

**Detailed Assessment Report  
2010-2011 Paralegal Studies BA\***

**Mission/Purpose**

The mission of the B.A. program in paralegal studies is to provide students with a well-rounded liberal arts education, including the legal terminology, concepts, and skills necessary to function effectively in the legal profession, whether in a private law firm, business, or government environment.

**Student Learning Outcomes, with Any Associations and Related Measures, Achievement Targets, Findings, and Action Plans**

**O 1: Research and create a legal memorandum**

Students will demonstrate the ability to research a legal issue resulting in a legal memorandum that correctly cites legal authorities

**Related Measures:**

**M 1: Legal Memorandum**

Graduating seniors will research and create a legal memorandum scored on a standard program-developed rubric with criteria set for format, contents, mechanics and grammar, and style.

**Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will receive an overall score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for the legal memorandum.

**Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14 of 14 who completed the senior capstone PLS 490 Advanced Para legalism) received an overall score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for the legal memorandum. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1 of 1 who completed the senior capstone PLS 490 Advanced Para legalism) received an overall score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for the legal memorandum. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5 of 5 who completed the senior capstone PLS 490 Advanced Para legalism) received an overall score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for the legal memorandum. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1 of 1 who completed the senior capstone PLS 490 Advanced Para legalism) received an overall score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for the legal memorandum.

**M 2: Legal Research Exit Exam**

Graduating seniors will take the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research before graduation.

**Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will score 70% or better on the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research.

**Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Not Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 50% (7/14) of graduating seniors scored 70% or better on the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 0% (0/1) of graduating senior scored 70% or better on the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) of

graduating seniors scored 70% or better on the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) of graduating seniors scored 70% or better on the program-developed exit assessment examination in legal research.

**Related Action Plans (by Established cycle, then alpha):**

For full information, see the *Action Plan Details* section of this report.

**Legal researching skills**

*Established in Cycle:* 2009-2010

In an attempt to improve the scores of the legal research exit exam, the exam results will be re-examined to determine exactly w...

**M 3: Graduate Exit Survey - Legal Memorandum Skills**

Graduating seniors will evaluate their ability to research a legal issue and to culminate the results of the research into a legal memorandum on a 5 point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree.

**Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will strongly agree or agree that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to research a legal issue. 80% of graduating seniors will strongly agree or agree that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to put the results of their research of a legal issue into a legal memorandum.

**Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to research a legal issue. 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to put the results of their research of a legal issue into a legal memorandum. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to research a legal issue. 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to put the results of their research of a legal issue into a legal memorandum. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to research a legal issue. 100% (5/5) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to put the results of their research of a legal issue into a legal memorandum. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to research a legal issue. 100% (5/5) strongly agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to put the results of their research of a legal issue into a legal memorandum.

**O 2: Compose basic legal documents**

Students will demonstrate the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, interrogatories, and a research memorandum.

**Related Measures:**

#### **M 4: Legal Documents in Senior Portfolio**

Graduating seniors will submit a senior writing portfolio which includes 5 legal documents each scored on a standard program-developed rubric.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will receive a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for each legal document in their senior writing portfolio.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 86% (12/14) received a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for each legal document in their senior writing portfolio. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 0% (0/1) received a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for each legal document in their senior writing portfolio. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) received a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for each legal document in their senior writing portfolio. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) received a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric for each legal document in their senior writing portfolio.

#### **M 5: Senior Portfolio**

Graduating seniors will organize a professional writing portfolio for presentation to prospective employers which is scored on a standard program-developed rubric with criteria for format and organization, contents, and appearance.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will receive a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for a professional writing portfolio that they organize for presentation to prospective employers.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 79% (11/14) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for a professional writing portfolio that they organize for presentation to prospective employers. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for a professional writing portfolio that they organize for presentation to prospective employers. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for a professional writing portfolio that they organize for presentation to prospective employers. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for a professional writing portfolio that they organize for presentation to prospective employers.

