



Feature

Paralegal Certificate Exams

By Andrew Tan

The paralegal profession is necessary for the modern law office to function effectively today. Training for paralegals usually involves going through a legal assistant program but what else is out there?



As much as lawyers are the main stars of the legal profession, their seemingly infinite number is still unable to handle the volume of work. Therefore, lawyers are increasingly delegating substantive legal work to the members of their support staff known as paralegals.

Paralegals are not just employed by law firms. Corporations and insurance companies also use paralegals to handle some of their work. Tasks that are delegated to paralegals include research, investigation and analysis of documents, and maintaining client files.

The majority of paralegals working in law firms and corporations have completed a paralegal program that teaches the knowledge and skills that a paralegal will need on an everyday basis. Paralegal programs generally lead to either a degree or a certificate and can either be approved by the American Bar Association (ABA) or by other organizations, such as a state Department of Education. However, the ABA definition of a “certified” paralegal refers to someone who has passed one of the certification exams offered by one of the three major national paralegal organizations.

Currently, there are no certification exams required by any state in the United States for paralegals; however, some states, such as Texas, offer voluntary certificate exams. In addition, three national organizations—the National Association of Legal Assistants, Inc. (NALA); the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc. (NFPA); and NALS—administer voluntary certificate exams adhering to the ABA definition. These exams test categories such as communication, office procedures, ethics and judgment, and legal knowledge and skills.

In order to qualify for the exam, each organization differs

in its requirements. For example, the NALS requires that each candidate have three years’ experience in the legal field. In contrast, the NALA requires one of the following: (1) graduation from a legal assistant program approved by the ABA that offers either a certificate or degree, or completion of at least 60 semester hours of legal assistant education; (2) a bachelor’s degree in any field and one year of experience as a legal assistant; or (3) a high school diploma, seven years of legal assistant work under the supervision of a Bar member, and two years of continuing education prior to the examination. These certificates generally expire after five years due to the continuing education requirements set by these organizations.

Although the exams are not required, why would someone bother to take an exam when the programs that offer paralegal training are sufficient? The benefit to passing the exam is letting potential employers throughout the United States know that the paralegal they are hiring has the essential skills needed to effectively meet the needs of the legal community. In addition, these organizations have study guides and seminars, which can be found on their websites, to help candidates prepare for the exam.

According to the ABA website, regulation for the paralegal profession in the United States is potentially the strictest in California because it is the only state that has any laws directly regulating the profession. California law requires that such persons using the title “paralegal” or “legal assistant,” which are synonymous, meet set educational and/or experiential standards as well as continuing education requirements. In other states, the supervising attorney is viewed as the regulatory agent for paralegals. However, California may not be the only state with direct regulation for paralegals. North Carolina and Wisconsin are considering regulation, and other states may also wish to regulate paralegals in the future.



Feature

Potential effects of regulation might eventually translate into mandatory certificate examinations and continuing education requirements. Therefore, another benefit to taking a paralegal

certificate exam offered by any of the three organizations is that should states require one, paralegals who have passed it will have one more credential to add to their resumes.

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