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RETHINKING NETWORKING: A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARALEGAL EDUCATION

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Networking is widely framed as essential to paralegal career preparation, yet student participation in professional paralegal associations remains uneven. Drawing on survey and interview data from paralegal students at San Diego Miramar College, this article argues that networking is not a neutral or universally accessible practice, but one shaped by self-efficacy, perceived readiness, and socio-economic constraints while also disentangling ambivalence toward the practice itself. Although students largely understand networking's importance, translating that awareness into action is often inhibited by confidence gaps and structural barriers. Reframing networking as a transitional, learnable skill rather than a personal trait, the article proposes curriculum-embedded, guided approaches that shift the focus from telling students to network to teaching them how—and under what conditions—it becomes possible.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2025, I attended my first networking event. It was organized by my local paralegal association and promoted as a “Friendsgiving” to celebrate the student community and to hear from the newly elected Board of Directors. Since the introductory course to the paralegal program at my college made it clear that networking is an essential component of entry into the paralegal profession, I expected to see many other paralegal students. However, when I arrived, I was surprised to find only two other students present among a dozen or so professionals. I felt a mix of bewilderment and curiosity—why was the student body so thinly represented?

Networking is widely framed as essential in contemporary career development. Research across multiple domains supports this view, including foundational sociological theory,¹ large-scale causal evidence on job mobility,² employer hiring surveys emphasizing experience and communication skills,³ educational research demonstrating the effectiveness of structured networking interventions,⁴ and legal scholarship demonstrating that networking and relationship-building contribute to long-term career advancement.⁵

Within paralegal education, professional organizations and experienced practitioners explicitly teach networking as foundational to career preparation. Toya Walker, writing for *Facts & Findings*, NALA’s quarterly publication, advises that “[p]rofessional networking is a key component of a successful career, especially for paralegals” and describes networking as the cultivation of mutually beneficial professional relationships.⁶ Similarly, practice-oriented guides for paralegals emphasize that networking can take many forms — from leveraging social media and professional associations to continuing relationships from school — and remains a necessary skill throughout one’s career.⁷

This emphasis is also embedded in paralegal training materials. In *Introduction to Paralegalism*, Statsky and Tepper explicitly urge students to participate in paralegal association meetings — even when those meetings fall outside their immediate areas of interest — on the grounds that employed paralegals may become one’s most valuable networking resource.⁸ The text provides a list of national paralegal associations within its first few pages, and later devotes a full section to networking, characterizing it as a purposeful, active practice and encouraging readers to become “assertive or purposeful networkers” who intentionally cultivate and maintain professional contacts.⁹

Despite this broad consensus, far less attention has been paid to how paralegal students themselves experience and interpret these expectations, or to the conditions under which networking becomes feasible rather than merely aspirational. Following the Friendsgiving event, I decided to act on my curiosity and ask my classmates directly. I designed a voluntary survey that posed eleven questions examining students’ perceived value of networking, the barriers that prevented them from attending networking events, and the factors that might make participation feel more attainable or worthwhile. In addition to the eighteen survey responses collected from students in the Miramar Paralegal Program, I conducted in-depth interviews with five additional students to explore these themes in greater detail.

This article examines how paralegal students understand networking by situating survey and interview data within broader sociological and educational research on social capital, self-efficacy, and career transitions. It argues that networking is not neutral or universally accessible

professional practice, but one shaped by socio-economic context and skill. By addressing these dynamics directly, the paper seeks to supplement prevailing exhortations to “network” with a more transparent account of its function, limitations, and pedagogical implications. To do so, the article first examines the barriers that limit student participation, then situates those findings within broader research on employer expectations and professional identity formation, addresses three common misconceptions about networking, and concludes by proposing curriculum-embedded interventions designed to make networking a more equitable and learnable professional practice.

Methodology and Limitation

Empirical studies focused specifically on paralegal students and professional association networking remain relatively scarce. As a result, this essay engages a wider literature on networking, social capital, and early-career transitions to examine how students access networking opportunities, participate, and perceive their value. Although this literature extends beyond the paralegal profession, it provides critical conceptual tools for analyzing how networking operates as a structurally mediated practice — tools that I apply here to paralegal students’ accounts and experiences.

Students submitted survey responses anonymously.

I conducted all interviews anonymously. Interview quotations have been edited for clarity and readability; minor verbal fillers and false starts have been removed without altering substantive meaning.

