

THE PACE GOES ON

by Debbie Tope, CLA

In September and October 1995, Professional Examination Service (PES) invited two groups of 20-25 individuals to write examination questions according to specific criteria. Those questions were evaluated, rewritten and submitted to PES for technical critiquing. In February 1996, we (a committee of 20) were asked back to validate those questions, develop the profile of the successful PACE candidate and establish the passing level. The purpose of this session was to review again the items that had been written and revised in previous workshops and produce two to three versions of the exam to begin beta testing. Each item was subjected to intense scrutiny on a number of measures that included accuracy, content designation, proper question and answer format, and level of difficulty.

Another project for this work session was to develop a profile of the paralegal who that is qualified to pass this exam in contrast to the paralegal who is not. One more assignment, which remains to be done by mail, is to assign the pass/fail level for each item.

We ended up spending far more time than had been expected reevaluating the draft items. It became clear that the test development process is an evolving one. There is one certification exam already available. NFPA is offering a different perspective. Discussions revolved around the level of difficulty of the items we had written and the balance of litigation questions to other practice areas. We also discussed incorporating essay questions in the specialty exams.

Easily said, not so easily done. This is new, difficult, and, for NFPA, uncharted territory. Fortunately for NFPA, PES has charted the course many times in its work with other professional associations developing certification exams.

The paralegal profession covers vast legal ground and takes many forms. I am truly in awe of the wide range of talents, knowledge, experience and backgrounds of the individuals I have met in this test development process. The diversity of our profession ranges from freelance paralegals who can (and do) some of everything, to the paralegals who represent clients in administrative proceedings, to the corporate and litigation paralegals to the paralegal managers and administrators, and on and on. This diversity is the essence of the professional for who we are providing a test of advanced competency. Yet it is this very diversity and the work that can be and is, done under the label of "paralegal" that makes developing a certification examination so difficult.

Predictably, questions, uncertainty, controversy and self-examination abound. We are attempting to create a certification examination that tests a level of experience, knowledge and competence that we have chosen to exemplify as the best our profession has to offer. We are, in essence, in search of excellence. We are making progress, but there is still work to be done.

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