



Strategies for Success Advising Guide: Paralegal Major



Paralegals work in a wide variety of legal areas so the skills that they need vary from job to job; for example, some of the skills that a real estate paralegal needs differ from the skills that a litigation paralegal would need. However, there are a lot of similar skills and personality traits that are valued in all paralegals.

This advising guide includes information that will help you to explore your academic and career interests, and determine whether the **Paralegal Studies major** will support your long-term goals.

Exploring Your Options

Before deciding upon a major, you should take some time to explore your interests and develop your long-term academic, career, and personal goals. You should meet with your advisor at least 3 times per semester. Below, is a list of activities to help you with your self-exploration and identify your interests. These activities are for your first year or during your first 30 credits at MCC.

- ___ During the first few weeks of your first semester at Middlesex, schedule an appointment to meet with your advisor to get acquainted, discuss your future plans and how the Paralegal program can help you to achieve your goals.
- ___ Complete the Focus2 online career assessment tool which is located on our website at www.middlesex.mass.edu/careerservices/FOCUS2.htm. After completing FOCUS2, schedule a meeting to discuss your results with a Career Counselor. Call 1-800-818-3434 or visit the Academic, Career and Transfer Centers in Lowell and Bedford to schedule your career counseling appointment.
- ___ Review the career biographies which are located on the Career Services website at www.middlesex.mass.edu/CareerServices/voc.biographies.htm

Is the Paralegal Major the Right "Fit" for Me?

___ Think about whether you have the following personality traits and abilities that paralegals must possess:

■ Ability to work with people

Are you the type of person who can maintain a calm attitude in the face of another person's anxiety? Can you keep a smile on your face and a tone of judgment out of your voice? Most paralegals work with a lot of different people in doing their jobs: lawyers, clients, judges, court clerks, government officials, surveyors, etc. Very often these people are under stress, especially clients who may be worried about a stressful situation such as being arrested or buying an expensive home.

■ Ability to pay attention to detail

Are you the kind of person who considers life from every angle? Do you look both ways when crossing a one-way street? Do you double check to make sure your spelling is correct even after you have used spell-check? Paralegals often have to look at both sides of an issue to find the right answer for the lawyer and the client. If you consider, "What if..." when faced with a problem, you might make a good paralegal.

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■ Ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines

Do you miss deadlines when you are doing your school work? Do you always have an excuse when you are late to work? Paralegals have to deal with lots of deadlines. And missing a deadline could result in a malpractice lawsuit for a lawyer. If you have a laid-back attitude and assume your work “will get done when I get around to it” being a paralegal is probably not a good fit for you. Paralegals need to meet deadlines and need to stay calm while they do so.

■ Ability to keep client information confidential

Are you the one that everyone comes to when they want to hear the latest gossip? Do you like to be the one who knows everything about everyone and share that information with whoever will listen? If you are, you need to think about becoming a gossip columnist on an entertainment channel, not a paralegal. Paralegals need to be able to keep other people’s secrets. Confidentiality is critical.

■ Ability to act honestly

Are you able to put other people’s interests ahead of your own? Can you be selfless instead of selfish? If you can, then you might make a good paralegal. Paralegals must act with integrity and honesty. Clients have to be able to trust you with their deepest secrets and know that you will not use their information for your own advantage. Paralegals cannot profit by acting in conflict to their clients’ interests.

■ Ability to stay organized

Does your bedroom have clothes all over the floor? Are you constantly searching through your book bag to find your homework assignment? If this sounds like you, you may have to work on developing your organizational skills before you can work as a paralegal. The ability to organize is a skill that you can practice and improve. But if you don’t want to learn that skill, you will not make a good paralegal.

■ Ability to multi-task

Can you talk on the phone and exercise on a treadmill at the same time? Do you like to knit while you watch television? If you can multi-task, you will make a good paralegal. Paralegals need the ability to handle many different tasks during the day; they may get interrupted by the phone ringing; they need to be able to set their own priorities. But please, even though you can multi-task....don’t text and drive at the same time!

