

# **Phoenix College Paralegal Studies Program Assessment Plan**

## **Program Goals**

1. Prepare students for entry-level employment in law offices.
2. Provide students with practical legal skills enabling them to draft legal documents with minimum supervision.
3. Familiarize students with fundamental concepts of substantive areas of law.
4. Develop effective written, oral, communication, team work, critical thinking, computer proficiency, and legal research skills.
5. Integrate legal theory and related practical applications.
6. Learn how to manage practical ethical dilemmas commonly encountered as working paralegals, including how to avoid the unauthorized practice of law by non-lawyers.

## **Overview**

Each course in the curriculum has competencies (objectives) designed to teach the student skills needed to meet the Program Goals. Student mastery of those course competencies are assessed every semester by instructors through written assignments, tests, quizzes, and other classroom-based measures. The Program also uses broad-based indicators, such as performance on the CLA/CP exam. We look at not only our students' pass rates, but also compare those pass rates to those of other examinees in our state and nationally.

The program also conducts needs analysis by looking at practice areas within the state bar, adjusting our curriculum as needed so that students have the opportunity to take courses related to the current job market. We look at the state bar's published practice area statistics, monitor trends in lawyer CLE offerings, collaborate with our adjunct faculty, all 27 of whom are practicing attorneys and paralegals, and consult with our advisory committee. Recent outcomes from this process include two new electives and development of our [e-court facility](#).

The Program also considers the number of job announcement requests it receives from the legal community and how many of the responding graduates indicate they are working as paralegals, working in the legal field, continuing to law school, or working in other professions that leverage their training in our program.

In addition, the Program conducts end-of-course evaluations of each legal specialty course every semester and reviews students' perceptions of the course and shares those with faculty.

The Program Director and faculty also review work samples from all legal specialty classes each semester. The purpose of the review is to identify any systemic weaknesses in instruction, confirm the practical nature of assignments, and ensure reasonable harmonization of assignments amongst multiple sections of the same class.

The program also partners with the Maricopa County Bar Association Paralegal Division in conducting a Paralegal Utilization survey. This Program designs, administers, and analyzes survey results. The Paralegal Division provides access to its membership and the broader paralegal community to participate in the survey.

### **Assessment Activities with Summary and Analysis of Results**

#### **Review of CLA/CP Exam Results Fall 2006, 2007, 2008**

Each year, the program receives a report summarizing the results of students from this program, comparing them to the state and national results. From these reports, we can see how well our students are performing on standardized tests that measure some of the skills related to program objectives, such as understanding of general legal principles, judgment and analysis, ethics, communication, and legal research. In 2006, the area of "judgment and analysis" (critical thinking) was identified as needing improvement. The program discussed this issue with the CLA Review Committee of the county bar association's Paralegal Division. We learned that this subject area that has a high failure rate nationally for first time attempts at the CLA/CP exam. We identified the nature of the objective being tested as that related to case briefing and statutory analysis. Based on this analysis, more case briefing and analytical exercises were been incorporated into [LAS211 - Legal Research](#) and [LAS131 - Legal Writing](#).

In 2007 and 2008, CLA test results improved. Also, in 2009, the college conducted a broad-based assessment of critical thinking skills across seven different disciplines at the college. Utilizing the nationally-recognized tool known as *The Test of Everyday Reasoning* was administered in spring 2009 to 24 randomly selected sections, across the different disciplines, include Paralegal Studies. The national mean is 21.5. Score across the seven disciplines at Phoenix College ranged from a low of 17.40 in the area of Business and Marketing, to the college high-point of 24.73, for Paralegal Studies.

## **Paralegal Utilization in Maricopa County Survey – Fall 2006**

In the fall of 2006, the program partnered with the Maricopa County Bar Association Paralegal Division to conduct a [Paralegal Utilization Survey of Maricopa County](#). This survey was completed in December of 2006 with over 200 responses.

The primary focus of the survey was to see what tasks are being performed by local paralegals and the specific skill sets that are needed. Also examined were the educational backgrounds required to be designated a paralegal within the organization and the education of those paralegals that responded. The focus of this survey was on litigation practice because that is the primary area of work for paralegals. Supplemental questions were asked at the end of the survey about future practice areas the MCBA membership would like to explore. Questions specific to those practice areas will be integrated into the next survey.

The results of the survey show that approximately 35% indicated that a bachelor's degree was the minimum required. Phoenix College attempts to address this need by maintaining more than 30 articulation agreement options for its students.

The survey also inquired about the specific legal/paralegal training required. 37% indicated that a degree or certificate from an ABA-approved program was required. 19% indicated that training from a "well-approved" program, but not necessarily ABA approval, was required. This shows the continued importance of ABA approval in this market.