I: WHY AREN’T STUDENTS NETWORKING?

Paralegal students entering the profession encounter no shortage of opportunities for professional engagement. More than 140 national, state, regional, local, and specialty paralegal associations operate throughout the United States, alongside numerous student organizations and professional networking platforms.¹⁰ Many offer a wide range of opportunities to participate. From networking dinners and cocktail hours to continuing legal education programs, access-to-justice initiatives, and community service projects, these organizations provide community, professional development, and meaningful avenues for involvement in the profession.

So, why aren’t students engaging with these opportunities more? The Miramar survey responses revealed a striking disconnect: 70.6 percent of respondents agreed that networking is important for finding a job and gaining exposure to other opportunities, while the remaining 29.4 percent concurred with a more lukewarm “it doesn’t hurt” response. The same majority agreed that the Miramar Paralegal Program communicates the value of professional networking well; however, only 23.5 percent of the students have joined a professional paralegal association thus far in the program and little less than half expect to do so before graduation. Awareness of networking’s importance is not the primary obstacle for paralegal students; translating that awareness into action is.

The survey identified three equally cited barriers to participation in networking: time constraints, work schedules, and uncertainty about what to expect. One student elaborated on the first of these succinctly: “Time, I just don’t have the time. I work 60-something hours a week and I’m carrying 23 units this semester, and I’m tired.” Another respondent expanded on this constraint by describing caretaking employment arranged on an on-call basis, layered on top of caregiving

responsibilities for her mother. Despite these pressures, she emphasized her motivation plainly: “I want to do it. I want to learn.” These accounts highlight a fundamental disparity: students with greater economic security can afford to invest time and energy into professional development activities, while those supporting themselves or their families cannot do so with the same frequency or flexibility, despite being equally motivated to participate.

These structural constraints, however, tell only part of the story. Uncertainty about what to expect poses another significant barrier to participation, and confidence ranked as the second most commonly cited obstacle overall. Together, these findings suggest that networking self-efficacy may be just as important as time and access in shaping student engagement. One student, who described herself as naturally outgoing, reflected on how differently networking may be experienced by others, noting that many “have a hard time networking and communicating and talking.” For those individuals, the challenge lies not in recognizing networking’s value, but in finding but in having someone to guide those first tentative steps. As the student put it, “just being able to have an opportunity to practice . . . would probably be really useful for a lot of people.” Taken together, the survey and interview responses point to two distinct challenges: (1) structural constraints that limit participation, and (2) confidence-related barriers that make participation feel daunting even when opportunities are available. The solutions may differ, but they share a common denominator. Both interventions can begin in the one place all students already find themselves — the classroom.

II: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The gap between students’ awareness of networking’s importance and their ability to participate becomes more consequential in light of employer expectations.¹¹ Findings from the *New Hire Readiness Report 2025* show that hiring managers are “more likely to hire an entry-level employee that demonstrates critical thinking/problem solving (94%) or effective communication skills (90%).”¹² Relevant work experience — particularly internships — is one of the strongest predictors of early hiring success, with employers viewing experiential learning as evidence of job readiness and professional competence.¹³ Likewise, employer research within the legal profession suggests that the competencies most valued in entry-level hiring are overwhelmingly professional rather than doctrinal in nature;¹⁴ indeed, none of the ten highest-ranked hiring competencies identified by employers concern substantive legal knowledge.¹⁵ Rather, employers place greater value on how prospective employees communicate, conduct themselves, and engage with others. Many of these professional qualities are first developed — and often first demonstrated — through the very process of networking.

Legal education scholars have increasingly recognized that many of the skills essential to professional success are acquired not through doctrinal instruction, but through exposure to the “hidden curriculum” — the unwritten rules governing how legal professionals build relationships, navigate their careers, and access opportunity that often remains invisible to students without existing social capital.¹⁶ Students from historically underrepresented or economically disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly likely to encounter barriers to accessing these opportunities, prompting a growing body of scholarship advocating for intentional curricular intervention rather than leaving professional development to chance.¹⁷

Responding to these concerns, a number of law schools have begun embedding professional identity formation, work-integrated learning, and structured professional

development into the curriculum itself.¹⁸ These initiatives recognize that networking, relationship-building, and communication are teachable skills that benefit from deliberate practice rather than informal exposure alone.¹⁹ While these developments have gained considerable traction, they have yet to receive the same sustained scholarly attention within paralegal education. If networking is to become a genuinely equitable avenue to professional development, it cannot remain an extracurricular expectation reserved for students with the time, confidence, and resources to pursue it. It must become a curricular objective.

