

Industry Research - 2021

Introduction

Ensuring the University of La Verne Legal Studies Program meets industry standards is a top priority. ULV is geographically located around numerous public and community colleges that offer access to ABA-accredited paralegal certificate and associate degree programs. The costs of these programs are less than ULV's and access to courses might be more convenient. For ULV's Legal Studies program to remain competitive, it must produce successful alumni and industry-relevant curriculum.

From January 7-10, 2021, Assistant Professor Thomas Allison provided a survey through a social media post on his personal Facebook profile. The survey requested the participation of any practicing legal professionals. The purpose of the survey is to gain insight into the industry needs of paralegals to ensure the University of La Verne's Legal Studies program responsiveness to professional standards and expectations.

Data Collection Method and Results

A survey was created using Qualtrics. Respondents accessed the survey through an anonymous link included in the Facebook post. The survey was available starting 7:00 pm, January 7, 2021, and closed at 11:59 pm, on January 10, 2021. The inclusion criteria were English-speaking legal professionals, above the age of 18, with access to the internet. Responses from non-legal professionals, individuals below the age of 18, and partial or incomplete survey responses were excluded.

The survey included seven questions. The first four questions requests information regarding the professional perspective of the respondent. The next three questions request the respondent to rank the value and proficiency expectation level of each professional task a paralegal should be able to perform upon graduation from an ABA-accredited paralegal program.

The department used Business & Professions Code 6450 and the activities outlined by the Legal Studies Program specifications provided through its website to form the list of paralegal activities.

Data Received

There were 73 respondents to the survey. 62 of the respondents are attorneys representing 84 percent of the data responses. Six of the respondents are paralegals

representing 8 percent of the data responses. Three of the respondents are law clerks representing 4 percent of the data responses. Three of the respondents were “other” representing 4 percent of the data responses.

Data Results

The respondents represented different sectors with 53 representing private law firms. Nine respondents were in government. Seven respondents were in public interest. There were four corporate respondents and four “other.” There were 14 options for legal area practiced in, all except Bankruptcy were represented, with family having the highest number of participants with 21 respondents. 18 respondents were litigators.

Fifteen respondents had 1-3 years practice experience. Sixteen respondents had 4-7 years of experience. 23 respondent had 7-10 years of experience. 10 had 11-15 years of experience. Five had 16-20 years of experience. Four had more than 20 years of experience. The last questions asked the respondents to rank the listed paralegal skills and rank the level of expected proficiency. The chart below represents the average responses to these questions. The tasks are ranked, and the expected proficiency is next to each activity.¹

Paralegal Tasks in Rank Order	Avg. Expected Proficiency
Document Preparation	Novice
Client contact	Intermediate
Court filing	Novice/Intermediate
Discovery Preparation	Novice/Intermediate
Document Review	Novice/Intermediate
Letter Writing	Novice
Computer Legal Research	Novice
Legal Research	Novice/Intermediate
Calendaring	Novice/Intermediate
Document Control	Novice/Intermediate
File Organization	Novice/Intermediate
Investigation	Intermediate
Trial Preparation	Intermediate
Database Management	Intermediate
Interviewing	Intermediate
Preparation of Bills	Intermediate/Advanced

¹ The average expected proficiency was calculated by scoring each rank 1-5. No experience was 1, Novice was 2, Intermediate 3, and Advanced 4, and Expert was 5. The ranking of the professional was converted to a numerical value and the mean of the responses was used as the average expected proficiency.

Discussion

While the sample is small and the variance of responses large, the sample provides insight into curriculum design. The survey also opens a needed conversation on the readiness of our graduates upon entering the profession as certified paralegals. The Legal Studies Department made three changes based off of the data collected. First, we began assessing our students for their readiness regarding the paralegal tasks. Second, we began work on a paralegal primer for our students to take with them into practice. Third, we added a professional employment readiness component to our Paralegal Internship and Ethics Course.

Students Assessment

We furthered the conversation on data-driven professional readiness curriculum development by assessing the perspectives of our students on their readiness to complete the designated tasks. At the beginning of the semester in their Paralegal Internship and Ethics Course, students receive an anonymous survey link that asks them to rate their confidence in performing the task at a professional standard from “very confident” to “not confident” at all. During the semester, the instructor provides students exercises and resources to boost their confidence and competence in performing the designated tasks. The instructor administers the survey again at the end of the semester to track progress regarding the students’ professional growth.

Paralegal Primer

There is a lot of subjectivity in this research. How a legal practitioner rates an assignment is subjective. What is novice-level work to one legal practitioner is intermediate-level work to another. The work product of a student with no confidence could be better than the work product of a student who is “very confident” in their ability to perform the task. To address this subjectivity, we began construction of a paralegal primer that provides resources on producing at least intermediate-advanced work product for each of the tasks for reference once the student is in professional practice. The better our alumni perform in the industry, the higher the employment, pay rate, and reputation of the graduates of the program.

Professional Employment Readiness

Legal Studies has started emphasizing the employment readiness of our students. The Paralegal Internship and Ethics requires students to have a resume, cover letter, references, and writing sample reviewed by their instructor as well as career services.

Students must also become a member of a professional paralegal association for networking purposes. The goal is to get our students out and employed as soon as possible.

Conclusion and Further Research

This is the start of our data-driven approach to industry-responsive curriculum development. Next steps include casting a larger and more diverse net by engaging paralegal and bar associations in the research and accessing the professional diversity of their members. Additionally, personnel in the Legal Studies Department will cross-analyze the data variables for in-depth analysis of the findings for industry-specific curriculum development. For instance, courses geared toward public service will reflect the data feedback of the “public sector” respondents.