#### **M 6: Graduate Exit Survey - Drafting Legal Documents**

Graduating seniors will evaluate on a graduate exit survey their ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories on a 5 point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors on a graduate exit survey will strongly agree or agree that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories. Gulf Coast

Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 60% (3/5) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories. 20% (2/5) neither agreed nor disagreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to draft basic legal documents, including correspondence, basic pleadings, and interrogatories.

### **O 3: Locate and research ethical rules for paralegals**

Students will demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for paralegals and attorneys and will be able to locate and research the ethical rules and guidelines for paralegals and attorneys

#### **Related Measures:**

##### **M 7: Ethical Documents in Senior Portfolio**

Graduating seniors will submit a senior writing portfolio which includes an ethics section which is graded on a standard program-developed rubric with criteria of format and organization, contents, and appearance.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will receive a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 93% (13/14) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) received a score of 80 or better on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio.

##### **M 8: Graduate Exit Survey - Ethical Rules familiarity**

Graduating seniors will evaluate on a graduate exit survey familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals on a 5 point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree..

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will strongly agree or agree on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has allowed them to demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has allowed them to demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has

allowed them to demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has allowed them to demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has allowed them to demonstrate familiarity with the ethical rules for attorneys and paralegals.

#### **O 4: Identify and resolve ethical dilemmas**

Students will demonstrate the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in the workplace.

##### **Related Measures:**

##### **M 9: Ethics Exit Exam**

Graduating seniors will take the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics before graduation.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will score 70% or better on the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 86% (12/14) scored 70% or better on the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) scored 70% or better on the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 80% (4/5) scored 70% or better on the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) scored 70% or better on the American Association for Paralegal Education exit assessment examination in ethics.

#### **M 10: Graduate Exit Survey - Resolving Ethical Dilemmas**

Graduating seniors will evaluate on a graduate exit survey the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that arise in the legal workplace on a 5 point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will strongly agree or agree on a graduate exit survey that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in workplace.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in workplace. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in workplace. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in workplace. Gulf Coast

Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience in the paralegal program at USM has given them the ability to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may be confronted in workplace.

#### **O 5: Prepared to enter job market**

Students will be prepared to enter the job market in the legal profession.

##### **Related Measures:**

##### **M 11: Graduate Exit Survey - Professional Preparation**

Graduating seniors will evaluate on a graduate exit survey that they are prepared for the paralegal workplace by their education on a 5 point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree.

##### **Achievement Target:**

80% of graduating seniors will strongly agree or agree on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has prepared them to enter the job market in the legal profession.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Met**

Hattiesburg Fall 2010: 100% (14/14) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has prepared them to enter the job market in the legal profession. Gulf Coast Fall 2010: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has prepared them to enter the job market in the legal profession. Hattiesburg Spring 2011: 100% (5/5) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has prepared them to enter the job market in the legal profession. Gulf Coast Spring 2011: 100% (1/1) strongly agreed or agreed on a graduate exit survey that their education experience at USM has prepared them to enter the job market in the legal profession.

#### **M 12: Alumni Survey - Professional Employment**

Alumni will report on an alumni survey that they are employed within the legal profession within six months of graduation. Alumni are surveyed in the spring following the calendar year in which they graduate.

##### **Achievement Target:**

70% of responding alumni will report on an alumni survey that they are employed within the legal profession within six months of graduation.

##### **Findings (2010-2011) - Achievement Target: Not Met**

Hattiesburg/Gulf Coast: 38% (3/8) of responding alumni (class of calendar year 2009 - 8 of 12 graduates responded) reported on an alumni survey that they were employed within the legal profession as a working paralegal or in another legal capacity within six months of graduation. Additionally, 13% (1/8) worked in another field and 25% (2/8) were continuing their education in master's degree programs.

#### **Action Plan Details for This Cycle (by Established cycle, then alpha)**

##### **Emphasis on paralegal ethics in class**

Paralegal ethics will continue to be emphasized in all paralegal courses.

**Established in Cycle:** 2005-2006

**Implementation Status:** Terminated  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Implementation Description:** Fall 2006  
**Responsible Person/Group:** Paralegal Faculty

#### **Encourage students to enroll in PLS 389 Internship**

Students will be strongly encouraged to enroll in PLS 389 Paralegal Internship to give them on the job experience as a paralegal before they enter the job market.