III: ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT NETWORKING

Many of the structural and confidence-related barriers discussed above can be meaningfully addressed within the classroom. Doing so, however, requires educators to first confront several persistent misconceptions about networking. These misconceptions matter primarily because awareness of networking's importance alone is often insufficient to prompt participation. Kuwabara, Hilderbrand, and Zou explore this "knowing-doing gap" through the concept of lay theories of networking — the beliefs individuals hold about what networking is, who it is for, and whether it is worthwhile. Their work suggests that motivation to participate diminishes when the activity itself is viewed as uncomfortable or inauthentic. The authors liken attitudes toward networking to attitudes toward exercise:

[M]ost people desire to be fit, understand the importance of fitness, and know how to exercise, yet many still struggle to exercise regularly — not for lack of skills, rationality and purpose, access to opportunities and resources, or certain dispositions but because of beliefs and attitudes they hold about what is physically possible, effective or desirable . . . simply understanding the importance of networking . . . may not be enough to motivate people to actually network if they view it as threatening, awkward, or dirty.²⁰

In *Social Chemistry*, Marissa King describes a frequent reaction when the subject of networking is broached in her classrooms: "Around a third of the class becomes noticeably physically uncomfortable. Students cross their arms, avert their eyes, shuffle papers. People just don't want to think about the people in their lives in a purposeful manner."²¹ Kuwabara, Hilderbrand, and Zou document a similar response among employed professionals, noting that "while hardly anyone would dispute the importance of 'who you know,' perhaps no other word in business is imbued with so much moral ambivalence, sense of futility, or even dread and distaste as 'networking.'"²² In "Nothing by Networking," a more humorous articulation of this discomfort comes from scientist and writer Adam Ruben: "I hate the concept of networking. It just feels icky. You schmooze with strangers, subtly selling yourself while not selling yourself. 'I'm pretty great,' you tell them, 'though I'm not, you know, the sort of person who claims to be pretty great.'"²³

Aversion to networking also intersects with social anxiety. One Miramar student described her feelings about socializing as "negative" due to her lack of confidence: "I just lack a lot of social grace, so it's difficult to seamlessly integrate into new environments." Collectively, these accounts suggest that resistance to networking is not marginal or idiosyncratic, but reflects a broader undercurrent of discomfort, moral tension, and anxiety surrounding a common professional

expectation. While these concerns are real, students need not accept them as fixed limitations. This is where educators have a unique opportunity: in the relative safety of the classroom, students can begin dismantling some of these misconceptions through guided practice and honest conversation. In particular, educators can help students with the following: (1) overcoming the belief that networking favors extroverts; (2) dispelling the notion that they have little to contribute to professional relationships; (3) and clarifying what networking can realistically accomplish.

Misconception #1: Networking is an extrovert's game

When asked to rate their level of comfort with attending professional networking events, most survey respondents clustered around the midpoint of the scale, with only 35.3 percent selecting the highest rating. Among those who expressed greater comfort, students described themselves as naturally sociable and eager to meet new people. "I like networking," explained one student, "I like getting in a group with people that want to talk about the same thing that I want to talk about." Another interviewee expressed a strong desire to build professional connections within the paralegal community as well as foster friendships at school (what are often described as weak and strong ties, respectively) and remarked on her personality: "I'm not a shy person at all. My joke is always that social anxiety fears me. I'm very extroverted and I love to be social."

These responses may create the impression that successful networking is primarily the domain of naturally outgoing individuals. Yet while sociable students may find it easier to initiate conversations or enter unfamiliar environments, research on social networks indicates that personality alone explains little about networking outcomes. King reframes networking as a matter of relational structure rather than temperament, observing that "extroversion has very little effect on what someone's network looks like."²⁴ Her work shows that effective networking depends less on sociability and more on how relationships are patterned, sustained, and activated. Similarly, in *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain challenges the assumption that influence and professional success are rooted in outgoing personalities, demonstrating how effective leaders often rely on reflection and preparation rather than performative sociability.²⁵ For students who feel inherently disadvantaged by their personality, King and Cain provide a useful corrective. Their work reminds students that networking is not reserved for the naturally outgoing but is instead shaped by behaviors and habits that can be learned, practiced, and refined over time.

