

Choosing an Accredited Paralegal School

Although a paralegal degree is not a hard-and-fast requirement for launching a career as a legal assistant in most states, it can definitely provide an advantage over other candidates vying for the same position. Those who are serious about pursuing a career in the paralegal field or plan to eventually attend law school should consider obtaining an Associates or Bachelors degree from an accredited paralegal university.

While there are hundreds of paralegal schools across the country, only 260 of them are accredited, which means they have been verified as high-quality educational institutions by the national American Bar Association (ABA) or by a local bar association. There are also several independent accrediting agencies that evaluate online paralegal training programs. ABA accreditation is by far the most respected form of endorsement in the legal field. To receive ABA accreditation, a school must request the designation and pay an application fee to be evaluated.

Benefits of Attending an Accredited School

A large majority of the paralegal schools in the United States do not hold an official ABA accreditation, but that doesn't necessarily mean they should be avoided entirely. Many paralegal programs choose to follow the ABA's guidelines even if they haven't yet paid the fee to be evaluated and accredited. In these cases, a school may be designated as "ABA compliant," which means they follow all of the organization's criteria but have not yet gone through the official evaluation and approval process.

Even so, attending an accredited paralegal school affords you some important advantages over a non-accredited institution:

- Many accredited schools are eligible to take part in government-funded programs.
- After receiving a degree from an accredited institution, it will be easier to gain admittance to other accredited schools for more advanced degrees.
- When seeking a position as a paralegal after graduation, you'll have an edge over other candidates who did not attend an accredited program. Many of the country's most prestigious law firms give preference to accredited graduates that have been trained according to the ABA's strict guidelines.

Types of Accreditation

Depending on the location of the school, there are three main types of accreditation for which an institution can qualify:

- **ABA Accreditation:** The most reputable form of accreditation is awarded by the American Bar Association, a designation held by 260 paralegal schools and training programs in the United States. The ABA evaluates only traditional college-level institutions, not online or remote learning programs. Evaluation by the ABA is voluntary and requires that the school pays a registration fee. Upon approval, a school maintains its accredited designation for a period of seven years. Ongoing evaluations are required in order to renew the accreditation. The ABA has a strict list of requirements that must be met, including the presence of a comprehensive legal library and a minimum of 60 credits earned by all students.
- **Regional Accreditation:** This designation is awarded by regional agencies who evaluate paralegal training programs in their respective areas. The agency must meet federal requirements before earning the authority to evaluate and sanction schools.
- **State Bar Accreditation:** Some states have local bar associations that evaluate and authorize schools in their jurisdictions.
- **Alternate Accreditations:** Private colleges are evaluated and endorsed by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools. Web-based programs are accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council.

About the ABA Accreditation Process

The American Bar Association applies a rigorous set of standards when evaluating a school for accreditation. This helps to ensure that students receive the highest levels of paralegal education.

Accreditations are awarded and monitored by the Standing Committee on Paralegals & Approval Commission. A comprehensive approval process is followed for each educational institution that applies:

- The first step of the process occurs when the school contacts the ABA to request approval. To submit this request, the school must complete and submit an intensive self-evaluation.
- The self-evaluation is reviewed by the Approval Process Manager and other assessors. If the evaluation is determined to be sufficient, an on-site visit to the school is scheduled.
- During the two-day visit, a team consisting of an ABA representative, a veteran paralegal, and a director of an accredited paralegal institution tour the site, meet with faculty, and review curriculum.

- After the visit, a detailed report is submitted to the Approval Commission. The Commission reviews the report and decides whether the school meets the guidelines for high-quality paralegal training. If the school meets or exceeds expectations, the Committee recommends that the House of Delegates approves it as an accredited institution.

Finding an Accredited Paralegal School

With only 260 accredited schools in the country, it can be a challenge to locate one in your area. The easiest way to obtain a list is to visit the ABA's official website at <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals/directory/>. On this page, you can view an alphabetical list of ABA-accredited schools, or you can opt to filter by state. This site provides a host of helpful information about each school, including:

- Name and mailing address
- Phone number and email address
- Type of paralegal degrees offered
- A detailed description of program features

Another good way to locate an accredited school is to speak with established legal professionals in your area. Networks like the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) and the National Federation of Paralegals Association (NFPA) can help you connect with legal assistants and read reviews of local schools and programs. You can purchase a student membership to either of these organizations.

If you have a particular firm in mind for prospective employment, you might consider checking with them to see if there's a local accredited university they prefer. Attending one of their favored schools may give you an edge over the competition when it comes time to enter the job market.

Once you find an institution that interests you, be sure to conduct thorough research before enrolling. Visit the school's website, conduct an on-site visit, talk with current and past students, and ask about graduation and placement statistics. By gathering as much information as possible, you'll be better equipped to ensure that you receive a high-quality paralegal education that will improve your job prospects.