

Expand Your Skillset

THE EVOLUTION OF CERTIFICATION

BY KRISTY GERON, RP®

The profession's landscape has evolved so much since the inception of the first national certification in 1976. Since that time, several national associations have created their own certification exams and the paralegal profession has never been the same. Certification is crucial to the paralegal profession. It enhances the paralegal's skillset, as well as informs their attorney or employer that they value their career not only enough to attend a paralegal program for their certificate, but also to attend study groups in person or review courses online in order to earn that coveted paralegal certification and the right to use those credentials behind their name.

PAVING THE WAY

The National Association of Legal Assistants, or NALA, offers two certification exams. The Certified Paralegal program was established in 1976, enabling a paralegal to earn their CP credential, and then follow that with their ACP credential. Certified Paralegal (CP) is the title of paralegals in the United States who have passed the Certified Paralegal Exam and have met additional education and experience requirements for

certification as a CP. After a paralegal obtains the CP credential, he or she is eligible to participate in the Advanced Paralegal Certification program. The credential awarded after successful completion of the program is the ACP credential. A CP must complete an ACP course and pass an exam which demonstrates advanced knowledge in the specific practice area or areas of practice in which the course is taken. NALA reports that as of 2016, there are over 18,000 paralegals who have achieved the CP credential and over 3,400 who have achieved the ACP credential in the United States. Since its inception, over 28,000 paralegals have participated in this program. NALA reports Florida leading the states with the highest number of CPs, followed by Texas, Arizona, and California. Florida also leads the states with the highest number of ACPs, followed again by Texas, California, and Arizona.

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations, or NFPA, offers two certification exams. The Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam® (PACE®) was established in 1996. The PACE® exam consists of hypothetical questions testing advanced application of general knowledge, paralegal experience, and critical analysis

obtained only by a higher level of education and actual work experience. NFPA's Paralegal CORE Competency Exam (PCCE™) was established in 2011. The Paralegal CORE Competency Exam™ (PCCE™) was developed to assess the knowledge, skills and ability of early-career and entry-level paralegals. A paralegal who completes the certification process through NFPA earns the credential PACE Registered Paralegal® (RP®) for completion of the PACE® Exam and Core Registered Paralegal™ (CORE™, CRP™) for completion of the PCCE™ Exam. The questions for the exam were written by paralegal educators and experienced NFPA paralegals. Many of those paralegals have gone on to hold leadership and Board positions within NFPA and their local associations. As of March 2017, NFPA reports over 323 CRPs

The American Bar Association does recognize the national certifications, as well as...

and over 593 RPs, totaling over 900 paralegals possessing NFPA credentials. Of those paralegals, NFPA reports 8 of them are dual-credentialed with the NFPA designations of both CRP and RP. This number of NFPA dual-credentialed paralegals is expected to increase as CRPs are readying themselves to sit for the advanced PACE exam to earn the RP credential. Washington State leads with the highest total number of NFPA certified paralegals, followed by Florida and Texas. Florida has the highest number of RPs, followed by Washington and Minnesota. Texas and Washington State have the highest number of CRPs, followed by Florida.

The Association for Legal Professionals, or NALS, previously National Association of Legal Secretaries, offers the Professional Paralegal Exam established in 2004. A paralegal who completes the certification pro-

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The Evolution of Certification

cess through NALS earns the credential Professional Paralegal (PP). The Certified PP designation is received after passing a one-day, four-part examination, and was developed at the request of its members. NALS reports approximately 203 PPs, with the highest number of those in Michigan, followed by Texas, Nevada, and Washington State.

The American Alliance of Paralegals (AAPI) awards the designation American Alliance Certified Paralegal (AACP). AAPI reports approximately 74 AACPs, with the highest number of AACPs in Ohio, followed by Texas and California.