■ Ability to work as part of a team

Have you ever been part of a sports team? Or walked as part of a team to raise money for charity? Can you work on group projects in school, even if you don’t necessarily like all the people you are working with? Paralegals never really work alone. They work as part of a legal team led by a lawyer. You may not ever be “BFFs” with everyone on your team, but a good paralegal will be able to develop good teamwork strategies to get results.

■ Ability to take on responsibility

Are you the one people turn to when they want someone to lead a group? Do you sometimes do more on a community project just because it interests you? If your professor needs someone in class to take on a special job, do you volunteer to help? Paralegals need to be able to assume responsibility for their own work. Paralegals should ask for help when they need it, but they are able to work independently most of the time. If you are willing to “go the extra distance” and “give 110%” being a paralegal may be a good fit for you.

■ Ability to persevere when you run into road blocks

Do you stick with a problem until it is solved, even when it takes longer than expected? Do you like to solve puzzles and figure things out? If you have the ability to see a problem through, then you would probably make a good paralegal. Paralegals don’t leave projects lying unfinished on their desks; they stick with it until the problem is solved even if that means working longer hours than usual.

■ Ability to speak and write clearly

If you is, like, somebody who, like, nevuuh no-way nuh-uh likes to talk to peepul, and who, like, always sorta kinda forgets to write down phone messages for the Fam....then don’t become a paralegal. Paralegals need to care about good grammar, good spelling, and good English language skills. You can



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learn these skills if you don't have them. But you won't make a good paralegal without them.

■ Ability to keep learning

Do you like to learn new things? Do you like to read? Do you like to think about how things can be done better? If you do, then being a paralegal may be the right choice for you. The law is always changing and a good paralegal knows that learning is a life-long pursuit. If you are willing to continue learning for the rest of your life, you will make a good paralegal. And your job will never become boring!

If you are still unsure whether the paralegal program is the right major for you, take the “*Would I Make a good Paralegal?*” quiz.

Paralegal Studies Self Exploration Activity

Would I Make a Good Paralegal?

For every statement below that you consider to be true, give yourself 1 point. Then consult the scale at the end.

NO.	PERSONALITY QUESTION	TRUE	FALSE
1	I enjoy helping people.		
2	When I am driving and someone cuts me off, I speed up so I can cut back in front of them and make an obscene gesture.		
3	I pay attention to details and try to follow instructions.		
4	When someone gives me driving directions, I listen for a few seconds and then drift off. I can always ask someone else later.		
5	I usually get my school work done on time.		
6	I am always late whenever I go anywhere.		
7	If you tell me a secret you can be sure I won't tell anyone.		
8	I am always the person people seek out when they want to hear the latest gossip.		
9	I think of myself as an honest person.		
10	If there is a long line at the checkout counter, I don't think there is anything wrong with taking a candy bar from a store and not paying for it.		
11	If you looked at my handouts from class, you would see that I keep them very well organized in a binder.		
12	I often forget to bring a pen to class.		
13	I can handle taking two tests in different subjects on the same day at school.		
14	Having two homework assignments due on the same day stresses me out.		
15	I enjoy playing team sports.		
16	I never like working on group projects even if everyone is doing their share of the work.		
17	If a school project interests me, I might spend some extra time on it just for fun.		
18	I would never volunteer to be a group leader.		
19	I enjoy word puzzles or “What is the difference between these two pictures?” puzzles.		
20	I get frustrated and give up if I can't figure things out after a few minutes.		
21	I enjoy knowing the answer to a question in class and raising my hand to give the answer.		
22	I know I don't write papers well, but I still get good grades in school because I am good at guessing the answers to true/false questions.		
23	I like reading and learning about new things.		
24	I want to finish school, get a good job, and never have to learn anything new again.		

GRADING THE QUIZ:

■ Questions 1,3,5,7,9,11,13,15,17,19,21,23:

Give yourself 1 point for every question that you answered TRUE; 0 points for every question that you answered FALSE.



