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Commonly Asked Questions About the Paralegal Certificate Program

What does a paralegal do?

A paralegal, also called a legal assistant, is a person who assists an attorney in the practice of law. Responsibilities may include legal research, document analysis, cite checking, and investigational research. The paralegal may also aid the attorney in drafting pleadings, interrogatories and discovery, interviewing clients, administering trusts and estates, assisting with real estate transactions, drafting certificates and corporate documents needed by state law to form various business entities as well as assisting in client-related matters that do not require a law degree.

It is important to note that, in general, paralegals do not represent the public in the practice of law by either expressed or implied actions. The Unauthorized Practice of Law (UPL statute) is a criminal offense in the State of Texas and in all other states within the United States.

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations defines a *paralegal* as "...a person qualified through education, training or work experience, to perform substantive legal work that requires knowledge of legal concepts and is customarily, but not exclusively, performed by a lawyer. This person may be retained or employed by a lawyer, law office, governmental agency, or other entity or may be authorized by administrative, statutory or court authority to perform this work."

What is the difference between a paralegal and a legal assistant?

There is no specific standard or set of qualifications one must achieve to become a legal assistant or a paralegal. The terms "legal assistant" and "paralegal" can be interchangeable.

Historically, paralegals have been referred to as *paralegals* or *legal assistants* depending upon their geographical location or employer's preference; the terms are synonymous and used interchangeably. In November 1995, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) adopted the term Paralegal as the preferred term for the profession. NFPA members identified several recent trends in the paralegal profession including court decisions awarding higher fees to attorneys employing persons called *paralegal* instead of *legal assistant*, the ABA Commission on Non-Lawyer Practice's latest report using paralegal almost exclusively, and several paralegal associations changing their names to *paralegal* from *legal assistant*.

What is the starting pay of a paralegal?

Starting pay is dependent upon a variety of factors, including relevant work experience and location. According to industry surveys, a starting paralegal with little work experience can start at an average of \$25,000 to \$30,000 annually. This is about the national average for entry-level paralegals.

What is the job market for paralegals?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Occupational Outlook Quarterly, the paralegal profession is solidly growing and a very secure occupation. The growth rate is estimated at 35% through the year 2014.

Do I have to be licensed or registered by the State of Texas or the State Bar of Texas?

No. There are no requirements or procedures for licensing or registration of legal assistants or paralegals. They work under the supervision of a licensed attorney who assumes full responsibility for the work product.

Why do I need to have a paralegal certificate then?

This has become almost mandatory in the workplace because it is an economic issue for the law firm.

The courts, both the United State Supreme Court and a State of Texas Appellate Court, along with other state courts, have held that compensation for a paralegal's work may be separately assessed and included in the award of attorneys' fees. Proof of education or training in paralegal skills is required for the paralegal to be billed out for the hours spent working on the client's case. The paralegal certificate is the proof.

In fact, one of PDI's graduates has been a paralegal to the justices on the Texas Appellate Court sitting in Dallas, which is the very court that wrote the above-mentioned opinion regarding the recovery of fees.

Is an ABA approved certificate program important when looking at programs to attend?

ABA certifies program - not people. There is no such thing as an ABA-certified paralegal. For a complete list of paralegal courses in Texas see <http://www.lad.org>.

The ABA "approves" paralegal programs. It does not "accredit." ABA approval is voluntary. There are only seven "ABA approved" paralegal programs in Texas.

For information on the ABA, visit this web link:
<http://www.abanet.org/legalervices/legalassistants/directory/tx.html>

How do I become "certified" and is it necessary?

There are two national recognized certification programs currently in existence. Both are voluntary. However, one can certainly work as a legal assistant/ paralegal in Texas without participating in either certification program. They are:

The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA). This organization administers an exam leading to the designation of Certified Legal Assistant (CLA).

The National Federal of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) administers an exam named Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam leading to certification (PACE - Registered Paralegal or RP).

