

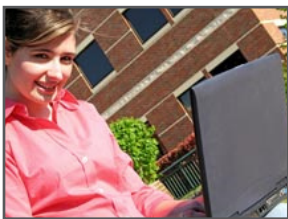


Feature

Online Paralegal Programs

By Anne O'Dell

When Northern Californian Deborah James started working in the legal field 24 years ago, she had a bachelor's degree and knew an experienced attorney who was willing to train her.



When she chose to continue her legal education with a certificate in paralegal studies, James joined a growing number of students who are obtaining bachelor's and associate's degrees, as well as post-graduate certificates, in online classrooms.

The deciding factor for James in choosing a paralegal certificate program was cost.

"I have taken continuing legal education courses at both California State University, San Francisco, and California State University, East Bay," she said.

"Both of these schools offer ABA-approved programs, but the cost is prohibitive for me, as I still have a child in college.

"Los Angeles Mission College is a community college of the State of California and a member of American Association for Paralegal Education. Because there are no inexpensive ABA-approved schools in Northern California, I opted for the online program given by L.A. Mission."

Countless students in James' position have expressed similar sentiments about the convenience of completing online paralegal degrees and certificates, and many professors are enthusiastic, as well.

Dr. Annie Reed, who has been a professor of legal studies for more than 20 years at Los Angeles-area community colleges, recently became an instructor at the Washington Online Learning Institute.

"Not having any affiliation or experience with online education," she said, "I didn't know what to expect in terms of student-professor ratios, communication among students, and

all the dynamics that occur in a physical classroom."

However, Reed continues, her impressions during her first eight months as an online instructor were overwhelmingly positive.

"I can honestly say that an online education is as substantive as in a physical classroom. My students have the same kind of support system for each other, communication is more effective between the students, and more attention can be paid towards each individual student than in a physical classroom."

In addition to the dynamic interaction between students and professors, online students have cited several other reasons for preferring Internet-based programs.

For students in remote areas, the appeal of online classes is obvious. Traveling long distances to attend classes, while inconvenient for some, is prohibitive for many others. Even for those who live relatively near a campus, time and money spent driving and parking can often be put to better use. A Web-based program can provide a practical alternative.

For paralegal students who are already employed full-time, an on-campus day program is unrealistic, and night classes can cut into work hours and consume leisure time. Another popular aspect of an online education is the flexibility it affords. Study time can be fit into mornings, evenings, lunch breaks, or even while the student is away from home.

When choosing an online paralegal program, it is important that prospective students research potential colleges and universities thoroughly. Accreditation, American Bar Association approval, and overall reputation are only a few of the factors that students must consider.

Peirce College in Philadelphia, PA, offers regionally accredited associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and postgraduate



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certificates in paralegal studies. Unlike most Web-based programs, all of Peirce's programs are approved by the American Bar Association. This is partly because the college requires that four courses be taken at a physical, ABA-approved college campus with a law library.

Another Web-based program that is approved by the American Bar Association is University of California, Los Angeles' Attorney Assistant Training Program (AATP). In addition to profiting from the university's excellent academic reputation, students also have the option of choosing one of AATP's two certificate tracks, litigation and litigation/corporations. Prospective students should already have a bachelor's or associate's degree or 60 credit hours of completed coursework from an accredited institution.

The paralegal program at Duke University is not ABA-approved; however, the university believes its reputation alone is substantial. In order to enroll in the online program, students must hold a high school diploma or an advanced degree. This nationally ranked university has collaborated

with LexisNexis to provide even more benefits to paralegal students. According to the Duke website, "The program includes traditional texts, online lecture notes, mock exams, information and reference materials for all fifty states, and many other study aids."

Although not approved by the ABA, the University of Texas at San Antonio's Online Paralegal Certificate Program offers six weekly research trips to physical law libraries, as well as one site visit to a local courthouse. Students will need to have completed 12 credit hours of coursework to enroll.

The University of Georgia's Center for Legal Studies offers a non-ABA-approved, online paralegal certificate course. One of the more attractive features of this program is the speed at which students are able to complete it; all the coursework can be finished in 14 weeks. California paralegals may need to complete Advanced Paralegal coursework to meet the requirements the California Business and Professional Code.

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