

## **CERTIFICATE, CERTIFICATED, CERTIFICATION. . . WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PARALEGAL CERTIFICATE AND CERTIFICATION?**

It is important to distinguish between a paralegal certificate and certification. The terms are often confused. The terms are not interchangeable and have separate meaning. A certificate verifies that a student has successfully completed a paralegal educational program. Generally, these programs are offered at universities and colleges. The prerequisites may vary but many require the entering student to have an associate or bachelor's degree in another area. For example, if a program offers a post-baccalaureate paralegal certificate, the student will have obtained a bachelor's degree in an area other than paralegal studies. It is possible that the student will take only legal specialty courses since they have completed their general education requirements during the pursuit of their associate or bachelor's degree. Upon successful completion of the institution's educational requirements, the student is issued a certificate of completion. The student is now *certificated* in paralegal studies.

A certified paralegal is one that has successfully completed a certification exam or other requirements of the certifying organization. Certification is the process through which an organization grants formal recognition to an individual that meets certain established requirements. This may include meeting educational requirements, prior work experience as a paralegal and passing an examination. Once the paralegal has met these criteria, they may use a special designation namely, "*certified paralegal*".

Currently, all certification programs in the United States are voluntary. Therefore, a paralegal may work in the field without obtaining certification. Two of the national paralegal organizations, the National Association of Legal Assistants, or NALA, and the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, or NFPA, offer certification. Some state bar associations, such as The Florida Bar Registered Paralegal Program, The North Carolina State Bar Certified Paralegal Program, and The Ohio State Bar Association Paralegal Certification Program, offer voluntary certification, or registration, for paralegals working in those states. In addition, the Texas Board of Legal Specialization Paralegal Certification Program certifies paralegals in six select areas of law. The scope, duration and requirements for the certification credential vary with each organization. Check with the organization offering the credential to determine the requirements.