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Paralegal (Legal Assistant)

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LEGAL ASSISTANT

The legal assistant program was first offered in 1977. This two-year program was one of several new para-professional programs that focused on developing competencies in an occupation and included substantially more general education courses than the existing vocational-technical programs. The program had been offered in many two-year colleges in the United States and was developed in response to requests from a number of attorneys in Central Iowa.

Several challenges were identified in starting the program:

- Recognition of the occupation by the legal profession and local attorneys
- Determining the role of the legal assistant para-professional
- Establishing courses at both the Ankeny and Urban Campuses
- Recruiting highly qualified adjunct instructors

The program is described as follows in the DMACC 1977-79 Catalogue: Under the supervision and direction of the lawyer, the legal assistant should be able to apply knowledge of law and legal procedures in rendering direct assistance to lawyers engaged in legal research; design, develop or plan modifications or new procedures, techniques, services, processes or application; prepare or interpret legal documents and write detailed procedures for practicing in certain fields of law; select, compile and use technical information from such references as digests, encyclopedias or practice manuals; and analyze and follow procedural problems that involve independent decisions.

The curriculum included a liberal arts core (communications, social and behavioral sciences, math/science and humanities); support courses in accounting, business communications, human relations, data processing; and legal courses in the law office management, legal internship research, legal processes, legal systems, law of commerce, estates and trusts, torts and trials, real estate transactions, business organizational law, corporate income tax and income tax law.

The program objectives and curriculum have been much the same since the program's inception. The greatest changes have occurred with regard to technology, and the increasing need of students to be able to conduct factual and legal research by electronic means.

A program advisory committee made up of attorneys and paralegals played a key role initially in defining the program objectives and student competencies. It was also a subcommittee of the Iowa State Bar Association. The Advisory Committee members have assisted the program chair in securing competent adjunct instructors, provided information about changes and trends in the field, communicated changes and challenges in the job market and career opportunities, assisted in assessing the effectiveness of program curriculum and objectives, and more. The functions of the advisory committee are set by the ABA Guidelines and have remained constant over the years.

The program was first approved by the American Bar Association (ABA) in 1988. To obtain and retain ABA—Approval the program must demonstrate compliance with educational policies established by Guidelines promulgated by the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Paralegals. The program is approved for a seven-year period. Programs must submit an interim report form during the third year of a program's approval period and reapprove a self-evaluation report during the sixth year of the current approval period. The program must host a site visit for an ABA site evaluation team prior to obtaining reapproval.

The program was originally structured much like other College para-professional programs. The expectation was that students would attend classes during the day, would complete the program in two years and would be placed in jobs where they had participated in an internship. In fact, the program had many part-time students, employed large adjunct faculty, and attracted students with a range of backgrounds and employment outcomes. Few students were “full time” since many were employed while enrolled.

Soon after the program began courses were scheduled at times convenient for the large part-time student component. This allowed students to complete the program by taking only evening courses, but one cannot complete the program by taking only day courses. No paralegal courses are offered on line, although students can enroll in on line general education courses required to complete the program.

The initial program enrollment was 30 full-time plus many part time students. At the inception of the program students were predominately women. More men and younger students are enrolled in the program today. The program has always enrolled more part-time students than full-time students. Graduating student numbers have gradually increased over the years.

The faculty has always been predominately adjunct, since there are many specialized courses. Attorneys are available to teach since most classes are offered in the evening. Practicing attorneys insures legal related courses are taught by specialists in each substantive legal course.

The program chair has provided overall leadership to the program, including supervision of adjunct instructors. The chair also teaches several courses each term.

The program name, Legal Assistant, was changed to Paralegal beginning the 2013-2014 academic years. This change followed the trend set by the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Paralegals’ name change and other National Associations who began using the term Paralegal as opposed to Legal Assistant. It was the view of the national associations and DMACC faculty and administrators that the new name more accurately described the mission of the program.

The program award was changed from an Associate of Science degree to an Associate of Applied Science degree as required by the Iowa Department of Education. The change was effective for the academic year 2015.

The program chairs and their years of tenure are listed below.

Cary Israel	1977-82
Gary Cox	1982-85
Kim Weiser	1985-89
Faith O’Reilly	1988-91
Chanda Miller	1991-1993
Randi Ray	1993-present