The American Bar Association does recognize the national certifications, as well as the voluntary state specific certifications. Several state bars have their own paralegal certification programs, such as North Carolina, Ohio and Texas, and paralegals can earn the certification credential for various specialty areas, such

as family law, civil litigation, personal injury, or family law. State bars and paralegal associations may also offer voluntary registration once a paralegal is certified or when a paralegal has met minimum standards. Florida offers a voluntary registration program through the Florida Bar, and paralegals that choose to register with the Florida Bar may use the Florida Registered Paralegal (FRP) credential after their name. Indiana offers a similar voluntary registration program through its state bar and a paralegal that registers is known as an Indiana Registered Paralegal (IRP). Minnesota offers a voluntary registration program as well; a paralegal that registers in this program is known as a Minnesota Certified Paralegal (MnCP).

As of September 1, 2012, Washington State offers the Limited License Legal Technician (LLLT) program, and other states, such as Oregon and California, are considering and/or implementing similar programs. The LLLT program was born out of a need to offer equal access to justice for those who could not afford to hire an attorney to represent them. According to WSBA's website, they are currently trained and licensed to advise and assist people going through divorce, child custody and other family-law matters, and are able to consult and advise, complete and file necessary court documents, and help with court scheduling. Currently, there are 20 LLLTs listed in the Washington State area.

WHY CERTIFICATION MATTERS

From 1976 to 2017, the certification process has evolved on a broad scale and now encompasses paralegals, "hybrids" (paralegals assuming legal secretary duties, but still performing as paralegals) and Limited License Legal Technicians. Our profession has had to adapt to what the term "paralegal" actually means, and how that is enhanced by a hard-earned credential. Attorneys, human resources managers/supervisors, and judges are just beginning to understand all of the nuances that come with certification. When viewing a job on LinkedIn or any number of the other social media online job posting sites, the trend of requesting a paralegal that is not only educated and certificated, but also

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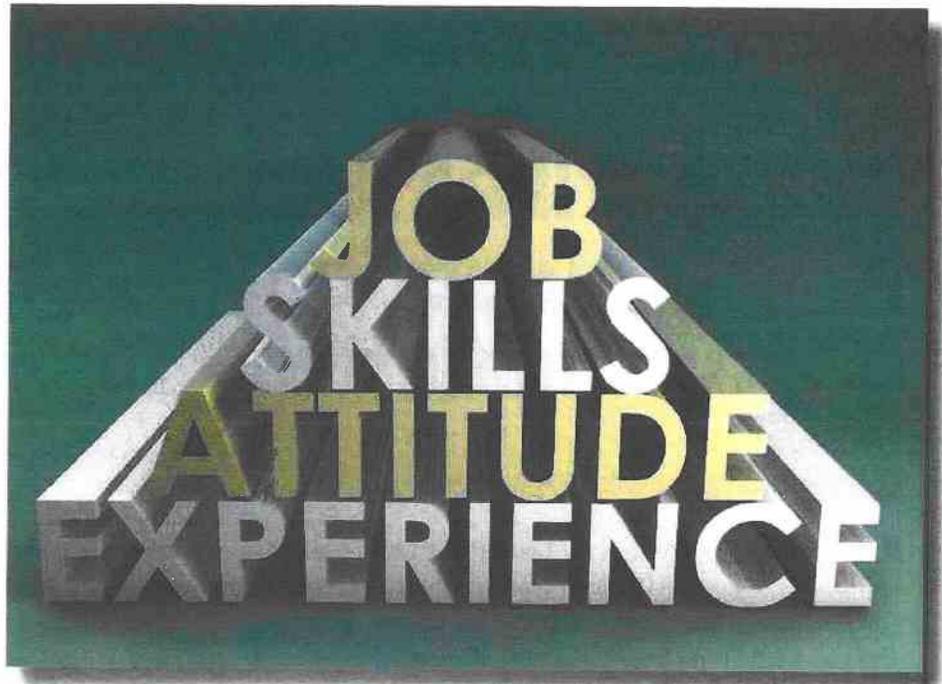
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certified, is increasing daily. Employers are more aware of the differences between a certificated paralegal (a paralegal who has completed a paralegal program and earned a certificate), and a certified paralegal (a paralegal who has taken and passed an exam related to core or advanced skills in order to earn a credential). Employers used to ask for someone with experience, but are now asking for paralegals who have a degree or certificate, and who are also certified. Law firms and companies are recognizing the importance of certification with regard to fee recovery in lawsuits. A law firm can recover fees for hours billed by a certified paralegal. This means more money awarded to the firm and that is the bottom line for a law firm; they want a positive verdict and a large monetary award for the client. Simply put, the certified paralegal is now extremely marketable. According to different recruiters across the board, with all things being equal, such as personality, experience, and education, paralegals with a certificate and certification typically edge out those without the same in the hiring process.

