

Paralegal Studies Program History

The Spring 2012 semester was the tenth anniversary of the Lake Superior College Paralegal Studies program. In those ten years, the Paralegal Studies program has grown from a handful of students to over 70 declared majors. The authors of this report have been with the Paralegal Studies program from the beginning and offer this history of the development of the program over those ten years.

The Origins of the Paralegal Studies Program

The inception of the Paralegal Studies program at Lake Superior College dates to 2001. Candy Barnack, then Vice-President of Academic Affairs, asked Barry Dahl, Interim Dean of Business, to research paralegal programs and to develop a curriculum based on models around the country. To differentiate the LSC Paralegal program from other MnSCU paralegal programs, Barry Dahl developed a plan for the LSC Paralegal program to be a fully online program.

On April 23, 2002, Barry Dahl, the new Vice President of LSC's fast-growing Virtual Campus, invited Tina Johnson and Kent Richards to meet, review, and support the proposed paralegal curriculum. The instructors made suggestions for revision and the curriculum was approved by AASC. The new Dean of Business and Industry, Mary Jean Lush, submitted a New Program Application to MnSCU requesting approval of three separate paralegal awards – an A.S. degree, and A.A.S. degree, and a Paralegal Certificate. The application was approved in the spring of 2002 and program courses were scheduled for the fall 2003 semester.

Development of the Online Paralegal Studies Program

The planning for online course offerings in the Paralegal Studies Program began almost immediately. The first program courses were offered in the spring of 2003 – online Business Law (Kent Richards), Legal Studies I (Tina Johnson), and Family Law (Steve Schneider). On November 27, 2002, Dean Lush requested on Vice President Dahl's behalf that Paralegal Studies faculty make five more courses available online by fall 2003.

On October 2, 2003, Sue Stenerson, Interim Dean of Business, requested that Tina Johnson advise students in the Paralegal Studies program. Tina Johnson was the FTU licensed faculty in the Administrative Support-Legal area and had been serving as a resource for students interested in pursuing further education in the legal field for several years. In addition, it was expected that many existing or new paralegal students would begin their studies with the Administrative Support courses.

An LSC News Release dated November 3, 2004, announced students would have the option of earning the Paralegal Studies A.S. degree through online coursework beginning spring 2005. Approximately half of the LGST courses required for this degree were already available online at that time and faculty planned to offer the remainder of the

LGST courses in online format by the following Summer and Fall Semesters. The A.S. degree was selected as the first fully online Paralegal Studies degree because of the number of general education credits that could already be earned online.

It quickly became clear that the Paralegal Studies A.A.S. could also be advertised as a totally online option since there were also a sufficient number of online business electives to make completion of that award possible over a two-year period. Even though the legal component of all three awards was identical, the Certificate option was exempted from these advertisements since the planner showed it as a one-year, 30-credit program. Because of the sequenced prerequisites and the necessary rotation of online offerings due to staffing limitations, it carried the caveat that while it could be completed entirely online, the Certificate would take longer than two semesters.

Articulation Agreements

Vice President Dahl negotiated an articulation agreement with Franklin University in anticipation of the Paralegal Studies program becoming a fully online program. That agreement, dated April 27, 2002, allowed students who have completed the Paralegal Studies A.S. degree to articulate to a four-year degree at Franklin University.

In February of 2003, the University of Wisconsin-Superior re-initiated prior discussions with Lake Superior College in an effort to finalize an articulation agreement that would include LSC's new Paralegal Studies program. An agreement was reached in December of 2004 that allowed LSC Paralegal Studies students to transfer LGST and other courses towards a Bachelor's Degree in Legal Studies at UWS.

Finally, in 2009, Lake Superior College reached an agreement with Kaplan University for the transfer of LSC course credits to an "advanced start" bachelor's degree program at Kaplan. This agreement applies to the all the degrees awarded by the LSC Paralegal Studies program, among others.

Accreditation Issues

There is no specialty accreditation for paralegal programs. Instead, the American Bar Association offers a similar credentialing process known as ABA Approval. The Paralegal Studies faculty began exploring the possibility of obtaining this program credential early on in the development of the program.

A September 2003 memo from Steve Schneider detailed some of the roadblocks to seeking ABA approval. These roadblocks included the costs of creating physical library, the staffing requirements imposed by the ABA, and possible curriculum compliance issues. It was also noted ABA approval requires that a program be in existence for two years and that the program have graduated students.

