

Paralegal Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
November 17, 2020 - 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM
Virtual Meeting

In Attendance: Dr. David McCormick, retired University Administrator; William Shuluk, SoBT Library Liaison, Florida SouthWestern State College (FSW); Mary Conwell, Department Chair of Paralegal Studies, FSW; Matthew Hoffman, Professor of Paralegal Studies and Business, FSW; Jessica Guth, Paralegal, Collier County Sheriff's Office; Sabrina Guerin, CP, FRP, Paralegal, Henderson, Franklin, Starnes & Holt; Nickie Stewart, ACP, FRP, Paralegal, Henderson, Franklin, Starnes & Holt; Jennifer Baker, Associate Dean of the School of Business and Technology (SoBT), FSW; Keith Grossman, Attorney; Debbie Psihountas, Dean of SoBT, FSW; Lee County Judge Andrew Swett, 20th Judicial Circuit Court and FSW Adjunct Faculty, Shawn Seliger, Attorney; and Caroline Siefert, FSW.

Mary Conwell's Opening Remarks: Mary Conwell welcomed all in attendance and started the meeting with self-introductions around. Mary commented that as of yesterday, November 16th, she has been teaching at FSW for 21 years.

Approval of Spring 2020 Minutes: After a review of the previous meeting minutes, there was a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded. The motion carried to approve the spring 2020 meeting minutes.

Paralegal Real Estate and E-Discovery Certificate Updates: Dr. Psihountas explained that Governor Ron DeSantos implemented grants for short term certificates for helping the unemployed due to the pandemic. The Real Estate Paralegal Certificate new this fall is only 12 credit hours to complete. Students enrolled in the Law Office Management course this fall will be receiving and e-Discovery certificate paid with Schulz Grant funding. Paralegal Studies program statistics: For Fall 2019, enrollment is down to 81 students, with 46 part-time and 35 full-time, and with 64 female, 17 male students. The average age of the Paralegal Studies student is 27.4. The number of AS degrees conferred was 21. Statistics over 6 years, 2014 through 2019, include the following: In Fall 2014, there were 125 students enrolled, with 106 females and 19 males, with an average age of 32.4 years. The number of degrees conferred in 2014 was 22. The time to complete the degree was highest in 2016 at 4.61 years. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the time to completion of the AS Paralegal degree lowered to 2.32 years. We are better at completion rates and are encouraged that we are moving in the right direction. Fall to Fall retention rates continue from 50 to 58% during the same time span of 2014 through 2019.

We are working on reaching out to larger law firms, unions, bar associations, and paralegal associations throughout Florida. Also, possibly contacting communities underserved by colleges without ABA approved programs nearby. It takes time and money to market. We could purchase lists from high school student interest lists and interest lists from students taking the Gmat. A big problem is that we have no marketing budget. It was suggested that we could target unions, prisons, and retirees who may be interested in completing the degree. FSW is the only southwest Florida college that has a paralegal program that is ABA approved.

The new real estate certificate that is 12 credit hours has an enrollment of 33 students this fall. We will have additional students completing in the spring.

The Schulz Foundation has donated funds with the stipulation of helping students to complete industry certifications and CCCs, not Associate degrees. The deadline to use these funds is December 2020. We submitted mass marketing emailing in the summer targeting students who would be able to complete a CCC or industry certification. Schulz funds also paid for the E-discovery certification for students in the Law Office Management course. We will have 18

completers of that certificate this Fall 2020. In the fall term, the paralegal program spent \$17,967 of the funds on tuition and certifications.

The Cares Rapid Credentialing grant funds can fund short term certifications, industry certifications, professional certificates, or CCCs. The Real Estate certificate is great because it may be completed in one semester provided the student has already taken ENC 1101 (English Composition I). SoBT has been allocated \$77,000 and has used \$23,000 so far with the deadline in May 2021.

