

PARALEGAL INTERNSHIP

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MOORHEAD

I. Purpose and Objectives

All paralegal students are required to complete an internship prior to graduation. The internship is designed to acquaint the student with the actual practice of law by working as a paralegal under the supervision of an attorney. The student gains experience by applying knowledge from prior classroom training, and the law office gains an eager worker.

The objectives of the internship experience are:

1. To work under the supervision of a licensed attorney and with others in a law office or agency setting.
2. To apply the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom, and to develop new skills by being involved in actual cases and projects.
3. To provide the student with important contact with the legal community which may lead to career opportunities.

II. Prerequisites

Prior to the internship, the student must satisfactorily complete the following courses:

1. Legal Research & Writing II (PARA 251)
2. Civil Procedure 1 (PARA 310), Interviewing (PARA 325) , Legal Ethics (PARA 375)
3. Two courses from your area of emphasis.

In addition, the student must have attained a 2.25 GPA in Paralegal courses and must attend an informational internship meeting before commencing the internship.

III. Steps in the Internship Process

1. Attend an internship meeting.

These meetings are held during the first few weeks of each semester. The purpose is to explain the requirements and process of the internship. Former interns attend these meetings to make informal presentations about their experiences and to answer questions from prospective interns

2. Find an internship site.

See section IV.

3. Paralegal Internship Agreement.

This form is completed and signed by you, the supervising attorney, and the faculty internship coordinator. You will not be allowed to register for the internship until this form is completed and signed by all parties. See section VII for details.

4. Register for internship credits.

Registration for the internship is the same as for other courses, except that a course override must first be obtained from the faculty internship coordinator. You must register for a minimum of 4 credits, and you can register for a maximum of 12 credits. Any credits in excess of the minimum are applied as elective credits. One credit equals forty (40) hours of work at the internship site.

5. Daily Time Sheets and Weekly Activity Reports.

You are required to submit regular reports of work performed at the office. See section VIII.

6. On-Site Visit.

The faculty internship coordinator will, at some point during the semester, visit with you and the intern supervisor at the job site in order to do an interim progress evaluation.

7. Final Report.

You must do a written report at the end of the internship. See section IX.

8. Supervising Attorney Evaluation.

After your internship is completed, your supervising attorney will be asked to complete an evaluation form, which will be sent out by the faculty internship coordinator.

9. Attend Internship Meeting.

Returning interns should attend an internship meeting at the beginning of the semester following their internship. The purpose is to give an informal presentation to prospective interns and to answer any questions they may have. Your presentation should include such things as how you got your internship, the tasks you performed, the most interesting and least interesting aspects, any difficulties you encountered and how they were resolved, how it compared to class work, how you were treated in the office, and any other suggestions or comments you feel would be useful,

10. Grading.

Grading is on the basis of "P" or "F." In most instances, the requirements for the internship will not be completed by the end of the semester, and a grade of "IP" (in progress) will be assigned. The grade will be changed after all reports and the final paper are submitted.

IV. Finding an Internship Site

It is the student's responsibility to find an internship site. This will usually require the same steps as you might follow in obtaining a regular job, that is, preparing and sending resumes and letters, making telephone calls, being interviewed, etc. This is made a part of the internship to help prepare the student for job searches after graduation.

The Paralegal Department maintains a list of firms and organizations, which have had MSUM paralegal interns in the past. If you do not have a particular office already in mind, you may wish to use this list as a starting point in your search. There is no guarantee that the offices on the list will want an intern at the time you are seeking one, nor is your choice of an internship site limited to the offices on the list. A minimum requirement is that the place you intern must have at least one licensed attorney who will be ultimately responsible for the supervision of your work.

It is usually best to start by mailing a cover letter and a resume to the firms you are interested in, rather than making "cold calls" in person or by phone. Be clear in your cover letter that you are seeking an internship, not a permanent job. If you don't receive a response within 10 days or two weeks, follow up with a phone call.

A good, neat resume is essential. Take advantage of the free resume writing seminars, individual assistance, and materials offered by MSUM's Career Services office. There are also books available in the Paralegal Department offices, which contain sample resumes and application letters for paralegals.

Some attorneys may be hesitant about taking on an intern if they haven't done so before. You may wish to briefly explain in your cover letter the things you could do for the firm. Some students have included a copy of the Paralegal course descriptions sheet with their resume and checked off the courses they have already taken. The faculty internship coordinator has prepared a written explanation which- you may wish to give to a firm that hasn't had one of our interns in the past.

V. The Interview

The attorney will usually want to have an interview with you before accepting you as an intern. The foremost rule to remember in an interview is to relax and be confident. Be a good communicator. Be open and assertive. MSUM's Career Services office offers workshops on interviewing and job-seeking skills.

This is a good opportunity for you to let the firm know that you are a capable knowledgeable person, even though you haven't had actual job experience as a paralegal. Emphasize what you've learned in research and writing, interviewing, methods, and other relevant course projects. Take writing samples with you to the interview and offer them even if they are not requested. This may include memos and briefs you have done for the research sequence, for example.

The interview is a good time for you to discuss specific tasks and projects you would have as an intern. If the attorney decides at the time of the interview to accept you, you may wish to complete the Paralegal Internship Agreement before leaving.

