated to promoting high standards for paralegal education. Educational institutions that are voting members of AAfPE have adopted this Statement of Academic Quality.

Preamble

Paralegal education is a unique academic curriculum, composed of both substantive legal knowledge and professional skills that incorporates legal theory with an understanding of practical applications. This intellectually demanding course of study is derived from the responsibilities of paralegals as legal professionals. It is the philosophy of this organization that a person is qualified as a paralegal with (1) an associate or baccalaureate degree or equivalent course work; and (2) a credential in paralegal education completed in any of the following types of educational programs: associate degree, baccalaureate degree (major, minor or concentration), certificate, or master's degree. AAfPE recognizes these essential components of quality paralegal education programs:

Curriculum Development

Quality paralegal education programs monitor the responsibilities and competencies expected by employers on an ongoing basis. They regularly incorporate this information into a well-designed curriculum with a logical sequence of courses that emphasize interactive learning (student to student and faculty to student) and assignments that teach practical job-related paralegal skills in conjunction with underlying theory.

Facilities

Quality paralegal education programs have a physical learning environment that provides: (1) access to legal research library facilities that include computer-based resources; (2) classrooms that provide opportunities for interaction among students and between students and the instructor and include the necessary equipment and technology to facilitate learning; (3) a convenient physical location for administration/support staff and the provision of student services; and (4) accessibility pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

Faculty

The faculty of quality paralegal education programs consists of legal professionals and, where appropriate, other similarly qualified persons in good standing in their profession

who (1) possess expertise and experience in their subject area; (2) have background working as or with paralegals; (3) can demonstrate teaching ability; (4) hold a graduate degree or possess exceptional expertise in the legal subject to be taught; and (5) are committed to the role of paralegals in the delivery of legal services. Evaluation is conducted on a frequent and regular basis to ensure that quality instruction is maintained and enhanced. Quality programs strive to achieve diversity in the composition of faculty. The faculty of quality paralegal education programs consists of legal professionals and, where appropriate, other similarly qualified persons in good standing in their profession who (1) possess expertise and experience in their subject area; (2) have background working as or with paralegals; (3) can demonstrate teaching ability; (4) hold a graduate degree or possess exceptional expertise in the legal subject to be taught; and (5) are committed to the role of paralegals in the delivery of legal services. Evaluation is conducted on a frequent and regular basis to ensure that quality instruction is maintained and enhanced. Quality programs strive to achieve diversity in the composition of faculty.

Marketing and Promotion

Quality paralegal education programs advertise in an ethical manner and in full compliance with all applicable laws and regulations. All representations in the following areas are factual as well as current and can be substantiated: (1) the job market, employment opportunity, compensation, and placement; (2) the knowledge and skills necessary to meet entry-level paralegal job qualifications; and (3) the transferability of course work to other educational institutions. Quality programs strive to achieve diversity in the composition of their student body.

Paralegal Instruction

Quality paralegal education programs maintain standards of excellence and include, either as separate classes or with the overall course of study, the following topics: ethics, substantive and procedural law, the American legal system, delivery of legal services, law offices and related environments, the paralegal profession, legal research and writing, law-related computer skills, legal interviewing and investigation, and areas of legal practice such as those described in AAFPE's Core Competencies for Paralegal Programs; and offers an experiential learning component, such as internship, practicum or clinical experience. Program Director Quality paralegal education programs provide adequate release time, funding for professional development opportunities, and administrative support for the program director to develop, monitor and accomplish the goals and objectives of the program, as well as assess the program's effectiveness in achieving these goals and objectives. The director is primarily responsible for the paralegal program. A program director is a legal professional or other similarly qualified person appropriately credentialed and in good standing in his or her profession, with knowledge, involvement and understanding of the paralegal profession and paralegal education.

Related Competencies

Quality paralegal education programs assist their students in acquiring these essential

related competencies, primarily in general education: (1) critical thinking skills (analysis, judgment, research, and problem-solving); (2) communication skills (oral, written, non-verbal, and interpersonal); (3) computer skills; (4) computational skills; (5) understanding of ethics; and (6) organizational skills. Graduates also possess a basic understanding of American history, business, and political systems.