Fall 2020 American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) National Conference: Professor Conwell and Professor Hoffman attended the virtual conference in early November. One of the highlights noted is that some schools are hosting legal clinics, for example, to inform participants about landlord/tenant issues or simple estate planning. Professor Hoffman added that FSW already puts on a VITA income tax clinic on campus in the spring. Perhaps we could add a legal clinic the same day featuring workshops on estate planning, immigrations, and real estate. Immigration laws will experience rapid and immediate changes once executive orders happen. Engaging the community would be a great way to market our programs. Professor Hoffman noted that he also attended a seminar on how to teach during covid-19 which was informational.

ABA Virtual Site Visits: Professor Conwell participated in two ABA virtual approvals of paralegal programs in Texas and Ohio this fall semester. She will participate in the spring as a team leader of a virtual site ABA approval of a paralegal program in Kansas.

Major ABA Guidelines Change: The ABA guidelines allow synchronous classes taught via Zoom or other similar technologies. The ABA also is allowing stackable certifications such as the Real Estate Law CCC that we have implemented this fall. All paralegal programs must submit a covid-19 policy describing the teaching modalities used in Spring 2020, Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021.

ABA Approval Commission Meeting in October: Professor Conwell attended the ABA meeting and learned that our enrollment in the FSW Paralegal Studies program is right on target since the national average enrollment in programs is 81 students. Many programs are reporting funding issues. Assessment is the big topic and how assessments align with program goals is important to the commission.

Changes Caused by Pandemic in Paralegal Education and Practice of Law: FSW now has five modalities that are used to teach students. Online, traditional, blended, live online, and live flex. Law firm changes include more work completed remotely instead of in an office.

Miscellaneous Suggestions from the Advisory Committee Members: A discussion ensued regarding enrollment. There are many factors affecting colleges as suggested in high school demographics. There is an inverse effect and there are larger issues. Law school enrollment is also down. Also, it was noted that some law firms do not need the expertise of paralegals and that other areas such as Family Law, rely heavily of paralegals. Professor Conwell commented that our Paralegal Studies program is ABA approved and that most programs around the nation have declined enrollment by 20 to 30 students. Our program is highly regarded in the local area in the level of legal writing of our students possess. We may need to concentrate more on making students aware of our program. We need to market that FSW provides a quality education at a reasonable cost.

It was also mentioned that the bar passage rate is down in the last ten years. The paralegal title is used in different ways. The title suggests legal skills attained and perhaps a career path has not been designated. Paralegals could be compliance officers, Judicial assistants, and real estate title company employees, for example.

An example of why it is prudent to employ knowledgeable paralegals or legal assistants follows. In Indiana, a law firm that specializes in wills, trusts, and estates hires an out of work bartender. The mistakes made by this employee has cost the law firm \$500,000 for errors in misfiled deeds and Medicaid errors. They also had to pay for 2 months of nursing home costs. Law firms should want someone with training and customer service skills. Some areas of law require

challenging tasks and others require a different set of skills. Estate planning, real estate law, family law, corporate law all have different skills needed.

It was suggested that perhaps FSW should market our ABA approved program in the bigger cities. The paralegal title in a larger metro area would be in more demand than in a smaller area. The legal assistant title suggests no degree but maybe has 25 years of experience. Law firms bill for the paralegal's time under the guidance of a lawyer. The better the paralegal, the more money a law firm can make and the more money the firm can pay the paralegal. Perhaps market to high school students who do not want to complete a four-year degree.

E-Discovery Specialists is another current title for paralegals or legal assistants. Could market to broaden the focus. The trend seems to be heading for paralegals to be wearing more hats and having more duties. Also, in the legal field as in other fields, remote work is here to stay. Skills that are still sought after in a paralegal include customer service skills, ethics, and technology skills that are current with the 21st century. Data management skills and the ability to manage databases are becoming more important.

The comment was made that FSW's Paralegal Studies program has done a superior job in educating paralegals.

Closing Remarks: Judge Swett thanked all for their participation. Mary added that we appreciate the committee members' time and the meeting was adjourned at 12:36 pm.

Meeting minutes interpreted and reported by Jill De Valk.