**Established in Cycle:** 2005-2006  
**Implementation Status:** Terminated  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Implementation Description:** Fall 2006  
**Responsible Person/Group:** Paralegal Faculty

#### **Encourage students to respond to alumni survey**

Students will be encouraged to respond to the alumni survey that is mailed within six months or so of their graduation. The results of students entering the job market are really skewed since not all graduates returned the survey. Additionally, while some graduates may not be working in the legal field, some were furthering their education. We were unable to contact many graduates(mail returned) especially those on the Gulf Coast.

**Established in Cycle:** 2005-2006  
**Implementation Status:** Terminated  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Implementation Description:** Fall 2006  
**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Reassess the AAfPE legal research exit examination**

Faculty will reassess the AAfPE legal research exit examination and will develop our own legal research exit examination. This test is somewhat antiquated and our students actually do well on their legal memorandums.

**Established in Cycle:** 2005-2006  
**Implementation Status:** Terminated  
**Priority:** High  
**Implementation Description:** Fall 2006  
**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Research assignments given in most PLS courses**

Research assignments will continue to be given in most, if not all, paralegal courses. This exposure to researching has served our students well and our faculty will continue this effort.

**Established in Cycle:** 2005-2006  
**Implementation Status:** Terminated  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Implementation Description:** Fall 2006  
**Responsible Person/Group:** Paralegal Faculty

#### **Emphasis on paralegal ethics in class**

A continued emphasis on paralegal ethics will be implemented in all paralegal courses.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** High

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Encourage students to enroll in PLS 389 Internship**

Students should be encouraged to enroll in the PLS 389 internship so that they can obtain valuable law office experience.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** Medium

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Encourage students to respond to the alumni survey**

Encourage students to respond to the alumni survey

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** Medium

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Job interviewing skills, resume, cover letter**

Faculty must teach job interviewing skills and must have the students submit a resume and cover letter in the PLS 490 Advanced Paralegalism senior capstone course. Some faculty have failed to cover this most important aspect.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** High

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Reassess the legal research exit exam**

The legal research exit exam will be reassessed to determine exactly what concepts our students are having difficulty with.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** High

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

#### **Research Assignments given in most PLS courses**

Legal research assignments should be given in most paralegal courses in order to hone our students' legal researching skills.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** High

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty

### **Submission of sr portfolios, surveys, exit exams**

Faculty teaching the PLS 490 Advanced Para legalism senior capstone course must timely assign the senior portfolio to the students at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, they must collect the senior portfolios, exit surveys, and exit exams to be graded. Our data is skewed because not all students submitted a senior portfolio or because the students had such short notice that the quality is poor.

**Established in Cycle:** 2007-2008

**Implementation Status:** In-Progress

**Priority:** High

**Implementation Description:** Fall 2008

**Responsible Person/Group:** All paralegal faculty who teach PLS 490

### **Legal researching skills**

In an attempt to improve the scores of the legal research exit exam, the exam results will be re-examined to determine exactly what concepts our students are having difficulty with. Additionally, the exam itself will be examined to determine if any questions are ambiguous or are simply not a good measure of a student's knowledge of researching skills. The legal research exit exam is largely one that was developed by the American Association for Paralegal Educators (AAfPE) many years ago. The legal researching instructor and the director will review the exam and refine it so that the questions asked would be more indicative of the concepts that students should have mastered in legal research.

**Established in Cycle:** 2009-2010

**Implementation Status:** Planned

**Priority:** High

### **Relationships (Measure | Outcome/Objective):**

**Measure:** Legal Research Exit Exam | **Outcome/Objective:** Research and create a legal memorandum

### **Analysis Answers**

#### **What specifically did your assessments show regarding proven strengths or progress you made on outcomes/objectives?**

Without question, one of the strengths of the paralegal program is the students' ability to compose legal documents, specifically legal memorandums. Indeed, our students have steadily improved with 100% of Hattiesburg and Gulf Coast students for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 who turned in a legal memorandum receiving a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric (up from 83% in 2008-2009 for Hattiesburg students). Students have consistently reported over the years on exit surveys that they feel their paralegal education at Southern Miss has prepared them to draft basic legal documents. This ability is a cornerstone of a good, solid paralegal. Likewise, we continue to emphasize legal ethics

across the curriculum. This emphasis has had an impact as students are consistently scoring high on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio and the ethics exit exam students take before graduation.