VI. What to Expect During the Internship

Above all else, remember that you are involved with a professional team delivering quality legal services to real people. The goal of the internship is to give you an orientation and exposure to how a law office operates. You should conduct yourself and dress professionally.

Confidentiality cannot be overemphasized. As an intern, you are bound by this rule just as are the attorneys, paralegals, and other employees of the firm. Some firms require all employees and sometimes interns to sign a statement promising to maintain confidentiality. If asked, sign it willingly and eagerly.

You should receive an orientation to the office so that you are comfortable being there. If this is not offered to you, politely ask for it. You should have a clear understanding of the lines of communication between yourself and others in the office, e.g., to whom you are accountable, from whom you will receive projects, where to go with your questions, etc.

Initiative and self-starting are essential qualities for paralegals, but don't be afraid to ask questions when necessary. Most attorneys and paralegals enjoy the opportunity to "teach" you. They would prefer to answer questions about your assigned projects at the beginning or while it's in progress, rather than to end up with an unsatisfactory work product, which in turn leads to frustration for the attorney and you, as well as reflecting negatively on our interns in general.

Although initiative and self-starting are important, you must also keep in mind at all times that everything you do in the office should have attorney approval and supervision. Thus, do not undertake tasks on your own without prior approval. Remember the prohibition against the unauthorized practice of law.

Don't expect to receive assignments or requests in writing from your supervisor, as you are used to written assignments in your classes. Most instructions are given orally; this will help your listening and communication skills.

You should try to get experience in as many paralegal tasks as possible, but keep in mind that because your time is limited, you may not get to do everything you'd like to. If you feel you are not being given projects, which you would like to do, and which you feel would be more appropriate, you should discuss that with your supervisor or with the faculty internship coordinator.

The firm and individuals who agree to have you as an intern are not compensated by us for their time in delegating and supervising your work. Your supervisors provide a valuable teaching service for you. (Of course, we believe they do receive valuable work from you in return.) Don't forget to thank the attorneys and staff for giving you the opportunity to learn.

VII. Internship Agreement

The Paralegal Internship Agreement is to be completed and signed by you and your supervising attorney after you discuss your projected activities. This agreement must be submitted to the faculty internship coordinator prior to commencement of the internship. You will not be allowed to register for the internship, and you will not receive credit for work done, prior to approval of the agreement form by the coordinator. The liability insurance provided by MSUM for interns does not take effect unless there is a fully executed internship agreement in place.

Be as detailed as possible when completing the agreement. The dates and times you'll be at the internship site are important to the faculty internship coordinator when attempting to contact you and when scheduling the site visit. The section on proposed activities must contain specific plans that you and your internship supervisor have discussed. Do not leave that section blank.

VIII. Daily Time Sheets and Weekly Activity Reports

You must submit daily time sheets and narrative summaries each week throughout your internship. Failure to submit these reports on a weekly basis may result in no credit for the internship.

The time sheets must be signed by your supervising attorney. Each time sheet allows you to account for an entire week. Good record keeping requires that your time be entered on a daily basis. Attempting to recall and reconstruct a whole week's schedule is difficult and usually leads to very inaccurate reporting.

For each time segment on the time sheet, place the appropriate activity code, followed by a brief description of the work performed. For example, if you did research on the dischargeability of Mary Jones' student loans in a Chapter 7 bankruptcy, you might simply record: "R -- research bky. discharge of student loans."

Do not use client names or identifying information on your time sheets or any of your reports. Remember the rule on confidentiality. The faculty internship coordinator is not part of the legal team, and thus should not see or hear such information.

The weekly narrative summaries do not have to be reviewed and approved by the supervising attorney.

You should make a sufficient number of copies prior to using the forms for the first time. Retain a clean one as a master from which to make more copies as needed.

IX. Final Report

A final written report must be submitted to the faculty internship supervisor within two weeks after completion of the internship. The report should be 4 to 6 pages and must be typed/word processed. The purposes of the report are to give you the chance to reflect on the experience, and to allow evaluation by the coordinator. The report will not be shared with the supervising attorney or with others at the internship site without your consent.

The final report should be in narrative form and must include the points on the following page, in addition to whatever else you'd like to say.

Final Internship Report

1. Summarize the types of cases, projects, and issues you handled. If there were one or more cases which were especially interesting or involved, you may wish to discuss those in more detail.
2. A description of specific tasks you performed within each of the proposed activities in your Internship Agreement.
3. Your thoughts on whether you were adequately prepared for the internship. Which parts of the Paralegal curriculum did you feel were most valuable? Were there courses you wish you would have taken before doing the internship? Were there courses you took outside of the Paralegal curriculum which were especially helpful?
4. What changes do you plan to make in the remainder of your Paralegal education, if any, as a result of having had your internship experience?
5. What suggestions, if any, do you have for changes in the Paralegal major, or specifically in the internship program?
6. What are your observations about the use of paralegals as professional members of the legal services delivery team in the office where you worked?
7. How would you evaluate the supervising attorney? Did he/she provide you with a good experience? If you worked more directly with a paralegal or other office staff person, answer the same questions as to that person. Would you recommend your internship site to other students? Explain.
8. Discuss the impact of the internship on your choice of paralegal as a career.
9. Any other comments, suggestions, or observations that you wish to convey to the faculty internship coordinator. They will be much appreciated.