

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR PARALEGAL EDUCATION POLICY STATEMENT REGARDING SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS

The American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) is the only national organization for paralegal educators. This national organization, with over 450 members, has been serving paralegal educators and educational institutions since 1981. AAfPE's member schools currently enroll nearly 50,000 students and have nearly 200,000 graduates. AAfPE's primary mission is to promote high standards for paralegal education.

Short-term Programs

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 may not be the case. AAfPE opposes the proliferation of these short-term paralegal programs because these programs do not meet minimal standards recognized by virtually all paralegal educators, lawyers and paralegals. These programs undermine the legitimate educational efforts of AAfPE institutions that seek to provide quality entry-level paralegal education. These short-term programs are doing a disservice to the students who enroll in them, to those who employ paralegals, and to the legal profession.

These short-term programs harm students because

- Students spend significant sums of money in the hope that these short-term programs will provide an education that qualifies them to function as paralegals;
- Graduates often receive far less instruction than AAfPE and most paralegal educators view as necessary;
- Such brief programs cannot adequately present all of the content required of a quality paralegal education;
- Many such programs charge students at a significantly higher hourly rate than do those offered by institutions providing superior programs; and
- The reputation of the colleges and universities that offer these short-term programs or that offer campus space to these programs may become tarnished as do their legitimate programs.

These short-term programs harm those who employ paralegals because employers who hire graduates of short-term programs may assume that prospective employees from other programs are similarly ill prepared to cope with the demands of the paralegal profession; and

The profession is harmed by these short-term programs because

- Consumers of legal services may receive lower quality services rendered by the graduates of such programs when those graduates are not capable of performing the complex duties required of today's paralegal; and
- The paralegal/legal assistant profession reputation as a vital, cost effective, and reliable player in the delivery of legal services may be diminished.

While AAFPE believes that any education can be beneficial, AAFPE also believes that entry into the paralegal profession requires formal education of sufficient length, sophistication, depth, and quality to produce an entry-level paralegal who can function effectively in today's sophisticated legal environment. It is AAFPE's position that those attempting to provide students with a paralegal education must maintain certain minimum standards. The failure of short-term programs to live up to these educational minimums harms the public and everyone engaged in the legal profession.

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL MINIMUMS

Paralegal programs must be of sufficient length and quality to prepare students for the challenges of the paralegal profession. AAFPE has previously published two policy statements related to entry-level paralegal education. AAFPE's *Core Competencies for Paralegal Education Programs* specifically describes the exit competencies expected of students completing the curriculum offered in quality paralegal education programs. AAFPE's *Statement of Academic Quality* sets out the minimum standards for paralegal education programs in such areas as curriculum development, physical facilities, faculty, marketing and promotion, instruction, qualification of the program director, student competencies, and student services.

In 2001, AAFPE went a step further and created a document, the *Position Statement of the American Association for Paralegal Education Regarding Educational Standards for Paralegal Regulation Proposals* that sets forth the following minimum educational standards:

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.

In addition to, and because of its belief in quality paralegal education, AAFPE, along with the five other major law-related associations, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, the National Association of Legal Assistants, the Legal Assistant Management Association, the Association of Legal Administrators, and the Standing Committee on Legal Assistants of the American Bar Association, drafted the brochure, *Choosing a Quality Paralegal Education Program*. These organizations, all of which are dedicated to insuring the quality and growth of this profession, set forth the minimum education necessary to prepare a person to succeed in an entry-level position in the paralegal field. The collective wisdom of these law-related organizations is that a paralegal program must include at least 18 semester units of paralegal coursework and appropriate general education.

It is the purpose of this statement to make clear that short-term programs do not meet the minimum standards necessary to prepare students to enter the paralegal profession.

These minimum standards include:

- Post-secondary 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*;
- No fewer than 18 semester credit hours (or the equivalent) of substantive paralegal courses;
- The completion of a minimum of 60 semester hours (or the equivalent) of total post-secondary 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 should meet these minimum time periods.
- The paralegal education program must be offered by an institution that is:
 - An institutional member of the American Association for Paralegal Education;
or
 - A paralegal educational program approved by the American Bar Association;
or
 - A paralegal education program offered by an institution accredited by an agency recognized by the United States Department of Education and offering courses at the post-secondary level.

CONCLUSION

The continued growth of the paralegal profession requires quality education that meets established minimum standards. Institutions presently offering paralegal programs, as well as those that may consider offering such programs, are encouraged to evaluate their offerings in light of the standards for paralegal education that have been adopted by the American Association for Paralegal Education, the recognized expert in quality paralegal education.

Adopted unanimously by the AAFPE Board of Directors on February 8, 2003, in St. Louis, Missouri, pursuant to the unanimous support of the AAFPE voting membership at the AAFPE Annual Business Meeting October 3, 2002 in Orlando, Florida.