

## Paralegal Certification: What It Is & How to Get It

While it's possible to obtain a job as a paralegal and learn the intricacies of the position through on-site training, it's becoming more common for law firms and large corporations to require their legal assistants to have formal education. There are nearly 1,000 formal schools across the country that offer Associate's and Bachelor's programs for aspiring paralegals, but for those who want to supplement their traditional degree, there are several certifications available that can help boost their resumes and make them more attractive in the eyes of prospective employers.

### Types of Certification

You can apply for certification regardless of your place of employment, whether it's a large law firm, a small private practice, a corporation with an internal legal department, or a sole proprietorship. Depending on the program you use to obtain certification, you'll be held to different requirements. There are three main professional organizations that grant paralegal certifications:

- **National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA):** The most esteemed of the certification venues, NALA's program was launched in 1976. The program was launched with the goal of helping law firms verify the expertise of prospective employees, to help develop standards for paralegal curriculum, and to keep legal assistants abreast of the latest industry developments. Since its inception, the program has awarded certifications to more than 25,000 of the country's top paralegals. Currently, nearly 13,000 legal assistants are accepted members. NALA requires that each candidate meets at least one of the following requirements:
  - Graduation from a paralegal educational program that is accredited by the ABA, an Associate's degree program, a Bachelor's degree program, or a paralegal program that includes completion of a minimum of 60 semester hours (15 of which are legal courses).
  - A Bachelor's degree in any area of study with one year of on-the-job paralegal experience (or 15 semester hours of legal assistant courses).
  - A high-school diploma or GED and seven years of job experience as a paralegal, with at least 20 hours of continuing education credits within a two-year period.

Due to NALA's rigorous certification requirements, most applicants wait until they've obtained some real-world experience rather than taking the test immediately after graduation. Those who are eligible can apply to take a

comprehensive two-day, five-section exam on the details of the paralegal field. Those who receive a passing score earn the title of Certified Legal Assistant/Certified Paralegal (CLA/CP). After receiving the designation, legal assistants must complete at least 50 hours of continuing education every five years. Visit <http://www.nala.org/cert.htm> for more details on obtaining certification.

- **National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA):** Founded in 1974 as the first national paralegal association, this prestigious organization gauges applicants' skill sets through the administration of the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE). Candidates must meet specific levels of experience and education to be eligible for the test. In order to qualify, an applicant must meet one of the following requirements:
  - Hold an Associate's degree from an accredited paralegal program and have six years of on-the-job experience
  - Hold a Bachelor's degree from an accredited paralegal program and have three years of on-the-job experience
  - Hold a Bachelor's degree and have completed a paralegal training program within the Bachelor's degree and have two years of on-the-job experience
  - Have four years of on-the-job experience prior to December 31, 2000

Upon passing the test, the designation Registered Paralegal (RP) is awarded. To maintain the certification, legal assistants must complete a minimum of 12 hours of continuing education every two years. Visit <http://www.paralegals.org> for more certification details.

- **American Alliance of Paralegals (AAPI):** The easiest of the three certifications to receive, the AAPI-administered American Alliance Certification Program (AACP) only requires that paralegals have at least five years of on-the-job experience and hold at least one of the following criteria:
  - An Associate's degree from an accredited paralegal program
  - A Bachelor's degree (or higher) from an accredited paralegal program
  - A certificate of completion from a paralegal program who follows the guidelines of the ABA

No exam is required to receive the AACP designation. To maintain the designation, paralegals must complete 18 hours of continuing legal education

every two years. Visit <http://www.aapipara.org/Certification.htm> for more information on beginning the certification process.

### **Benefits of Certification**

Obtaining a certificate from any of these reputable organizations earns you the title of a “certified paralegal”, which serves as corroboration of your specialized knowledge and expertise as a legal assistant. A certification also demonstrates your sense of initiative and commitment to excelling in your field over an extended period of time.

Although it’s not a state-mandated requirement to work as a legal assistant, a certification can help give you an edge over the competition and provide you with a valuable bargaining chip when negotiating your salary. Certifications can serve as a stepping stone between education and employment, or can help an existing employee break through a plateau to achieve more recognition, monetarily and otherwise.

Gaining one of these certifications also reflects well on the firm with which you’re employed. A legal practice with CLAs and CPs on their staff is likely to receive more respect and credibility from colleagues and clients, as well as command higher billing rates. Employers may also choose to use certification programs as employee training programs, helping to boost their staff’s morale and expertise. Plus, when you’re on the job market, a certification makes it easier for employers to verify your education and experience—instead of spending the time and money to check your references and credentials themselves, they can rest assured that those requirements were met as a condition of the certification.

### **Things to Consider**

A certification is different from licensing, which is government-issued permission for someone to practice a certain profession (such as medical treatment) or sell a certain product or service (such as a liquor vendor). For some professions, both a certification and a license can be obtained. Paralegals are not required to obtain a license in order to perform work.

Official certification programs should not be confused with certificates that are given to students who complete paralegal education courses or training programs. Certifications awarded by NALA, for example, will have seals indicating the CLA or CP designation.

Obtaining official certification by a reputable organization can require years of hard work and dedication, and a paralegal should regard it as a high achievement. It also takes effort to maintain a certification with continuing self-education and re-testing,

which helps keep legal assistants apprised of new trends and developments in the industry.