

Paralegal Studies Careers - Providing Critical Legal Services

The fast-paced excitement of a paralegal or legal services career is dramatically depicted in popular and syndicated television shows, such as Boston Legal and Law and Order. Meanwhile, the local and national news, as well as court and justice television programs, have provided coverage of high-profile trials and legal proceedings that have made major headlines over the past several years. With such easy access to law and legal action courtesy of the American media, it is no wonder that so many young Americans want to complete law degrees or paralegal certificates each year. Like any career shown in the media—medicine, business, advertising, and so on—real-life law and legal careers do not always embody the back-to-back high-drama excitement portrayed on television. However, they are consistently interesting and engaging, requiring workers to devote focus to their careers. To get started in an entry-level legal or paralegal career (these terms will be used interchangeably throughout the article), a potential employee will typically need to have a degree or have completed legal studies training courses or a paralegal certification. Entry-level competition for any career, including the paralegal profession, can be tough. Students who have pursued a paralegal certificate or degree are usually considered to be stronger candidates for entry-level careers in law. This is because completing an education demonstrates that a student is mature and responsible enough to handle a daily legal services workload. Many schools in the United States offer a paralegal studies degree program to prepare students for an array of exciting legal careers. Some of the stronger programs are also approved by the American Bar Association (ABA).

The legal studies or paralegal degree program: What do students learn The most important skill sets that a paralegal or legal assistant will employ are good reading comprehension and writing abilities. The majority of a paralegal's work involves reading and writing, and some legal documents or court briefs can contain fairly complex language and concepts. Besides English reading and writing courses, many paralegal studies programs require students to take specific classes in legal research and legal writing. Strong research and documentation skills are other important components of a legal studies education. Upon completing a paralegal certification or legal studies career training program, students must be able to quickly and accurately find and interpret federal, state, and local laws, research legal precedents set by previous hearings or decided cases, and track down evidence that will support the case. Because the career opportunities for paralegals and legal assistants are very diverse, many legal programs require students to study several areas of law. Many ABA-approved schools offer classes in criminal law, family law, property and probate, torts, and civil procedure. Many schools offer career placement options for students completing a paralegal studies or legal services degree program. These student-centered career resources can include resume-writing workshops and cover-letter coaching, as well as job leads and career placement. This placement is often targeted in the area of the country in which the college is located. For example, a Los Angeles college might offer students placement assistance in Long Beach, Huntington, Irvine, Cerritos, or another city in Los Angeles County, California. Students interested in legal or law careers are most successful at the entry level when they use all of the resources their school or college offers, including career counselors and legal or paralegal job resource boards.

After the legal studies education: What do paralegals and legal assistants do Upon completing a degree and career training program, legal studies students will enter jobs with varying descriptions and duties. Paralegals perform many direct tasks for the rest of the legal team. A paralegal or legal assistant might be assigned to one lawyer or to a team of lawyers. For example, a litigation paralegal might assist the legal team in preparing for trial, which includes gathering and organizing evidence and court briefs; doing research and writing briefs for the case, and even preparing courtroom arguments or evidence exhibits. Some of the documents a paralegal will write are dependent upon the area of law in which he or she works. Estate and trust paralegals are likely to assist in writing wills and financial contracts. Family and divorce law paralegals help write divorce agreements, child custody briefs, and hearing summaries, or work with the courts in obtaining child abuse testimonies. Financial and corporate paralegals can prepare tax forms, work in government compliance, or write business contracts. A paralegal might also be employed in the public or the private legal sector. Legal assistants and paralegals might take notes in meetings, help to prepare employee tax and benefits forms, and file records and major papers for the law firm. Some employees might have more opportunities to perform more extensive legal research, as well. Other employees might be in charge of determining whether individuals are eligible for food stamps, housing subsidies, social security assistance, and other benefits. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the need for paralegals and legal assistants is expected to increase more rapidly than average through 2014. This is partially because Americans live in an increasingly lawsuit-prone society, and partially because it is more cost-effective for law firms to hire legal assistants to perform the work of an attorney. A comprehensive education in legal concepts and applications from an ABA-approved or accredited paralegal studies or certificate program, a thorough, post-college legal career search, and the desire to work hard at acquiring increasingly challenging job responsibilities will enable a legal studies student to begin a fulfilling legal career.

About the Author

Fremont College is a Cerritos, California education center offering several [career training programs](#), including a [paralegal studies associates degree](#) program. For more information, visit the school's Web site, www.fremont.edu.