

Scoring PACE--A Meeting of the PACE Development Committee

by Adria L. Henderson, LPI

Having accomplished the task of formulating the content questions, the PACE Development Committee's next order of business was standardized scoring. As the date for the first sitting of the exam approached, the Content Specialists met from Friday, May 31, 1996, to Sunday, June 2, 1996 to accomplish this task. The group met for eight hours a day; with discussions sometimes continuing long into the evening and through most meal breaks. It was a difficult task reaching a compromise among the varying positions on what should constitute a passing score. The opinions ranged from some who felt the score should be low enough to allow people to feel they could pass, to those who felt the passing score should be high enough to make the test valid for the Advanced Competency title.

The group met at NFPA headquarters in Kansas City and was directed by Pat Jones of Professional Examinations Service of New York City. Pat, who has been involved with the test from its inception about 18 months ago, gets the award of the year for patiently putting up with the twelve of us. Pat first explained to the gathered group the several theories currently in use by professional testing companies to grade or score an exam. A compilation of these theories would be used to finally score PACE. The method we were to use would be based on how the barely qualified paralegal candidate first *should* answer, and then secondly how he or she *would* answer each question, in essence allowing those with barely qualifying skills to pass. Although this sounds as though it goes against the purpose of PACE, Pat explained that a passing score had to be established, and appropriate studies have shown this process to be the most valid. Pat also explained that studies have proven that the key number for reliable scoring is using a group of twelve content specialists to determine passing scores.

Before the content specialists could begin the process, however, we all had to take the two exams the Committee had developed over the last year. What an eye opener that was! Since each group of content specialists had worked separately, this was the first time the group had the opportunity to see the final product. Those of us who have been in practice for many years (and out of school for a long time) realized quickly how far removed we were from the information learned in paralegal courses. Those of us who specialize in one area of law realized that the comprehensive perspective of the exam left many of us overwhelmed when attempting to answer questions that were outside our daily practice areas.

By the time we finished taking the exams there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the reference materials should be studied and the PACE Review Seminars attended. Arguments arose as to the value of the test if experienced paralegals couldn't pass without attending the review seminars. We finally agreed that, even if a paralegal specializes in one area of the law, 1) being well-rounded in our field is extremely important, as other areas of the law are encountered in the work day and should be reviewed and learned; and, 2) establishing the criteria for continuing education is one of the goals of the PACE Committee.

After we took the exam (200 questions each), Pat gave us the daunting task of putting a percentage score on each question, first based on what we felt a barely qualified candidate *should* answer. Hours later the group learned that we had all fallen within the same general percentage area. We then retook the test again, using groups of 10 questions, this time giving the scoring percentage based on what we felt the barely qualified candidate *would* answer. The averaging of these scores by the professional testing team will be used to determine the passing score for the exam. These scores had not been computed at the close of this weekend.

We then had the opportunity to review the content one last time. Needless to say, put twelve content specialists in one room, and there's bound to be discussion. We revisited and altered several questions and answers one last time, an occurrence our fearless leader told us happens with every content group.

Overall, the 16-hour process for scoring was physically and mentally exhausting, very revealing, but mostly rewarding for the group as a whole. I think the group felt finally that the test was fair. Most important, a passing score on this exam would represent a paralegal NFPA would be proud to claim as PACE Registered Paralegal (RP).

Speakers' lists will be available to NFPA organizations so that local NFPA member associations can arrange review seminars. Everyone thinking about taking the exam should understand that all PACE questions were generated from the reference materials listed in the Candidates Handbook which can be obtained from NFPA headquarters for \$15.

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