



Feature

How Important is ABA Approval for Paralegal Programs?

By Anne O’Dell-Rivero

One of the more important factors when choosing a paralegal program is whether the school has obtained the approval of the American Bar Association (ABA).



No paralegal organization, law firm, or state bar will deny that ABA-approved programs carry with them higher degrees of legitimacy and even prestige, and most charge significantly higher tuition.

How do would-be paralegals decide which kind of program is right for them? According to many professionals in the field, the choice is entirely personal.

The right option will depend on

the individual’s financial position, geographical location, and specific career goals.

“If your goal is to work in a top law firm in a metropolitan area or in a Fortune 500 company, hiring requirements may eliminate graduates of non-ABA approved schools from being considered,” writes Lana Clark in a recent *Legal Assistant Today* article.

Especially in cases where a company is considering candidates from ABA-approved and non-ABA-approved programs, job seekers need to have the best credentials possible to obtain the best positions.

Depending on the overall quality of the program, a non-ABA-approved program may still be a good choice, as many programs meet the ABA’s requirements but choose not to apply for approval.

Duke University is a good example of this situation. In surveys, studies, and reports, this university is consistently ranked among the top 10 in the United States; yet its paralegal program has not been approved by the ABA.

The program’s website states, “Although now eligible to apply for ABA approval, the Duke University Paralegal Program has

decided not to pursue approval as we question whether it is in the best interest of our students.

“The majority of paralegal programs have chosen not to seek ABA approval. Out of more than 1200 programs, only around 250 have sought approval.”

The page also notes that, when employers are considering job candidates, “the reputation of the institution attended by the paralegal is often much more important” than whether the program was approved by the ABA.

The International Paralegal Management Association states on its website, “Many good legal assistant educational programs do not pursue ABA approval due to the time and cost involved in the approval process.

“Many non-ABA-approved schools are ‘in substantial compliance’ with the ABA guidelines and offer suitable educational training for legal assistants.”

Still, the site noted that many members to look upon ABA-approved programs more favorably than they regard those that are not approved.

Several state bar associations have sounded off on the issue, as well.

The Colorado Bar Association Paralegal Committee issued a statement pointing out that “it is an expensive process for the school to become and remain certified by the ABA. The decision to attend a school which has been approved by the ABA, and therefore is more expensive, is not an option all paralegal candidates are able to accept for various personal and economic reasons.”

However, the State Bar of Wisconsin and the State Bar of Nevada both expressed a preference for graduates of an ABA-approved program. In order for a paralegal with a non-ABA-



Feature

approved degree or certificate to be on an equal standing with paralegals from ABA-approved institutions, a Nevada Bar committee suggested that he or she would have to have significant experience as “a legal assistant under the direct supervision of a duly licensed Nevada attorney.”

A similar committee in Wisconsin suggested that such paralegals be required to take a proficiency exam; ABA-approved-program graduates would not.

With all these variables to consider, it is important that each prospective paralegal conduct his or her own research. Find out what recent graduates think about the programs you may be considering. Has their school’s status helped or hurt them?

Also, contact any law firms, government agencies, or corporations that have captured your interest as potential employers. Ask about their hiring practices, and find out whether or not ABA approval is an important factor.

The next steps, writes Clark, are to “weigh those comments against your own ambition, and choose carefully.”

Stephanie Saporita is one student who has made the choice to attend a non-approved program. She is a student in the paralegal program at Kaplan University and appreciates the fact that her school does not pursue ABA approval.

“Many of the non-ABA-approved programs are in compliance with the requirements to achieve the status, but they do not have the funds or chose not to apply funds to achieve this

status. The ones who make the choice not to gain approval would rather apply the money to the students and the services they provide. I can’t really blame them for that.”

Saporita also noted the difficulty in finding an ABA-approved program in certain geographical areas.

“Someone was telling me that she had no ABA-approved schools in her area and the closest one was hours away. Should an employer hold this against her because she was not able to attend an ABA-approved school?”

In the end, said Saporita, “There is much more to the profession than an ABA degree; and if you do not have the skills necessary, you will not make it in the profession.”

Although ABA approval can be a factor in the hiring process, relevant job skills and experience do carry weight with prospective employers.

According to Lisa Hamilton of Robert Half Legal, a staffing company for legal professionals, “Paralegals with both certifications and relevant experience are the most marketable. Although some law offices will consider candidates with an associate’s degree from an American Bar Association-accredited program, most prefer paralegals who have worked for a number of years under a licensed attorney.”

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.