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■ Questions 2,4,6,8,10,12,14,16,18,20,22,24:

Give yourself 1 point for every question that you answered FALSE; 0 points for every question that you answered TRUE.

■ If you scored between:

___ **0 – 11:** Read the article called “Would I Make a Good Paralegal?” You should think seriously about whether or not this is the right job for you. Talk to some paralegals or lawyers to see what they like about their jobs and what they dislike about their jobs. There are many different job opportunities for paralegals, but you will need to find the right one to make yourself happy.

___ **12-24:** You are an excellent candidate to become a paralegal. Take an Introduction to Law class or an American Government class to determine if you enjoy learning about the law and the court system.

___ Mid-semester; schedule an appointment with your advisor to review your academic progress. Also, use this time to discuss your progress toward meeting your academic and career goals.

___ Before the semester ends; schedule an appointment to meet with your advisor to discuss the classes you will take the following semester. (Early November to plan for spring classes, early April to plan fall and summer classes.)

The Career Path

The **Paralegal Studies Career Associate in Science, Liberal Studies degree program** prepares graduates for employment assisting lawyers in gathering and analyzing factual data, researching legal questions, and preparing legal documents. Careful planning with career counselor is essential.

___ Work with your advisor to create a Career Plan. As a student who is on the Career Path, your focus should be on building your skill-set and marketing yourself for a job.

___ Work with a career counselor who can help you create a resume and cover letter. Consider looking for an internship to enhance your skills and establish some work experience. Call 1-800-818-3434 or visit the Academic, Career and Transfer Centers in Lowell and Bedford to schedule your career counseling appointment.

___ Review the career biographies which are located on the Career Services website at www.middlesex.mass.edu/CareerServices/voc.biographies.htm

___ Continue to work with a career counselor who can help you with interview skills and job search techniques. Schedule an appointment with your advisor to follow up on your career plan.

General Paralegal Work Tasks:

Paralegals work under the direct supervision of lawyers. Paralegals are not allowed to practice law or give legal advice. Most paralegals work for private law firms, public agencies, insurance companies and other large corporations, government offices, court systems, banks and lending institutions, hospitals, and anywhere else that there are lawyers who need assistance. Below, are some general tasks that all paralegals do on a day-to-day basis.

- Conduct interviews w/clients to gather background information
- Correspond w/clients, counsel, and others on factual matters
- Inform client periodically of case/matter status
- Draft pleadings and documents
- Organize and maintain forms and client files
- Index or summarize documents or transcripts
- Assemble and analyze records from courts or agencies relevant to a case or client
- Prepare clients for court hearings
- Assist in administering law library



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- Review legal periodicals and material relevant to a specialty area of laws
- Maintain current binders of court rules
- Maintain calendar or tickler system
- Administer paralegal program
- Research law, including procedural, administrative, or case law
- Keep track of and report any pending legislation that may affect clients

To learn more about the work responsibilities of paralegals, visit www.lawcost.com/paras.htm. To view a list of paralegal job search websites, visit www.middlesex.mass.edu/Advising and select Advising Resources.

The Transfer Path

The **Paralegal Studies Transfer Associate in Science, Liberal Studies degree program** is designed to prepare graduates to transfer to bachelor degree programs on a full- or part-time basis. Graduates of the program may either continue their education or enter the work force directly as a paralegal. Paralegals (legal assistants) assist lawyers in gathering and analyzing factual data, researching legal questions, and preparing legal documents. This program qualifies for *MassTransfer*, which guarantees credit transfer to Massachusetts state colleges and the University of Massachusetts.

