

EL CAMINO COLLEGE SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT

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Summary of Sabbatical Leave Project

My sabbatical project was an independent study program to study the best practices of American Bar Association (ABA) approved Paralegal Studies programs, specifically focused on enrollment, curriculum development and delivery, and job placement practices for alumni.

Project Details

The American Bar Association has approved 31 Paralegal Studies Programs within the State of California, 14 of which are within the California Community College system. The Paralegal Studies Program at El Camino College was one of the first programs to receive ABA approval. The ABA has many requirements to obtain and maintain ABA approval. All programmatic or curriculum changes must be approved by the ABA before implementation. As the Paralegal Studies Coordinator of an ABA-approved program, I have the responsibility to guide the direction of the program including curriculum, course delivery, advising program students, and evaluating the overall program. Evaluation of the program includes regular assessment of the extent to which the program meets its stated goals and objectives. In addition, I maintain close liaison with the legal, paralegal, and paralegal education communities by identifying and responding to the occupational and educational needs of the community.

The goal of the independent study program was for me to visit and have in-depth discussions with program directors of successful programs in California who have developed

strong working relationships with the legal community for guidance regarding curriculum and placement of their students and marketing of their program to increase enrollment.

For the purposes of my sabbatical project, I visited 10 ABA-approved paralegal programs and had substantive discussions with each of the Program Coordinators/Directors. The list included: Coastline Community College, Fullerton College, Mount San Antonio College, MTI College in Sacramento, Santa Ana College, Irvine Valley College, Cerritos College, University of San Diego, University of California, Irvine, and National University.

One of the primary issues the programs above have is the need to identify and enroll students who would be successful paralegals. I asked each of the Program Directors regarding their marketing and outreach strategies. Most replied that they rely on the institution's general marketing. The programs lack funding to engage in specific marketing campaigns to generate awareness for the paralegal programs. One exception to this is MTI College. The Director of the program engages alumni to recruit new students through a private Facebook account that she maintains. In this regard, the program maintains a regular and high level of contact with alumni who have deep connections within the Sacramento legal community. This, of course, results in high level referrals of potential students. The main difference between MTI College and most of the other programs I visited is that it is a private, for-profit college, so they have more resources to dedicate to a more strategic approach.

Most programs also lack any social media presence. All of the program directors I spoke to teach classes in addition to their roles as the head of the program. Establishing and maintaining social media presence is time consuming and can be expensive, which are resources that all public programs lack. This may be an area where we can take advantage to

generate enrollment among the generation that looks to social media content for direction. The ECC Paralegal Studies Program has invested in a marketing strategy that includes social media content, which will give us a strategic advantage over other programs that are in our vicinity.

An indirect way for many programs to generate enrollment is to provide specialty programs/tracks for current and potential students. For example, Santa Ana College promotes their Pathway to Law School, Legal Office Technician and Legal Interpreting specialty tracks that many other colleges do not offer. Likewise, Fullerton and Cerritos Colleges offer many specialty classes such as Intellectual Property, Employment and Immigration Law – all legal areas with high needs for paralegals and high potential wages. The ECC Program can move towards establishing specialty classes with specialty tracks; these legal areas all have a high demand for paralegals which in turn will drive enrollment.

Career placement after graduation is a significant concern for current and potential students. The directors I spoke to rely on the college's career placement office to direct graduates for job opportunities. Again, because most directors only have 20 to 40 percent release time, they have limited resources and time to develop placement opportunities and connect students with employers. MTI College, as the for-profit institution, has two dedicated full-time career placement staff to focus on a very small number of students; because of this, they have a very high placement rate for recent graduates. This is probably not an option for us at El Camino.

Personal and Institutional Benefits

The last few months I have spent with my fellow Coordinators/Directors have been refreshing. Sharing experiences of progress and struggles made me realize that I'm not operating in a silo and that there are supportive people in the same position who can help me with questions I have.

There are many best practices that we can duplicate and implement for the Paralegal Studies Program at El Camino. I also noticed gaps in the paralegal education field that we can fill to promote our program and increase awareness and enrollment, specifically in the marketing and outreach strategies that many potential students utilize to learn about new programs and educational opportunities. We can secure a competitive advantage by promoting our program through social media with consistent branding and messaging, while in turn, promoting the college as a whole.

This Sabbatical Leave experience has been very positive and an educational experience. I valued the time I was able to spend with my colleagues up and down the state and I'm looking forward to implementing the best practices I have learned to improve El Camino College's Paralegal Studies Program.