What's in a Paralegal Program? By Rhonda J. Brashears, CP

Did you know that all paralegal programs are not created equal? Paralegal programs like many things in today's society are a buyer or a student beware market. A would be student should thoroughly research a program before applying or enrolling. Programs cross the state, while I did not research nationwide programs I would imagine this is true nationwide, provide vastly different results at the end of the program. In addition, they type of student that a program can accept varies from program to program. This article will attempt to discuss the various types of programs offered in or available to residents of the State of Texas, but is not meant to recommend a specific program over another.

Types of Programs

There are several two year programs, often offered in conjunction with an associate's degree. There are a few four-year programs which will allow the student to obtain their bachelor's degree, some in paralegal studies and others allowing the paralegal classes to count as the elective hours and giving the student a bachelor's of art, science or general studies. To be accepted into these types of programs a student would need to meet the criteria to register in that junior college or university. These programs generally offer between 15 and 24 semester hours of substantive legal classes. Most of the classes will be in a traditional class room, some may be online or hybrid (online and class room combination) courses.

There are a few post-graduate programs that offer a masters degree in paralegal studies and as you would image would require that student to already have obtained their or bachelor's degree to qualify for enrollment in the program.

There are also a few programs around the state that are not associated with a junior or community college or a university. Most of these programs will require the student to have already obtained their associates or bachelor's degree. These programs vary in the number of credit or clock hours that they offer. After completion of the program the student often receives a certificate of completion.

While the above two, four year and post-graduate programs will allow the student to earn a college degree while also completing some very valuable substantive paralegal courses.

In addition, there are several other programs that offer strictly legal based courses. The requirements for enrollment into these programs vary from program to program as well. Some will require a high school diploma or the equivalent and others will not. You may find that a number of these programs are offered as strictly on-line courses with no actual time spent in a class room.

How do you choose a program?

With so many choices, how does a potential student possibly decide which course will work best for them and will provide them with education necessary to obtain the paralegal job or to advance in the one they already have?

One of indicators of a good program is one that is ABA approved. The ABA or the American Bar Association is the most recognized paralegal program accrediting entity for Texas programs. For a program to become ABA approved a paralegal program must go through a self-evaluation process and various on-site evaluations. An overview of the approval process for programs as well as a list of the ABA approved programs across the United States is available at www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals. A program that has been approved by the ABA will provide you with a well rounded paralegal education.

It is not necessary for a program to be ABA approved to be a good program. Look for a program that provides their students with good basic educational courses, skill type courses such as keyboarding and documents formatting, and of course, a good line-up of substantive legal courses.

As I indicated in the beginning, it takes a very through investigation of a program and the results that that program has offered its legal community to determine whether a program will provide an adequate education. A little bit of homework ahead of time can make all the difference.

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