**What specifically did your assessments show regarding any outcomes/objectives that will require continued attention?**

While the legal drafting skills of our students are unquestioned, students are continuing to have difficulty with the exit exam in legal research. The exam itself is one that was developed many years ago by the American Association for Paralegal Educators (AAfPE). A thorough examination of the exit exam in legal research was conducted and the test was changed to more closely correspond to the concepts and skills learned in legal research classes here at USM. This review was performed in the Fall of 2010 and some questions were deleted while many were added. What was once a 15 question legal research exit exam is now 24 questions. However, despite the changes, it appears that only 50% of Hattiesburg students and 0% of Gulf Coast students scored 70% or better on the exam in 2010-2011. The faculty will continue to evaluate the exam as well as course content to ensure that our students have the necessary legal research skills. The problem may very well be that while students feel comfortable performing legal research and actually do well on their finished product, when it comes to being tested on the process of legal research, students simply are unable to translate their research activities to the exam. The faculty are continuing with mandated review of job interviewing skills, resumes, and cover letters in the senior capstone course. While 77% of responding alumni (2009-2010 -class of calendar year 2008) reported on an alumni survey that they were employed within the legal profession as a working paralegal or in another legal capacity within six months of graduation, for 2010-2011(class of calendar year 2009) only 38% reported such. The economy is most likely to blame for the decrease in reported employment. The Director continues to email job announcements to students and graduates in order to assist our graduates with finding employment.

**Annual Reports**

**Program Summary**

The paralegal program is the oldest bachelor's degree paralegal program in Mississippi and the only ABA-approved program in South Mississippi. The fact that our program is approved by the ABA, mostly recently in 2008, is external validation of the quality of our program. In the last few years, as corporate clients have become aggressive in cutting legal bills, law firms have come to rely more and more on true paralegals to complete client tasks while holding down costs. In fact, government figures show that the market and demand for paralegals is expected to grow 28% in the next 8 years. Consequently, as the only accredited four-year paralegal program in south Mississippi, our program is providing a unique and vital service to the legal profession in south Mississippi.

Our program's efforts to recruit, retain, and engage our students are multi-faceted. In 2009, the program began to increase its presence in the high schools of south Mississippi. As a result, guidance counselors and students with an interest in law-based careers are more aware than ever of the unique educational opportunities available at Southern Miss. Once on campus, our majors find that our Paralegal Student Society is one of the more active academic-based student organizations on campus. This past year, as in years past, this organization facilitated visits to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans as well as various courtrooms across the state to view trial proceedings. The faculty is determined to give our students opportunities to see our judicial system up close and personal. The Southern Miss paralegal studies program has continued with the plan developed in 2009 to boost enrollment. The program distributes USM paralegal program brochures to area high schools and persons inquiring about our program; faculty speak at local high schools on career days; and the faculty work with local junior colleges to attract more transfer students. Specifically, the Director has been working closely with Mary Dane Gregg, Assistant to the President for Articulation

and Planning, concerning Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with select community colleges regarding transfer of courses. In 2010, Jones County Junior College and Holmes Community College signed the agreement. The program has already seen an increase in transfer students from these community colleges.

The faculty has encouraged students to participate in the paralegal internship course in order to actively engage the students in working in law offices and other legal environments. The internship is invaluable in providing students with some actual work experience which could assist them in finding employment after graduation. In many instances, the employer hosting the intern will ultimately offer the student work upon graduation. To that end, the Director has met with local attorneys to discuss the benefits of having a student intern and has several firms who are committed to accepting our paralegal student interns. Likewise, former paralegal graduates have returned to campus to speak to students and have encouraged students to consider the internship course. As a result of these concerted efforts, enrollment in the internship courses has seen a marked increase.