A major impediment to ABA approval, and one that exists to this day, is the ABA's requirement that paralegal students receive a minimum of ten hours of paralegal

education in a traditional classroom environment. The effect of this requirement was summarized in a 2008 Award for Excellence project by Steve Schneider titled, "An Assessment of the Costs and Benefits of Pursuing American Bar Association (ABA) Approval for the Paralegal Studies Program at Lake Superior College":

Certain requirements of ABA approval are inconsistent with the needs of Lake Superior College Paralegal Studies program constituencies. ABA approval would require the program to abandon much of its online presence and to focus the program curriculum on paralegal skills that are seldom required for entry-level positions in the local legal community.

The Lake Superior College Paralegal Studies program should not seek ABA approval at this time. It should adopt those parts of the ABA requirements that relate to program evaluation, review, and improvement [.]

Continuous Program Improvement Efforts

The core Paralegal Studies faculty, Tina Johnson and Steve Schneider, have made various efforts to improve the educational experience for Paralegal Studies students over the years. What follows is a summary of the most significant developments in the first ten years of the Paralegal Studies program.

Markets Served:

The constituencies served by the Paralegal Studies program include both students and potential employers. The varied needs of these constituencies create on-going challenges for the Paralegal Studies program.

Students

The Paralegal Studies program offers three separate degrees – a Paralegal Studies A.A.S. containing a strong business education component for students who plan to seek immediate employment after completion of the program; a Paralegal Studies A.S. that includes a significant general education requirement for students who plan to continue their education at a four-year college after completion of the program; and a Paralegal Studies Certificate that concentrates on the core legal studies curriculum for students who have a strong education or employment background and who are typically already employed in the legal field.

The Lake Superior College Paralegal Studies program differs from other paralegal education programs within MnSCU in three ways:

1. It is the only MnSCU paralegal education program that offers a Paralegal Studies Certificate that does not require a prior educational degree. Both Inver Hills Community College and North Hennepin Community College

offer paralegal certificate awards that require a prior associate or baccalaureate degree.

2. It is the only MnSCU paralegal education program that offers a 60-credit A.A.S. degree. Alexandria Technical College offers a 72-credit paralegal A.A.S. degree.
3. It is the only MnSCU paralegal education program that is offered in both onground and online formats. Other MnSCU paralegal education programs have online components, but none allow students to complete the program in an exclusively online format. St. Cloud Technical & Community College appears to offer an online Paralegal A.S. degree only.

Because of its online offerings, the Paralegal Studies program is attractive to many students who are not able to attend traditional onground classes. The online alternative also extends the geographical area served by the Paralegal Studies program. Past students have resided in such diverse communities as Minneapolis, Minnesota, Brainerd, Minnesota, Canby, Minnesota, Hibbing, Minnesota, and Silver Bay, Minnesota, as well as the local Duluth-Superior area. The Paralegal Studies program has also attracted students from Wisconsin, Iowa, and North Dakota.

Employers:

Legal employers utilize paralegals in different ways. Paralegal Studies graduates may seek employment with employers ranging from sole practitioners to large multi-lawyer firms and in geographic areas from Duluth-Superior to the Iron Range to the Twin Cities. The Paralegal Studies program offers different educational opportunities that allow graduates to be successful in a variety of work environments.

Curriculum Revisions:

Once the new program got started, it was evident that additional curriculum revisions were necessary: In December 2002 and November 2003, the planners were revised to better align the ADSC Legal courses with the beginning LGST courses and to minimize or eliminate duplication between the Administrative Support-Legal Secretary and Paralegal Studies programs, since beginning students in both programs needed so many of the same skills. In addition, in 2003 faculty added two critical content courses - Legal Ethics for the Paralegal and Real Property. Business Law was divided into two separate courses (Introduction and Commercial Topics) in order to cover all the necessary content.

A 2005-2006 Paralegal Studies Program Assessment Report revealed, among other things, no significant difference the performance of students between the online and on-campus courses.

Beginning Fall Semester 2007 the 18-credit Legal Secretary Certificate became available totally online, thereby making those courses and essential entry-level employment skills available as business electives to the Paralegal Studies AAS online students. This also resulted in an increased number of students double-majoring in order to earn both awards.

In October 2007 the number of LGST electives offered was reduced in an effort to respond to enrollments being spread across too many courses. In addition, a Capstone requirement was added, several courses re-named, with course descriptions, outcomes and prerequisites clarified, and the planner sequencing adjusted.

In November 2009, the planners underwent a final major revision, reducing the degree program size from 64 to 60 credits to comply with the state mandate, eliminating a four-credit elective, and combining one-credit and two-credit courses to improve scheduling by adhering to the recommended three-credit backbone. In addition, lower enrolling courses were removed from the planner to minimize confusion on course choices, although they were kept in the program inventory for possible future use. Effective Fall Semester 2010, the majority of the AAS Business elective credits were specified as ADS-Legal to better prepare those students for going directly into the field.

