Kill All the Lawyers but not the Paralegals

By Ray Votke
Contributing Writer

Shakespeare may have written “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers” (Henry VI, Act IV), but he did not mention Paralegals. It’s a good thing because Paralegal Studies is currently one of the most successful programs at Suffolk County Community College. Under the coordination of Dr. Ronald A. Feinberg, Paralegal Studies now boasts over 250 students enrolled in its two-year AAS degree and one-year certificate programs at the Ammerman and Western campuses. If you measure the success of an academic program by its graduates, students, faculty and professional activities, then there is no doubt about the prestige of the Paralegal Studies program at Suffolk.

For example, one of the approximately 1,300 alumni of the Paralegal Studies program, Cynthia Scesny has been a practicing Paralegal since graduating from the program in 1990, and is currently the Paralegal for the newly elected Suffolk County District Attorney Tom Spota. Among the many Paralegal graduates from Suffolk who have gone on to become attorneys is Rick Bryan, who is the Senior Tax Attorney at Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. in New York City. Very soon to be an attorney is Brian Peterson, who although originally a business major he switched to Paralegal Studies. Brian graduated from Suffolk in 1997, then graduated from SUNY/Buffalo, and is now completing his third year of studies at St. John’s University School of Law, where he is the director of trials for the Civil Trial Institute. Catherine Taylor, who graduated with highest distinction in 1997, was the first PACE certified Paralegal in Long Island/Manhattan. She then graduated with a bachelor’s degree summa cum laude from Dowling College. Now working at the firm of David Ross Okrent in Huntington, she is also the immediate past president of the Long Island Paralegal Association. Barbara Peters, already a librarian with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology from SUNY/Stony Brook, completed the Paralegal certificate program in 2000 and was inducted into the National Paralegal Honor Society. Before completing her internship at the law firm of former College Trustee Susan LeBow, Barbara was hired as a full time Paralegal at that firm and now specializes in the area of elder law.

Carol Cashmore, at first an accounting major at Suffolk before changing to the Paralegal Studies program was president of the Legal Society, a member of the National Paralegal Honor Society and a recipient of a Looseleaf Law Publications Award. When Carol graduated from the Paralegal Studies program in June 2001 she was awarded a $50,000 two-year scholarship to St. John’s University where she is enrolled in their four-year Paralegal Studies program and plans to apply to law school. In the same graduating class was Paralegal Studies major Andrea Bonanno, who was elected as Student Trustee on the College Board of Trustees. Andrea, another recipient of a Looseleaf Law Publications Award and a member of the National Paralegal Honor Society, is now employed as a Paralegal in Smithtown.

Before they leave Suffolk, Paralegal Studies students certainly get involved in the College’s academic and extracurricular activities. Frances Sprufera and Caroline Rau, current co-presidents of the Legal Society, also serve on numerous committees including Club Board, Student Liaison Committee, Distinguished Speaker Committee, Traffic Appeals Committee, Mathematics & Law Conference Com-

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mittee, New Student Orientation and Christmas Magic Committee. Other officers of the Legal Society, Frantz Deetgen and Maikishia Offord, are also officers in the African American Student Union, Council of Latin American Students and the Multicultural Club. Co-advisors to the Legal Society, Professors Ammerman, Feinberg and Giaccone, assist the students with planning an ongoing series of presentations by legal professionals and tours of the Federal, State and County courts each year.

The credentials of the Paralegal Studies faculty probably have something to do with the success of the program. Professor Feinberg, the only faculty member at Suffolk to hold both a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction and a J.D., and a recipient of the SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, is among a group of practicing attorneys/professors including Jessica Allen, holder of an M.B.A. and J.D., John Ammerman, a former assistant district attorney, Diane Dvorak, who holds degrees in mathematics and law, James Frayne, and Scott Giaccone, another M.B.A. and J.D. recipient. Part time faculty include New York State Supreme Court Judge Robert W. Doyle and numerous prominent practicing attorneys. The Paralegal Studies Advisory Board, chaired by County Court Judge Joseph Farneti, along with Professors Ammerman and Feinberg are responsible for maintaining the high standards of the Paralegal Studies program to insure continued approval of the program by the American Bar Association. Last fall our community college received particular distinction when Dr. Feinberg served as a judge in the St. John’s University School of Law Civil Trial Institute’s semi-final round of the competition among second-year law students. Dr. Feinberg was the only non-sitting judge (and only non-law school professor) asked to participate in the Institute. Considering that St. John’s has a four-year paralegal program of its own, it was quite an honor for Suffolk County Community College to be represented at the law school. Again, this month Dr. Feinberg was invited to judge the first-year law school students in the civil trial competition.

One of the most active SCCC programs in terms of professional development, the Paralegal Studies program with the Legal Society each year, for fifteen years, conducts a three-day trip to Washington, D.C., to hear oral arguments before the United States Supreme Court, as well as tour the Holocaust Museum, Capital, White House, National Archives, Smithsonian Museums, Newseum, Arlington Cemetery and numerous monuments. The trip has become so popular among our students that this year Professors Allen, Feinberg and Giaccone are driving three college vans filled with students to Washington, D.C. in April. This past semester the Legal Society invited District Court Judge Gary Weber and attorney Paul Feuer to speak to the campus; and, this spring the club has scheduled presentations from Grant W. Keener, director of admissions at Touro Law Center, Rose F. Lowe, assistant New York State attorney general, Michael Miglino, counsel to the Chicago Title Insurance Co., as well as other Paralegals and attorneys. The culmination of the spring semester will be the second annual “Mathematics and the Law” conference on May 10, 2002, in the Riverhead Building on the Ammerman Campus. Last year’s two-day conference, organized by Professors Feinberg and Russell K. Gusack (mathematics), featured presentations by judges, attorneys, Paralegals and mathematics professors and was attended by over 225 people, far exceeding the number of attendees at prior conferences sponsored by the SUNY “Conversations in the Disciplines” grant program. This year’s conference will also involve the accounting program and include Paralegal alumni as co-moderators of the sessions.

It may be that Shakespeare did not mention Paralegals in his play because that title did not exist in his time. Or he may have had a premonition that Paralegals would become one of the best professional careers by the 1990’s. Nevertheless, it is doubtful he would write a similar line about Paralegals today if he realized how popular and successful they are, especially at Suffolk.