Misconception #2: I need more experience before I can network

Some Miramar students grapple with a different concern. Rather than struggling with shyness or social anxiety, they are acutely aware of how little they know about the profession they hope to enter and, as a result, question whether they are sufficiently prepared to participate in professional conversations. One student articulated this apprehension particularly well:

I get a little nervous because I am engaging with new people in an area that I am not the most comfortable or knowledgeable about . . . I feel like I'm too new in this and . . . I would hate to make the wrong first impression with somebody because I don't know what field area I necessarily want to go to. I don't even know what I don't know. And that makes me nervous, that potential opportunity I could close a door on . . . Maybe my first impact could be better if I'm more informed, [or if] I'm further along my paralegal timeline.

The hesitation reflected in this response echoes a broader anxiety captured by Swedish mentalist and author Henrik Fexeus, who asks, “why are so many of us terrified of getting it wrong? Where does that little voice inside your mind come from, the one that tells you the slightest mistake will condemn you to eternal shame and disgrace?”²⁶ Bookstore shelves swell with networking advice that often focuses on first impressions, conversational techniques, and social presentation.²⁷ Within the legal profession, these concerns are compounded by a hidden curriculum that communicates expectations about professional appearance and conduct without always making those expectations explicit.²⁸ Students who have had limited prior exposure to legal environments may therefore feel pressure not only to say the right thing, but to look, act, and present themselves “correctly” before they believe they are ready to participate.²⁹

The student’s instinct to postpone networking until feeling more knowledgeable is understandable, but it runs counter to the advice of legal educators. Increasingly, scholars argue that professional identity formation and relationship-building should begin early in legal education because they help students secure meaningful experiences, refine their professional interests, and develop the very competencies some students believe they must possess before entering the networking circuits.³⁰ Underlying the hesitation to participate is also the assumption that networking requires students to offer something of immediate value in return. Individuals are often reluctant to network when they view it primarily as a transactional activity, fearing that requests for information or assistance may strain relationships.³¹ Educators can challenge this assumption by reframing networking as a transitional practice rather than an exchange of value. For students, networking need not be understood as an attempt to secure opportunities, favors, or professional advancement. Instead, it can be presented as exposure, orientation, and relationship-building — an opportunity to learn about the profession, explore potential career paths, and gradually develop a sense of belonging within the legal community.

This perspective aligns closely with American sociologist Mark Granovetter’s distinction between strong and weak ties. Granovetter argues that it is the more casual, infrequent connections — rather than our close relationships — that serve as bridges to new information and opportunities.³² Because weak ties do not require emotional intimacy, sustained reciprocity, or immediate contribution, they are particularly well suited to students who are still developing their professional identities. Read in this way, networking becomes less an obligation to perform than an opportunity to participate, where exposure itself becomes a meaningful form of engagement.

Legal education scholars have increasingly recognized that students benefit from mentors and role models as they navigate the process of becoming legal professionals, with professors serving as particularly important guides during this period of professional identity formation.³³ At the same time, professionals who attend networking events are not present solely as sources of expertise or guidance; they are also participants, similarly seeking access to perspectives, information, and opportunities beyond the bounds of their immediate professional and personal networks. Research on professional decision-making suggests that when individuals confront consequential issues (such as career direction, income, or professional fulfillment), they are more likely to seek guidance from weak ties than from close personal connections, turning to those whose experience or knowledge is relevant rather than emotionally proximate.³⁴ This insight carries an important implication for students who feel they have little to contribute: by virtue of

their own backgrounds, experiences, and vantage points, they may have more to offer their professional relationships than they realize.

Misconception #3: Networking is only valuable if it gets you a job

Throughout my time in the paralegal program, one message has been remarkably consistent: networking matters. Most Miramar respondents believe they understand the benefits of joining professional networking organizations, rating their understanding as a four or five out of five. The interviews, however, revealed important differences in how those benefits were perceived. “I think it was explained very clearly,” assessed one student. “It was kind of drilled into our heads [and] explained as though we would die if we didn’t do this.” Another student was less convinced. While agreeing that networking was heavily emphasized throughout the program, he questioned whether its value had been meaningfully explained: “I think they have a great intro and they show some things up front, but — what’s the value? What’s the benefit? Where is it?” He went on to suggest that concrete examples from individuals who had directly benefited from professional organizations might provide a more compelling rationale for participation. His question points to a broader uncertainty: if networking is as valuable as everyone says it is, what should students realistically expect it to accomplish?

