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BY KRISTAL SCHEFFLER

Rice Paralegal Certificate Program Prepares Professionals for Next Step

Since its inception in the fall of 2005, the Paralegal Certificate Program at Rice University has served Houston-area professionals seeking to begin or enhance their career in the legal field.

Administered by the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies at Rice, the paralegal program is taught by practicing attorneys and paralegals and runs approximately five months. Classes typically meet twice weekly in the evenings.

The Rice program is an attractive alternative to other local paralegal programs that offer associate's or bachelor's degrees. Because the Rice program requires participants to have already earned a bachelor's degree, the instructors can focus solely on teaching the paralegal curriculum.

Although he had no paralegal training, John Burnett joined his brother's law firm in Houston as a legal assistant after many years in other careers, including being a musician, teaching at the college-level, technical writing and public relations. At the firm, he picked up legal skills here and there but recognized the need for a systematic learning experience in the paralegal field.

As a member of the inaugural class, Burnett earned his certificate and has ramped up his work at the law firm, doing exactly the things he learned at Rice – conducting research, drafting legal documents, assisting with court appearances, preparing trial documents, etc.

The high standards of the Rice Paralegal Certificate Program, its instructors and the wide variety of participants are what he liked best, he said.

“It was not easy going back to school, but (the Rice program) was everything I had hoped for and more,” said Burnett.

Susan Caracio, a member of the second paralegal class which began in the spring of 2006, was working as a production assistant at a prominent theater company in Houston and was looking for a career change. After earning her certificate, Caracio landed several interviews for paralegal or legal secretary positions. Interviewers, she said, were impressed with her “client folder,” a portfolio of class work that illustrates skills learned in the program.

With the help of a headhunter, she found her first job with a petrochemical company as a legal secretary and now works for the international law firm of King & Spalding as a project assistant assisting lawyers with trial preparation.

Caracio said she liked the Rice Paralegal Certificate Program because of its intensive nature.

“It exposed us well to everything we would need to know to hit the ground running,” she said.

A member of the third class which began in the fall of 2006, Terza Oliveria is an international law professional who had worked as an attorney in Brazil for five years. Her international law degree does not allow her to practice in the United States.

Searching the Web for law courses in the area, she discovered the Rice program and decided it would give her a good foundation in the processes and procedures of American law. She said she appreciated the online access to mock exams and class notes and said the teachers were very knowledgeable and always available via e-mail.

"For other foreign attorneys, this program would be a good starting point," said Oliveira. "As a paralegal you get to see the real life of how lawyers work."

Oliveira was recently accepted in the University of Houston master's of law program.

For more information about the Rice Paralegal Certificate Program, visit www.riceparalegal.com.