

■ Associate Members

PACE

The Future of the Paralegal Profession

by Renee Rothweiler Cipriani and Deborah Baer McKinney

In 1994, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) voted overwhelmingly to develop an exam to test the proficiency level of experienced practicing paralegals. This voluntary exam, which became available in July 1996, is called the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE). PACE provides experienced paralegals with an opportunity to validate their experience and job skills, establish credentials and confirm their value to the legal industry. PACE was developed by an independent testing firm, the Professional Examination Service (PES), and is administered by Sylvan Learning Centers.

The exam is divided into two tiers. Tier I includes general and ethical questions; however, state specific sections may also be developed in the future. Tier II, which has not yet been developed, will include specialty sections. Before a paralegal can sit for the exam, the individual must meet the established criteria.

REQUIREMENTS FOR TIER I:

- A Bachelor's degree and completion of a paralegal program at an accredited school; and
- a minimum of two years work experience as a paralegal.

REQUIREMENTS FOR TIER II:

- Successful completion of Tier I; and
- a minimum of four years experience as a paralegal.

Recognizing that many practicing paralegals already have extensive experience, the educational requirement for Tier I will be waived for those paralegals with a minimum of four years experience if they apply to take the exam before December 31, 2000.

To prepare for the exam, paralegals can use the PACE Study Manual, seminars, local study groups and study information provided through the Internet. When notified by PES that you

have passed PACE, you receive a certificate authorizing use of the credential "PACE Registered Paralegal" or "RP."

As paralegals have become integrated into the legal team, the nature of the work delegated to paralegals has become more substantive. Attorneys now include time for paralegal services in fee petitions permitted by state or federal statute. In the early 1980's, courts recognized that paralegals were separate and distinct from support staff and encouraged attorneys to provide legal services in the most efficient manner possible. Courts awarding fees for paralegal services consistently point out that if the work had not been performed by paralegals, it would have been necessary to charge fees based upon attorneys' rates. Therefore, the allowance of fees for paralegal services is equitable.

This professional designation of PACE Registered Paralegal also provides clients with a standard by which to evaluate a paralegal's competency. Some clients, such as insurance companies, request that "certified" paralegals be assigned to their cases.

This designation also gives clients a standard to evaluate a paralegal's competency and distinguishes the paralegals' role from that of the support staff.

We are asking for the legal community's support in our endeavor to advance our profession as a whole and ourselves as individuals. We encourage paralegal employers to establish a reimbursement policy for the cost of the PACE exam if successfully completed. The full examination fee is \$225, and the cost of the Study Manual, necessary for exam preparation, is \$55.00.

We firmly believe this professional credential will substantiate a paralegal's value to the legal industry and will strengthen the clients' confidence in paralegals' professional abilities. ■

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