### **Continuous Improvement Initiatives**

The faculty have been working on a number of plans to improve student learning generally including encouraging legal research assignments in most paralegal classes, reassessing the legal research exit exam, and encouraging students to enroll in the paralegal internship course. The faculty have also been working on student recruitment of high school and community college transfer students. Indeed, the faculty have continued the Director's plan (developed in 2009) to increase enrollment in the program through a three-pronged approach: 1) distributing USM paralegal program brochures to area high schools and persons inquiring about our program; 2) speaking at local high schools on career days; and 3) working with local junior colleges to attract more transfer students.

### **Closing the Loop**

The faculty has been working on a number of plans to improve student learning generally, including encouraging legal research assignments in most paralegal classes, reassessing the legal research exit exam, and encouraging students to enroll in the paralegal internship course. The faculty has also been working on student recruitment of high school and community college transfer students. The paralegal program has continued to emphasize legal research assignments in most paralegal classes. This emphasis has obviously worked as one of the strengths of the paralegal program is the students' ability to compose legal documents, specifically legal memorandums. Indeed, our students have steadily improved with 100% of Hattiesburg and Gulf Coast students for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 who turned in a legal memorandum receiving a score of 70 or better on the grading rubric (up from 83% in 2008-2009 for Hattiesburg students).

Students have consistently reported over the years on exit surveys that they feel their paralegal education at Southern Miss has prepared them to draft basic legal documents. This ability is a cornerstone of a good, solid paralegal. Likewise, we continue to emphasize legal ethics across the curriculum. This emphasis has had an impact as students are consistently scoring high on the grading rubric for the ethics portion of their senior writing portfolio and the ethics exit exam students take before graduation.

While the legal drafting skills of our students are unquestioned, students are continuing to have difficulty with the exit exam in legal research. The exam itself is one that was developed many years ago by the American Association for Paralegal Educators (AAfPE). One of the action plans completed in the previous cycle was a thorough examination of the exit exam in legal research. Indeed, the test was changed to more closely correspond to the concepts and skills learned in legal research classes here at USM. This review was performed in the Fall of 2010 and what was once a 15 question legal research exit exam is now 24 questions. However, despite the changes, it appears that only 50% of

Hattiesburg students and 0% of Gulf Coast students scored 70% or better on the exam in 2010-2011. The faculty will continue to evaluate the exam as well as course content to ensure that our students have the necessary legal research skills. The problem may very well be that while students feel comfortable performing legal research and actually do well on their finished product, when it comes to being tested on the process of legal research, students simply are unable to translate their research activities to the exam.

The faculty has continued to encourage students to participate in the paralegal internship course in order to actively engage the students in working in law offices and other legal environments. The internship is invaluable in providing students with actual work experience which could assist them in finding employment after graduation. In many instances, the employer hosting the intern will ultimately offer the student work upon graduation. The Director has met with local attorneys to discuss the benefits of having a student intern and has several firms who are committed to accepting our paralegal student interns on a regular basis. Likewise, former paralegal graduates have returned to campus to speak to students and have encouraged students to consider the internship course. As a result of these concerted efforts, enrollment in the internship courses has seen a marked increase.

The Southern Miss paralegal studies program has continued with its student recruitment efforts begun in 2009 by the Director. The plan to boost enrollment calls for a three-pronged approach: 1) distributing USM paralegal program brochures to area high schools and persons inquiring about our program; 2) speaking at local high schools on career days; and 3) working with local junior colleges to attract more transfer students. The faculty has done all three: paralegal brochures have been distributed to career guidance offices of local high schools; the faculty attended career fairs at area high schools; and the faculty has worked with local junior colleges to attract more transfer students via Memorandums of Understanding (MOU). In the past, community college transfer students would be penalized for pursuing a Bachelor's degree in paralegal studies since some of the coursework they had taken at the community college level would not count toward the major here at Southern Miss. These students were left to repeat certain courses at the University level in order to receive credit. However, the Director has worked closely with Mary Dane Gregg, Assistant to the President for Articulation and Planning, concerning MOU. In 2010, Jones County Junior College and Holmes Community College signed the agreement. As a result, the program has already seen an increase in transfer students from these community colleges.