THE FUTURE OF CERTIFICATION

NFPA's dreams of changing the certification landscape are becoming a reality. NFPA's vision of marketing the PCCE™ exam to the paralegal programs as an exit exam for their students (Assurance of Learning program) has been met with a positive response from paralegal schools. NFPA's Certification Ambassadors are encouraging students graduating from paralegal programs without the Assurance of Learning program in place to sit for the PCCE, while all their core knowledge is current and fresh. These brand new paralegals are excited to enter the workforce already credentialed, which gives them an advantage over graduates with no certification. NFPA also has a vision of using the PCCE exam for paralegals enlisted in the military, and upon completion of their military service, would allow them

to enter the civilian workforce as credentialed paralegals. Members of the military legal community have discussed the logistics of this program with some of NFPA's Board members and are excited about the exam and what it means for their paralegals. NFPA is currently updating the PACE exam and expects the rollout of the new exam to be met with excitement and an influx of new RPs. NFPA continues to think outside the box where certification is concerned. The future is bright for paralegal certification and NFPA is the innovative leader lighting the way.

Kristy Geron, RP is a PACE Registered Paralegal and has been in the legal industry for almost 18 years. She is a Litigation and Environmental Paralegal with Kane Russell Coleman Logan PC, working on commercial litigation matters, as well as reviewing environmental reports for ground leases. She received her Bachelor's Degree from the University of North Texas and her paralegal certificate from Arlington Career Institute.



Ms. Geron was a member of the Dallas Area Paralegal Association for eight years, having served in various board and committee positions and as its President in 2016. She served as Certification Ambassador and led study groups for several years, before being awarded NFPA's Certification Ambassador Award in 2016. Ms. Geron is now serving as Minnesota Paralegal Association (MPA)'s Certification Ambassador Co-Chair and has been a member of MPA since January 2017. She is in her third term as NFPA's Study Materials Coordinator.