Texas provides an additional certification. The State Bar of Texas, Board of Legal Specialization, offers voluntary certification exams in specific areas of practice such as civil trial law, criminal trial law, probate and estates, real estate, and many others. The TBLS started doing this for attorneys many years ago, and expanded the program to paralegals, but it is voluntary for both paralegals and attorneys.

About the PDI Paralegal Certificate Program

PDI's Paralegal Certificate Program is one of the most accelerated, cost-effective programs of its kind. Participants can earn a certificate of completion in eight weekends (Saturdays are live and Sundays following with on-line study), while other programs cost many thousands of dollars more and can take years to complete.

The format makes it easy to boost your career without spending time away from the office. Newcomers and those already working in the field BOTH benefit from the program.

PDI's Paralegal Certificate Program is part of the Center for Paralegal Education, a component of the Professional Development Institute of the University of North Texas. PDI is a not-for-profit foundation that has served more than 500,000 professionals over the past 30 years.

Are there any prerequisites?

No.

Who teaches the course?

PDI has taken great care to provide only top-quality professional instructors with significant background in their teaching areas. We at PDI recognize that our success only comes with your success after graduation, so PDI is committed to providing its students with instructors that can make their learning experience valuable and maximize their job potential. This team of instructors includes Texas attorneys, paralegals and specialists with teaching experience.

Can I get a job after taking this course?

Absolutely. Our students that have taken advantage of this opportunity to attend this program, have started working in the legal field and worked their way up to a \$40,000 or \$50,000 per year job. Some students have even landed jobs prior to graduation!

What about job placement?

PDI does not have a job placement program. However, because of the outstanding reputation of the program and its long history, we often receive requests from prospective employers including attorneys, law firms, corporations and government agencies. We also have a number of placement agencies that are pleased with the caliber of our students in the past and continue to request them for their employer clients. We distribute these opportunities in class so everyone has the equal opportunity to pursue these options.

Students attending our class will also have an instant network into the legal community, since some students will already be working in the legal field and are attending because they need the certificate. These students bring job opportunities from their employers to share with the class. Students are often hired right out of class and go to work before graduation.

We continue to be available to all past and present students to share job leads, serve as a reference, to provide letters of recommendation and assist in resume preparation or critiquing. We are interested in helping you succeed.

A word of caution; we cannot guarantee jobs. No school or institution can guarantee employment. Beware of anyone who tells you a job is guaranteed when you graduate.

Is this program only offered on the weekends?

Yes, the Paralegal Certificate Program was designed to meet the needs of the legal community and the working student. When polled, the overwhelming response was for a program in a continuing education format, and the fast track or accelerated weekend schedule was preferred. This allows the students to finish quickly and still be able to maintain their work and family responsibilities.

Why is the program 8 weeks, some 9 months, and others 2 or 4 years?

As strange as it may seem, the truth is that the paralegal profession is not regulated in the State of Texas or most other states. Therefore, there is no absolute standard for education and thus answers the question as to the level of confusion and misinformation out there.

PDI has structured its program, both as to content and length, to accommodate recommendations made by the ABA as well as the National Federation of Paralegal Associations.

Where does the certificate come from?

Your certificate will read “The Professional Development Institute of the University of North Texas.”

How long is the Open House and do I have to attend?

Open House is something that we offer for all our programs. It is FREE with NO OBLIGATION and can be attended by anyone, registered or not. You will see the facility, meet the program director and staff, learn about the curriculum and the instructors, and get all of your questions answered. It is an informal meeting about 50 minutes long; however, we stay to assist students and answer questions as long as needed.

Students who attend Open House receive \$100 off the total price of the program. PDI serves as the bookstore, and all books will be packaged for the student to pick up at Open House.

Will I be “certified” at the end of this course?

No. However, many employers do refer to a person with a certificate as being certified.

“Often confusing is the assumption that a certificate of completion from a paralegal program carries with it the status of being certified. It does not. It simply means that the legal assistant is certificated-that is, the individual has received a certificate, but is not certified.” (SOURCE: Texas State Bar Journal)

People often have a misconception that they must be certified to work as a paralegal. While there are voluntary designations, there are no state licensing requirements for paralegals in most states.