The short answer — and one educators can confidently share with their students — is that networking does not guarantee employment. Its most consistent benefit is far simpler: it increases the likelihood that students will learn about opportunities they might otherwise never encounter. Across disciplines, research broadly supports the claim that social connections play a significant role in job attainment; King asserts that most people first learn about job opportunities through someone they know³⁵ (some estimates put the figure as high as 60-90 percent),³⁶ while Nathan Perez and Marcia Ballinger estimate that approximately 70 percent of jobs are obtained through referrals from trusted contacts or through direct employer outreach to prospective candidates they had already met.³⁷ These findings, however, do not mean that networking serves as a direct pathway to being hired. Research on recent graduates suggests that networking alone does not consistently result in a higher number of job offers or improve advancement through later stages of the hiring process.³⁸ In practice, networks often function as shortcuts to information — such as access to job openings not yet publicly advertised. Entry into the interview stage, however, is most directly mediated by recruiters rather than by networks as a whole.³⁹

This distinction helps clarify why networking is frequently experienced as simultaneously valuable and disappointing. Networks confer advantages for professional success not primarily because they ensure job placement, but because they expand opportunities for learning.⁴⁰ Recent research on graduate transitions points to and distinguishes between instrumental and expressive resources, which may be understood as two sides of the same networking coin:⁴¹ instrumental resources provide access to information about organizations, job openings, career paths, and labor market opportunities, while expressive resources offer encouragement, reassurance, and emotional support during periods of professional uncertainty.⁴² Together, they help individuals make sense of unfamiliar professional environments and transform professional uncertainty from an individual burden into a shared experience navigated with the support of others.

Students early in their professional development should therefore view networking less as a direct route to employment and more as an informational scaffold, shaping understanding long before it produces tangible outcomes. In this respect, the student who remarked, “I don’t even know what I don’t know,” may have unintentionally captured one of networking’s most important

functions: helping newcomers identify the questions they do not yet know to ask. Chere Estrin similarly encourages paralegals to approach networking with curiosity rather than immediate self-interest, advising them to “listen more than you talk,” “show up curious and authentic,” and remember to follow up afterward.⁴³ As she explains, “networking is not about asking for a job. It’s about building a relationship so that when an opportunity comes up, you’re the person they think of. You want to be remembered not as ‘that desperate job seeker,’ but as someone who brought value to the conversation.”⁴⁴

IV: PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN FOR NETWORKING

We have finally arrived at the practical question: if networking can be taught, what should that instruction look like? The challenge for educators is not simply to encourage students to network, but to design learning experiences that gradually reduce uncertainty, build confidence, and introduce students to the profession in structured, meaningful ways. The research surveyed in this paper points toward three complementary design principles. First, students benefit from building smaller, more intentional networks before expanding into broader professional circles. Second, networking skills are most effectively developed through structured, curriculum-based experiences that progressively increase students’ engagement with the profession. Finally, informational interviewing provides a particularly effective capstone to these efforts by allowing students to apply their developing skills in an authentic but low-stakes professional interaction.

a) Build Smaller, Diverse Networks

Within both popular and professional discourse, networking is often imagined as an exercise in accumulation — collecting business cards and maximizing visibility. Yet research consistently suggests that network value is not a function of size alone, but of structure, diversity, and informational depth. One’s network is “the horizon of what you can know,” advises Abram Anders, and as such, “[i]t’s not just who you know, it’s what they can help you learn.”⁴⁵ King further cautions that “knowing more people — particularly when those people are very similar to you — doesn’t create more value; it simply creates more work.”⁴⁶ Therefore, networking should not involve continual expansion. Instead, its value lies in the ability of specific connections to introduce new information or opportunities. A handful of meaningful connections can often provide more professional insight than dozens of superficial interactions, while also making networking feel more accessible to those who find large events intimidating or overwhelming. This emphasis on manageable, intentional relationship-building increasingly appears in legal education itself, where professional development courses often privilege sustained interaction with a small number of practitioners over exposure to large networking events.⁴⁷

If smaller networks help reduce the intimidation often associated with networking, diverse networks help maximize its value. Multiple studies have found that individuals with more diverse networks discover professional opportunities and develop professional skills at a faster rate.⁴⁸ For students, this may mean seeking connections across different segments of the legal profession rather than relying exclusively on a single organization or professional circle. Professional identity courses, structured mentorships, guest speakers, attorney interviews, networking events, and career panels deliberately expand students’ exposure.⁴⁹ The goal is not simply to meet more people, but to broaden the range of experiences and viewpoints to which one is exposed.