The survey also inquired about the areas of law where the respondents are working. The overwhelming majority are working in litigation, which correlates with the practice areas reported by the State Bar. There also are a significant number of people working in general transactions, real estate, and family law; this again correlates with the practice areas reported by the State Bar. Phoenix College has always emphasized the litigation skills and will continue to do so. We also provide solid elective offerings in the listed practice areas. We took this information, along with information from the tasks that are indicated as being performed, to strengthen our existing litigation courses and to develop curriculum appropriate for leveraging our [e-Court facility](#). The program also offers [family law](#) and [real estate](#) courses every year, sometimes every semester. The program has always included a mandatory course in general Business Law. Based on this information, program faculty and the advisory committee redesigned this course to be focused strictly on "[Contract Law](#)," which is also required, and then developed a separate elective course on [Business Organizations](#).

The survey also inquired about required technology skills. Basic computer skills in office productivity software, such as word processors, spreadsheets, and databases, were rated as very important by most respondents. The program at Phoenix College attempts to address this by requiring proof of basic proficiency in these areas or requires students to take a [class on this basic software](#). At the time of the survey, the Program's required course in law office technology included instruction in all of the other indicated software

applications, except for Adobe Acrobat. Based on the survey and further consultation with the advisory committee and faculty, the program added document scanners and use of Adobe Professional for [LAS229 – Computerized Litigation Support](#).

The survey inquired about general law office tasks and the frequency with which paralegals perform those tasks. The top two tasks were general word processing and filing documents. Word processing has already been addressed. Based on the survey, consultation with the Clerk of Court, as well as the Faculty, the litigation courses added coverage of e-filing, which is now mandatory in most cases for this jurisdiction.

The survey also inquired about general research and writing tasks. The most common writing tasks were in-house memos and motions. Based on the survey, faculty in the [Legal Writing](#) courses met separately to harmonize assignments and course approach.

The survey inquired about specific litigation tasks. The results show that paralegals are frequently preparing all the common litigation documents. The survey also shows that paralegals are being used extensively to prepare exhibits, trial notebooks, and assist at trial. The development of trial notebooks is integrated into our second litigation course where students must participate in a mock trial. With the implementation of our electronic courtroom, the program is now further emphasizing trial notebooks. We are also integrating activities for students to get more training in these areas. The faculty teaching the litigation courses met separately and reviewed course activities and assignments to make sure we are preparing students for the high-tech side of litigation developing in this jurisdiction.

The last part of the survey inquired into the working conditions, hours, billing requirements, and salary of working paralegals. This information was summarized and shared with faculty and the local paralegal community. The information is used to inform students about the potential income and the required education, experience, and productivity expectations to achieve that income.

### **Employer Survey – Periodically**

In general, we have a poor response rate to employer surveys and have de-emphasized them in our assessment plan. There is a general reluctance of employers to provide specific feedback on graduates. This may be due to concerns about liability if specific employees were somehow identified.

Although the response rate to the last employer survey was low, when comparing the responses to those of the utilization survey, there is some consistency in the way paralegals from our program are utilized and the tasks they are expected to perform. Also, narrative comments in the employer survey offer insight into the skills desired by employers of our graduates.

As with the utilization survey, there was a mix of large firm, sole practitioners, and government agencies. Half of the respondents were in solo practitioner or small firm offices and the other half were in large firms or government agencies. Half of the organizations employed 1-3 paralegals, while the remaining half of the respondents were larger entities.

The respondents indicated a wide variety of ways in which they learned about our program and its graduates. The majority indicated that they learned about the program by receiving resumes from graduates. This indicator runs contrary to the general information we receive from the advisory committee and general community. Historically, Phoenix College's paralegal program has been well known by its presence and tenure in the community. Program awareness and marketing is an area for the program to continue emphasizing and we have been able to improve upon this by running advertisements in the local bar monthly paper, *Maricopa Lawyer*.

The preference of these employers is that graduates have some prior work experience, preferably in a legal environment. This is consistent with the response of the utilization survey and also with the entry-level positions we often receive for posting that are in law firms but are support positions for paralegals. Phoenix College provides all of its students access to these entry-level job opportunities through its own electronic newsletter. The program also conducts its own resume-writing and interviewing workshops designed specifically for our students that are seeking entry-level work in the legal field. This workshop is run by adjunct faculty members with expertise in the hiring and management of paralegals.

The technology skills desired closely mirror those of the utilization survey, with word processing, databases, and Adobe being at the top. Also prominent are law office specific programs. The survey inquired about the level of preparedness of our graduates in the technology skill set and 100% of the respondents rated them as "good." Further instruction in Adobe was suggested here, as it was in the Utilization Survey, and those skills were integrated into [LAS229 - Computerized Litigation Support](#).