- ___ Work with your advisor to create a Transfer Plan. Identifying and applying to a Bachelor's Degree program will be your focus. You'll need to research academic programs of interests, colleges that offer these programs and be aware of deadlines for admissions, financial aid, and housing deposits (if you are interested on living on campus). The transfer process can be complex. Your advisor and transfer counselor can help you with this process.
- ___ Schedule an appointment to meet with a transfer counselor to learn about the transfer programs that are available to you as an MCC student, such as *MassTransfer*, transfer/articulation agreements with other colleges, and other programs. Also, ask about the Common Application and the benefits of using this form. Call 1-800-818-3434 or visit the Academic, Career, and Transfer Centers in Lowell or Bedford to schedule your appointment.
- ___ Determine which colleges offer Legal Studies or Paralegal Studies as a major or minor. Consider the following institutions:
 - Anna Maria College, Paxton, MA
 - Bay Path College, Longmeadow, MA
 - Boston University, Boston, MA
 - University of Hartford, Hartford, CT
 - Elms College, Chicopee, MA
 - Newbury College, Brookline, MA
 - Suffolk University, Boston, MA
- ___ If a college does not offer a legal studies major, consider what program your courses would fit into best. Try looking at their requirements for Political Science, Liberal Arts, Government, etc.
Consider: **Bentley University, Waltham, MA, University of Massachusetts Lowell or Amherst, MA** and other state schools. Remember if you took the Transfer track for paralegals, you will fit into one of their programs and enter as a junior.
- ___ Determine whether there are any special programs for students like you. Consider the non-traditional student programs at **Mount Holyoke College's Frances Perkins Program; Simmons College's Dorothea Lynde Dix Program; Smith College's Ada Comstock Program; Bryn Mawr College's Katherine McBride Program; and Wellesley College's Davis Degree Program**. Similarly, **Tufts University's REAL program** (Resumed Education for Adult Learners) may be right for you.
- ___ If the transfer institution that you are applying to requires that you write a college essay, make an appointment with a tutor in the writing center to help you edit and review your essay. Remember the essay reflects who you are as a student and is also a sample of your writing ability.
- ___ Determine whether you would be eligible for any scholarships or government loans. Public institutions



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are usually less expensive than private, but private schools may have more financial aid to offer.

- ___ Look for transfer scholarships that may be available. Consider applying to the MCC Foundation Scholarships. The deadlines for these MCC scholarships are typically at the end of the fall semester.
- ___ Determine whether you want to attend a small college or a larger university? Do you want to be in the city or the suburbs?
- ___ Determine whether you will commute to your new school or will you be living on campus? If you are a single parent, does the college have housing for you and your child(ren)? Many do.
- ___ Plan to visit your top choices in person. Every college looks good in a glossy photo...but you will get a better feel for the school when you visit. Be sure to talk to some students there and pay attention to application deadlines!

Paralegal Program Outcomes

Graduates of the Paralegal program are prepared to:

- Construct logical arguments in support of specific positions and evaluate their arguments
- Work effectively as part of a team and individually, as appropriate
- Prepare and carry out an effective legal research plan using both print and electronic sources of law
- Understand the legal process and the nature of laws practice, emphasizing the role of the paralegal in the delivery of legal services
- Demonstrate an understanding of the legal and ethical principles that guide paralegal conduct and the ability to identify and resolve ethical issues

AND

- Use knowledge acquired at MCC as a foundation for continued study and/or practical application
- Interpret and analyze information in order to engage in critical thinking and problem solving
- Communicate, use information, and employ technology effectively
- Communicate an understanding of the world from a global perspective
- Demonstrate social responsibility within the college community
- Demonstrate the capacity for on-going personal and professional development

At this point you can go one of two ways; The *Career Path* which is committing to your Associates Degree and then looking for a job after graduations or the *Transfer Path* continuing your education and transferring to a Bachelor's degree granting institute. Your advisor will guide you in the path you choose and help you reach your goal while ensuring that you meet your graduation requirements.

MCC Advising Resources:

- Career Services: www.middlesex.mass.edu/CareerServices
- Vocational Biographies: www.middlesex.mass.edu/CareerServices/voc.biographies.htm
- Transfer Services: www.middlesex.mass.edu/Transfer
- MassTransfer: www.mass.edu/masstransfer
- College Board Match Maker: http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/adv_typeofschool.jsp
- Financial Aid: www.middlesex.mass.edu/FinancialAid
- Foundation Scholarships: www.middlesex.mass.edu/foundation/scholarships

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