If there is one obstacle to building diverse networks, it is this: students naturally gravitate toward familiarity. Studies indicate that “in-group bonding”— the tendency for individuals to form

and maintain relationships with others who share similar backgrounds, experiences, or social status — creates barriers to entering diverse professional circles.⁵⁰ In practice, this may look as simple as students clustering together at a networking event because they do not know anyone else in the room. While understandable, research suggests that this tendency is not self-correcting and can significantly limit access to new information and perspectives.⁵¹ Moreover, mentorships can drift into the same peril, as mentors themselves tend to gravitate toward those “with whom [they] have the most in common.”⁵² For this reason, educators play an important role in deliberately connecting students with different corners of the profession inside the classroom. Guest speakers, informational interviews, and networked learning can all serve as bridges to professional communities students might not venture into on their own. The result is not merely a broader network, but a broader horizon of what students can know.

b) Networked Learning: Bridge the Classroom and the Expectation

According to Adam Kanar, a researcher specializing in job search and networking behaviors, “[o]ne of the most important personal determinants of networking behaviors is networking self-efficacy (i.e., one’s confidence for engaging in networking activities).”⁵³ Self-efficacy shapes networking behavior by influencing both the effort individuals invest and their persistence in the face of obstacles. Those with higher self-efficacy willingly pursue challenging opportunities and set ambitious networking goals,⁵⁴ approaching what is often a self-initiated and intimidating endeavor with fewer psychological barriers. Moreover, when they encounter setbacks, they are less likely to attribute them to a lack of ability and more likely to view them as evidence that additional effort is required.⁵⁵ In other words, instead of recoiling from negative or unproductive experiences, they remain willing to engage, adapt, and try again. Ultimately, self-efficacy cultivates two vital qualities essential to successful networking: motivation and perseverance.

Responding to growing concern over the hidden curriculum and professional identity formation, legal educators have begun embedding networking and professional development — including structured opportunities to build networking self-efficacy — directly into the curriculum. One illustrative example comes from legal educator Karen Graziano. She recounts a revealing interaction after asking students to exchange résumés before their next class; several approached her to explain that they did not have one and wondered whether they should withdraw from the course. Reflecting on the encounter, she writes, “These junior and senior students had excelled in the classroom, but has neither developed the collateral supporting materials, like their resume, nor their confidence to excel professionally.”⁵⁶ This experience prompted Graziano to redesign her *Legal Analysis & Writing* course to integrate traditional legal research and writing with professional development.⁵⁷

Graziano’s response reflects a broader trend within legal education. Across institutions, networking is increasingly treated not as an extracurricular activity, but as a teachable professional skill. Marcia Chatelain’s course, *Mastering the Hidden Curriculum*, teaches students how to cultivate relationships, advocate for themselves, and pursue opportunities that are otherwise only activated through pre-existing social capital.⁵⁸ Likewise, Aric Short recommends dedicating class time to professional networking and requiring students to attend networking events as part of the curriculum,⁵⁹ while Mercer Law School introduces professionalism and ethics through a required first-year course.⁶⁰ Graziano’s approach illustrates what intentional instruction can look like in practice. Rather than simply encouraging students to attend networking events, she prepared them

beforehand with research strategies, conversation prompts, and attire guidance, introduced them to practicing attorneys during the events, and required thoughtful follow-up afterward.⁶¹ Networking became not a single event, but a guided learning process.

c) Culminate with the Informational Interview

One guided exercise appears with remarkable consistency across these curricular models: the informational interview. Graziano incorporated attorney informational interviews directly into her professional development curriculum, requiring students to interview practitioners in their chosen fields of interest.⁶² Students who completed these courses developed industry mentors, expanded their professional networks, and, in some cases, even secured employment opportunities.⁶³ More broadly, informational interviews have long functioned as a mechanism for career exploration, allowing individuals to clarify career fit and make more informed, stable employment decisions.⁶⁴ Studies have shown that while students with already high self-efficacy “[do] not appear to benefit much” from informational interviewing, its effects are markedly different for those with initially low networking confidence.⁶⁵ Informational interviewing, therefore, functions primarily as a confidence-building intervention rather than a skill-refining tool. It allows students to test their communication skills in a low-stakes but authentic professional exchange, gradually building confidence, adaptability, and tolerance for uncertainty that early networking so often requires.