In the spring of 2010 Tina Johnson took a sabbatical to review of the content of several legal secretarial courses based on feedback from local employers. The results of the sabbatical proved exceptionally useful for the Paralegal Studies program. The comments of local employers about what skills they wish to see in Legal Studies graduates, including those coming from the Paralegal Studies program, resulted in a curriculum change that made ADSC1517 Computers in the Law Office a requirement for all three paralegal programs, effective Fall Semester 2011. LGST1400 Legal Studies I: Terminology and Procedures was re-instituted as a prerequisite to the substantive legal courses in an effort to improve student retention and success in these more advanced courses. A \$10 surcharge for Westlaw use was added to all advanced LGST courses in response to overall college budget concerns.

Advising Issues:

In the 2006-2007 Academic Year, the Paralegal Studies faculty assembled a collection of advising materials, including descriptions of the various degree options, program planners, course descriptions, course selection advice, tips for success, and job-hunting advice, into a single Desire to Learn shell called the Paralegal Student Lounge. Over the years, the Paralegal Student Lounge has been a place for students to interact with other students and Paralegal Studies faculty, to post questions that may not fit in other LGST courses, and to locate program-specific information to assist in their educational decisions.

In 2009, Steve Schneider completed an Award for Excellence project that resulted in the Paralegal Studies Program Handbook. The handbook was intended as a reference for Paralegal Studies students that they could use throughout their studies at Lake Superior College. The Handbook includes information on selecting a career as a paralegal, development of required skills, and career options, as well as much of the advising material included on the Paralegal Student Lounge. The Paralegal Studies Program Handbook was distributed to enrolled Paralegal Studies students beginning fall 2009.

An outgrowth of the Paralegal Studies Program Handbook was the 21 Questions pamphlet developed for Student Services to distribute to prospective paralegal studies students. This pamphlet has been distributed by Student Services and available at LSC Open Houses since fall 2009.

In the fall of 2011, the core Paralegal Studies faculty saw a need for a division of the advising duties within the program. Students who were in their final semesters as Paralegal Studies students often had questions that were more appropriate for the second-year instructor. As a result, arrangements were made to have all students who had completed Legal Studies II transferred to Steve Schneider as their advisor. First year students continued to be advised by Tina Johnson. This division of duty, although not quite equal, significantly strengthened the ability of Paralegal Studies faculty to provide appropriate advice to students commensurate with their advancement in the program.

Tina Johnson and Steve Schneider shared a total of 73 advisees in the fall of 2011 (58 for Tina and 15 for Steve). In the spring of 2012, the instructors shared 82 advisees (52 for Tina and 30 for Steve). The transfer of advisees greatly enhanced the ability of the program to provide appropriate advice to students in the career exploration phase of the program (Tina) and more advanced students with questions regarding legal specialty course selection, graduation, and job seeking. This division of advising duties has the additional benefit of providing students in-course contact with the advisor appropriate to the student's level of advancement in the program.

Service Learning:

In the 2006-2007 Academic Year, Steve Schneider completed an Award for Excellence project related to service learning opportunities within the local legal community. These efforts concentrated on building a relationship with the Volunteer Attorney Program in Duluth, Minnesota. The purpose of the relationship was to provide Paralegal Studies students with the opportunity to develop and practice paralegal skills in an environment that provides legal assistance to low-income clientele.

The relationship with the Volunteer Attorney program exists to this day. The VAP has provided several students the opportunity to learn practical paralegal skills that have led to employment in the legal field. In addition, the relationship with the VAP has given some students the option of a paralegal internship under flexible conditions that might not have been available in a more traditional legal office setting.

National and Local Memberships:

The Lake Superior College Paralegal Studies Program joined the American Association for Paralegal Educators in 2008. The AAFPE is a national organization dedicated to promoting excellence in paralegal education. Membership in the AAFPE has offered the opportunity to exchange information concerning best practices in paralegal education and to access a variety of classroom and program assessment tools. Paralegal Studies faculty have attended the AAFPE national conference in 2008, 2009, and 2012 and the regional conference in 2010. Each conference provided an opportunity to network with other paralegal instructors and program directors and to access a variety of resources, including

pedagogical and assessment techniques that have proven successful in other paralegal programs.

The core Paralegal Studies faculty are also members of the Minnesota Paralegal Association. The MPA helps promote the paralegal profession in Minnesota and the local chapter is a resource for students seeking networking opportunities within the field. The Paralegal Studies faculty regularly attend locally sponsored continuing education seminars.