The primary practice area is in litigation, which is the focus of this program. Within that practice area, the commonly required litigation tasks are similar to those identified in the utilization survey. When asked about our graduates' preparedness to perform general litigation tasks, 87% of the respondents rated them either "good" or "excellent."

The other significant practice areas were general business/transactions, real estate, bankruptcy and family law. All of these areas are taught within the program. When asked about students' general preparedness in terms of knowledge of general law-related concepts, all respondents rated them as either "good" or "excellent." This seems to indicate that students are getting an appropriate general legal education. Preparedness in terms of substantive legal knowledge was rated by 87% as "good" or "excellent." This is consistent with what we see on the national CLA exam results.

Ethical awareness was rated as “good” or “excellent” by 87%. Professionalism and attitude were rated at 100% “good” or “excellent” and the program feels this also reflects the dedicated course work and also the integration of practicing paralegals into the faculty. The paralegals are able to add a direct, personal dimension to the experience and share that with the students in a way that is unique to their job function.

The last general area of preparedness was a measure of “Overall Job Readiness.” Again, 87% rated it good to excellent. The comments provided in the narrative offer some insight into what employers would like to see strengthened. These comments will be considered by the faculty and advisory committee and see where they might be integrated into the curriculum without adding to the number of required credits.

### **Student Satisfaction with Courses and Instruction Surveys – Every Semester**

The program conducts end-of-course surveys each semester to evaluate legal specialty courses and the instructors. Information obtained is shared with the instructors to help them improve their classroom performance and is evaluated by the department to evaluate overall student satisfaction. The Program Director addresses every student concern brought forward.

### **Graduate Exit Surveys – Spring and Fall Each Year**

The survey inquires about the students’ perceptions and experiences with the curriculum, course selection, faculty, facilities, and other aspects of campus life. The program surveys graduates at or near the end of their last semester. The survey inquires about the students’ perceptions and experiences with the curriculum, course selection, faculty, facilities, and other aspects of campus life. We have used the results to identify areas of concern, such as our registration process, elective availability, and classroom facilities. We have also worked with administration to improve the classroom facilities assigned to some legal specialty courses.

### **Assessment of Students’ Mastery of Course Competencies – Every Semester**

Each semester, instructors of Legal Specialty courses collect student work samples. Samples are collected from both students that demonstrate strong mastery and students that are having challenges.

Those samples are sent to the Program Director and reviewed. The Program Director compares work in the same courses over time. The Director meets with the faculty in subject-specific areas to review student progress, course design, instructional methodology, and assessment techniques. When areas of apparent deficiency are identified, faculty work in a collaborative manner to revise the instruction.

**Discipline-specific meetings between the Program Director and faculty of that discipline:**

Faculty discuss any changes in the practice areas affected that warrant revision of curriculum or changing of assignments. Legal Writing faculty met and reviewed that course. Faculty determined that they could best meet the targeted competencies for specific documents and writing identified in the Utilization Survey, which was supported by experiences of the faculty, by developing our own course material. This we did and we eliminated the standard textbook.

Faculty teaching Business Law, along with input from our advisory committee, reviewed the Business Law course and rewrote the entire course. It is now a required course focusing on contracts with substantive drafting assignments. A separate elective in Business Organizations was created to complement the Contracts course.

The faculty for Ethics collaborated to develop uniform topics for writing assignments. The assignments now focus the student more sharply on practical ethical dilemmas commonly encountered as working paralegals, including how to avoid the unauthorized practice of law by non-lawyers. The course also requires oral presentations and group work.

Legal Procedures faculty met to review the curriculum and agree on core assignments amongst the multiple sections. Some material was moved from Procedures II down to Procedures I in order to give the more room in the second course for preparation of trial notebooks and conducting mock trials in the e-Court. This further enhances development of teamwork and oral communication skills.

The Litigation Technology faculty built upon the work of the Legal Procedures faculty and identified three key areas to modify: (1) De-emphasis in this course on general Microsoft Office technology in recognition that more students have this skill. Also, the program requires demonstrated proficiency or the successful completion of a course in Microsoft Office by the end of the first semester. (2) Increased emphasis on litigation-specific technologies, and (3) Application of those skills by requiring students to prepare an abbreviated civil case for delivery in the e-Court, with each student being required to demonstrate successful use of the technology. This further enhances oral communication and technology skills.

**Graduate Placement Surveys – Twice yearly**

Graduates are surveyed approximately six months post-completion to determine their work and/or educational status. Response rates are sufficient to derive trends over time. Students are clearly finding work as paralegals or other legal positions, as well as continuing their education. We've seen an increase in the number of students going to law school. With the current economy, we are seeing more students taking alternative work that makes use of the skills they acquired in the Program while they wait for the market to recover.