

PACE: From Exam Developer to Registered Paralegal by Sybil Taylor Aytch, RP

As a relatively new (since July 1999) PACE Registered Paralegal (RP), I wanted to share my PACE experience.

In 1995, I was selected to serve as an exam developer on the PACE Development Committee. This Committee consisted of paralegals, lawyers and educators from around the country. Between 1995 and 1997, I spent 4 intense weekends at NFPA headquarters in Kansas City developing the initial PACE Tier I examination.

About 6 weeks before my first trip to Kansas City to work on PACE Tier I, I received a packet from Professional Examination Service (PES), the company contracted by NFPA to develop and administer PACE. This package contained our homework. Before our first meeting, all exam developers were required to prepare 40 multiple choice questions (including providing a valid and current reference for each question) encompassing the 5 domains to be covered by PACE (Administration of Client Legal Matters, Development of Client Legal Matters, Factual and Legal Research, Factual and Legal Writing and Office Administration). This proved to be a daunting task. PES provided us with very strict exam development criteria; coming up with 40 questions that adhered to that criteria was quite unnerving. I luckily was able to complete my 40 questions prior to boarding the Friday night flight to Kansas City. On the flight, however, it was obvious who the PACE exam developers were by the number of books they carried and by their frantic scribbling throughout the flight to complete their questions.

The next morning (Saturday), approximately 20 exam developers, along with NFPA and PES representatives, gathered at NFPA headquarters. The exam developers were assigned to groups- each group critiqued and validated another groups' questions. Many high-spirited arguments ensued as to the validity, complexity and veracity of the questions. I was later told by the group that evaluated my questions that most of them were "too difficult." I viewed this feedback as a compliment because I wanted PACE to be a challenging exam. By Sunday afternoon, we had accumulated several hundred valid questions covering all 5 domains. It was an exhilarating but exhausting weekend.

I returned to Kansas City over 3 additional weekends to work on PACE. My second and third trips consisted of writing and critiquing more questions. My third trip also included development of a profile for the educational and work experience requirements necessary for a paralegal to sit for PACE and to be eligible to receive the PACE credential. On my fourth trip, we actually took a practice version of the exam. Luckily, we all did well but I still felt at that point that the exam wasn't difficult enough.

The most interesting exercise during my fourth PACE weekend was determining a criterion-referenced passing score. This was a fascinating process where we debated, discussed, deliberated and finally came to a resolution regarding a bona fide passing score using requisite criteria provided by PES. This exercise provided valuable insight into exam development and validation. Several years later, I was able to incorporate these exam development procedures into a course in my master's degree program where statistical analysis was used as a criteria to establish test validity.

In early 1997, I began working on a complex avionics antitrust case that precluded me from continuing my work on the PACE Development Committee due to extensive work commitments. For the next 2 years, I followed the development and implementation of the exam and saw the number of PACE Registered Paralegals steadily increase. In early 1999, I was selected as a beta tester for a new version of PACE. I was eligible to take the new version of the exam because it had been 2 years since I had last worked on it and the exam had gone through many metamorphoses during that time. I finally took the new PACE in early July 1999. Much to my surprise, it was much more challenging than the earlier version I had worked on. It was also less litigation-oriented than the initial version and incorporated more corporate and real estate questions. Since a certain number of beta testers needed to take the new version of PACE before any scores for beta testers could be released, I had to wait 3 months for my results. On October 1, 1999, I was notified that I had passed PACE.

Working on PACE was a challenging and rewarding experience. It was an honor to work with so many qualified professionals. One of the major benefits of working on the exam was the rapport I developed with some of my colleagues. I now count two of those colleagues among my closest friends.

Many thanks to all those who contributed to the development and implementation of PACE. Congratulations to those who have obtained the RP credential. Although we may not all have been in favor of the development of PACE, we should support its viability as an example of how NFPA has moved into the forefront of the regulation issue.