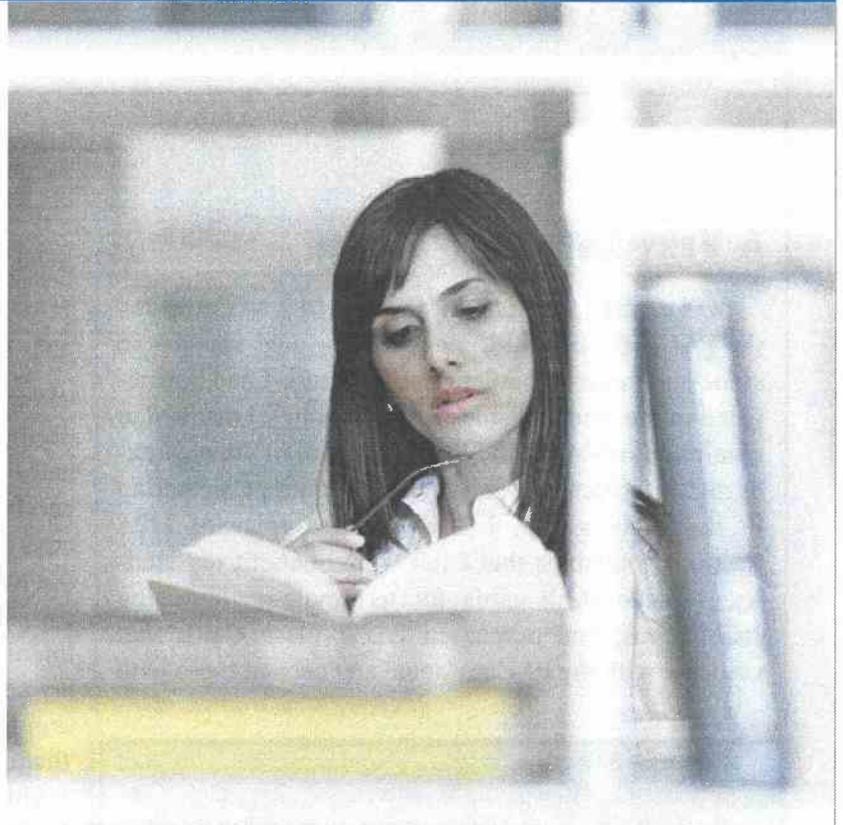
BOLDLY VENTURE INTO PACE

BY TINA JOHNSON, RP®

Having just participated in the MPA 2012 Annual Convention and co-presenting with Lori J. Boris, RP®, the Certification Ambassador, on the well-attended topic of “Boldly Venture into PACE, Personal Advancement for the Experienced Paralegal,” I am reminded of my journey and interest in the PACE exam. The excitement, the challenge, the ever so delightful end result — being designated as an RP — is what I want to share with you because this dream is absolutely possible!

My bold venture in pursuing paralegal excellence began in April 2009. Acting as the MPA Citations Editor, I was reading the monthly PACE articles in Citations and a spark was lit within me. I am a dreamer and am very passionate about my career as a paralegal. I am always searching for ways to “stand out,” and I love challenging myself to be the best paralegal I can be. The 2009 PACE Ambassador, Debra A. Jones, RP, sent an email to MPA members requesting interest in starting a PACE study group. I responded to that email and attended the meeting eager to learn more and my journey began.

I AM ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR WAYS TO “STAND OUT,” AND I LOVE CHALLENGING MYSELF TO BE THE BEST PARALEGAL I CAN BE.



MEETING THE CRITERIA

I knew I was eligible to take the PACE exam, as I had a bachelor’s degree, an associate’s degree in paralegal studies, and over nine years of paralegal experience. A study group was put together and I was appointed “head” of the group. At the beginning we had a total of 9 interested members in the study group, but eventually this number dropped to 6. We met bi-weekly to review the PACE Manual, discuss the sample questions at the end of the chapters, and oftentimes, we had references and contacts attend the meetings to speak on relevant topics, such as ethics, bankruptcy law, intellectual property law, and legal researching. While I was committed to the study group, I did not have a specific date set as to when I would take the exam. Our current Certification Ambassador, Lori J. Boris, RP, was a member of this study group, and she took the exam that year and passed. I was extremely proud of her and she inspired me to continue my journey. In 2010, I applied for the MPA PACE Scholarship and had it set in my mind that if I won, it would cement my personal goal into stone, meaning there would be no more procrastination, no more fear, no more excuses on my part. There are no valid reasons not to take the exam. All one needs is motivation... making the commitment.

A VERY LUCKY PARALEGAL

I was a very lucky paralegal in 2010! I was awarded the PACE Scholarship, meaning my goal was set in stone and never to be unturned. Because I had participated in the amazing study group in 2009, I decided to continue studying individually using all of the resources and information I had obtained while participating in the study group. I also attended relevant MPA Sectional meetings that I felt would benefit my studies. I made flash cards for terminology, including Latin terms, and purchased PACE Flash Cards that coincide with the PACE Manual and carried these with

me everywhere. That way, I could study at any moment of the day when I had free time from balancing my busy work life and family life.