Student Services

Quality paralegal education programs offer student services that include (1) academic counseling, (2) career information and placement assistance, and (3) information and/or opportunities for participation in such activities as honor societies, pro bono activities, professional and paralegal associations, and continuing legal education. Quality paralegal education programs offer student services that include (1) academic counseling, (2) career information and placement assistance, and (3) information and/or opportunities for participation in such activities as honor societies, pro bono activities, professional and paralegal associations, and continuing legal education.

The Paralegal Definition as amended now reads as:

Paralegals perform substantive and procedural legal work as authorized by law, which work, in the absence of the paralegal, would be performed by an attorney. Paralegals have knowledge of the law gained through education, or education and work experience, which qualifies them to perform legal work. Paralegals adhere to recognized ethical standards and rules of professional responsibility.

Position Statement of the American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) Regarding Educational Standards for Paralegal Regulation Proposals

The American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) has been in existence since 1981 and is the only national organization serving paralegal educators and institutions that offer paralegal programs. We presently have more than 450 members. AAfPE member schools currently enroll nearly 50,000 students and have nearly 200,000 graduates.

AAfPE acts as the national resource for paralegal education and has set minimum recommended educational standards for paralegal education programs to become institutional members. AAfPE believes that the paralegal profession requires training of sufficient length, sophistication, intensity, and quality to produce a functional entry-level paralegal.

Certain educational components should be required in any paralegal regulatory plan. AAfPE recommends that state legislatures, courts, and/or bar associations considering

paralegal regulation should adopt or include the AAFPE educational minimum standards described below:

Formal Paralegal Education

It is the position of AAFPE that some form of formal paralegal education should be present as a meaningful requirement in any paralegal regulation plan. This formal paralegal education should be offered through a program specifically designed to provide paralegal education.

Minimum Length of Study

A person is qualified as a paralegal with (1) an associate or baccalaureate degree or equivalent course work and (2) a credential in paralegal education from a paralegal program associated with an educational institution accredited by a nationally recognized agency completed in any of the following types of educational programs: associate degree, baccalaureate degree (major or minor), certificate, or master's degree.

A paralegal's education shall include, either as separate courses or within the overall course of study, coursework in substantive and procedural law, the American legal system, law offices and related environments, the paralegal profession, legal research and writing, ethics, and areas of legal practice such as those described in AAFPE's Core Competencies for Paralegal Programs.

The paralegal's credential shall include no fewer than 18 semester credit hours of substantive paralegal classes and shall be from a paralegal education program that, at the time the paralegal credential is granted, is:

1. An institutional member of the American Association for Paralegal Education; or
2. A paralegal educational program approved by the American Bar Association; or
3. A paralegal education program at the post-secondary (college) level that requires the student to have completed a minimum of sixty (60) semester hours (or the equivalent) of total study prior to graduation. A semester hour is equivalent to 15 classroom hours of at least 50 minutes in duration. The course offerings may be for credit or not for credit, but they should meet these minimum time periods.

Other Educational Institution Requirements

The educational institution should be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency. Additionally, the institution should meet the educational standards described in the AAFPE Statement of Academic Quality.

Minimum Educational Requirements Are Essential in Any Paralegal Regulation Plan

Paralegal education is a unique academic curriculum, composed of both substantive legal knowledge and professional skills, which incorporates legal theory with practical

application. Any proposal for regulation of paralegals should contain provisions incorporating the level of paralegal education necessary to enable graduates to meet the responsibilities of paralegals as legal professionals.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of short-term entry-level paralegal training programs of very limited duration, some with as few as 125 clock hours (which is less than nine semester credit hours). These programs do a fundamental disservice to the legal profession by creating unrealistic expectations in both employers and students that a quality paralegal education has been delivered, when such is not the case. State regulatory bodies are urged to adopt the educational minimums defined in this document as a requisite element of any paralegal regulation plan.

For further information on the American Association for Paralegal Education, please contact info@aape.org, or call our national headquarters at 856-423-2829.

*The AAFPE Board of Directors adopted this Position Statement
on February 24, 2001, at San Antonio, Texas.*