Preparing for the exam was in the back of my mind during 2011. As a probate and tax paralegal, the first half of the year my work load was heavy and chaotic. I barely had time for myself, much less to study. The next thing I knew it was the end of summer. I pulled out the PACE Application and did my best to focus and start studying. The Application process itself was quite intense. I had to obtain certified official transcripts for my education credentials and reference letters from my employer verifying my paralegal experience. It was at that time when an email from Lori J. Boris, RP, arrived asking me about my plans for taking the PACE exam. I responded with my well thought out plan and timeline for studying and taking the exam in December 2011. This would give me five full months for reviewing the PACE Manual and studying hardcore. Two days later, Lori J. Boris, RP responded to my email reminding me of the terms of the 2010 PACE Scholarship. This was my "oh no" moment...my stone was chipped. I had failed to docket my own personal goal. Every paralegal knows that docketing and calendaring deadlines is vital for each and every client. The terms of the Scholarship stated that I had to take the PACE Exam on or before October 1, 2011. That meant I had approximately six weeks to fit everything in. Six weeks was not the same as six months, the recommended time frame for studying and preparing for PACE. Would you guess that I was extremely stressed out? Why yes! On top of everything, I was also involved with the MPA as a co-chair of the probate sectional and on the MPA Board of Directors as the Treasurer and Director of Finances. Luckily, the one thing I had on my side was my commitment and dedication to achieve this goal.

THE EXAM DATE WAS SET

My date was set for taking the exam. I arrived at the

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testing center early and reviewed my flash cards one last time in the car. Once inside the testing center, I was instructed to put my personal belongings in a locker, everything except my license. I waited until my name was called and then went into the testing room. After answering a few questions, I was body scanned, similar to security scans at airports or when you enter the Hennepin County Probate Court. It all felt so official! I wore my lucky “key” necklace and it set off the

exhaled a deep breath. A great sense of relief, excitement, contentment, and even giddiness washed over me. It’s hard to describe. I was ecstatic! As fellow paralegal, Deborah Nelson, RP, stated in her PACE Testimonial, “this test has been one of the greatest accomplishments of my life.”

A CHALLENGE

At home, I model appropriate traits for my five year old son, Eli, such as wearing a helmet when riding a bike hoping he will follow my lead. As a paralegal, I hope to model the excitement and passion of being a PACE Registered Paralegal to all of you, hoping you too will follow my lead.

The final comment that Lori J. Boris, RP, and I left to the attendees of our session “Boldly Venture into PACE, Personal Advancement for the Experienced Paralegal” at the 2012 MPA Annual Convention was to “Remember!! It is possible to pass this test if you prepare for it!” This is precisely what I want to relay to all experienced paralegals that have passion for their career. I challenge you to boldly venture into PACE!

Tina Johnson, RP, is a paralegal with the Minneapolis law firm of Gray Plant Mooty and a member of the firm’s Trust, Estate, and Charitable Planning practice group. Tina assists with all aspects of estate and trust administration, including drafting probate documents, transferring assets, preparing annual accountings, and preparing and filing estate tax and fiduciary income tax returns. Tina holds the roles of Director of Professional Development and Certification Ambassador Co-Chair for the Minnesota Paralegal Association.



security scan. Luckily, I was able to keep it on for good luck. I was given headphones to block out noise distractions and assigned to a computer cubicle. The only items I had in my cubicle were a dry erase board and a pen for taking notes during the test. I began reading each question very carefully in order to select the “best” answer. I was intently engrossed in the exam when I reached the 100th question. I looked up at the clock. Two hours had already whizzed by. I had 100 more questions to go and only two hours left to complete the exam. My nerves were on fire, but I pushed myself along. With five minutes to spare, I finished all 200 multiple choice questions. I truly had no adequate time to go back to the few questions that I had marked down on my dry erase board. So, I took a deep breath and hit the finish button. A message popped up asking if I was sure I was done. Knowing I would see my results immediately, my heart was racing. I almost cried when the results reported a passing score. I