The goal is not to transform every student into a confident networker overnight. It is to provide repeated, guided opportunities to engage with professionals, ask questions, and build familiarity with the practice. Rather than expecting confidence to precede networking, these curricular interventions recognize that confidence is often the product of networking itself.

CONCLUSION: DO WE REALLY NEED TO NETWORK?

Paralegal students clearly understand that networking matters, though not always why. What they lack is not awareness, but fluency, confidence, and equitable access. Simply telling students that they “need to network” is insufficient. Research consistently shows that students benefit from both personal and institutional networks,⁶⁶ and that embedded networked learning increases networking self-efficacy and students’ likelihood of engaging in professional networking behaviors.⁶⁷ When formal networking instruction is integrated into the curriculum, structural barriers such as limited diversity and socio-economic constraints can be partially mitigated, expanding access to the kinds of professional opportunities that are more likely to support future employment. Law schools have increasingly embraced this approach and a small but growing number of paralegal programs have begun to follow suit, with institutions such as UC Irvine requiring coursework specifically devoted to legal career skills.⁶⁸

Which brings us back to the question many students quietly ask themselves: do we really need to network? The answer, unsatisfying as it may be, is that networking is neither a silver bullet nor an optional nuisance. It is a skill — unevenly distributed, structurally mediated, and increasingly indispensable. The more important question, then, is not whether students should network, but whether institutions are willing to teach it. If networking is essential to professional success, it should no longer remain confined to the hidden curriculum but become integrated in the curriculum itself.

As for this author, only time will tell where networking will take me. So, let’s keep in touch.

¹ See Mark S. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, 78 AM. J. SOCIO. 1360 (1973).

² See Karthik Rajkumar et al., *A Casual Test of the Strength of Weak Ties*, 377 SCIENCE 1304, 1307-08 (2022).

³ U.S. CHAMBER OF COM., NEW HIRE READINESS REPORT 2025 (2025)

<https://www.uschamber.com/assets/documents/2025-New-Hire-Readiness-Report.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/Y4Z9-DB5J>].

⁴ See Adam M. Kanar, *Effectiveness of Informational Interviewing for Facilitating Networking Self-Efficacy in University Students*, 71 CAREER DEV. QUARTERLY 147, 147 (2023); Abram D. Anders, *Networked Learning with Professionals Boosts Students' Self-Efficacy for Social Networking and Professional Development*, 127 COMPUT. & EDUC. 13, 13 (2018).

⁵ LORI BERMAN ET AL., ACCELERATING LAWYER SUCCESS: HOW TO MAKE PARTNER, STAY HEALTHY, AND FLOURISH IN THE LAW FIRM 1-3, 7 (2026) (summarizing an empirical study of law firm partners that identified networking and informal mentorship as common characteristics of lawyers who attained partnership).

⁶ Toya Walker, *Breaking Down Professional Networking for Students*, FACTS & FINDINGS BONUS ISSUE: CAREER 101 (2022), <https://nala.org/breaking-down-professional-networking-for-students-facts-findings-bonus-issue-career-101-q1-2022-issue/> [<https://perma.cc/HZ5B-XKDQ>].

⁷ Madison Arrotta, *A Guide to Paralegal Networking*, CLIO: BUS. L. (Apr. 21, 2025), <https://www.clio.com/blog/paralegal-networking/> [<https://perma.cc/62VZ-TJST>].

⁸ WILLIAM P. STATSKY & PAMELA R. TEPPER, INTRODUCTION TO PARALEGALISM 57 (9th ed. 2025) (ebook).

⁹ *Id.* at 7, 55-58.

¹⁰ CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEGREE SCHOOLS, *Directory of US Paralegal Associations*, <https://www.criminaljusticedegreeschools.com/resources/paralegal-association-directory/> (last visited on June 27, 2026).

¹¹ The pressure to acquire professional skills is not only coming from employers. Job seekers themselves recognize skill development as a significant challenge. In a Fall 2025 survey, 43% of respondents identified deficiencies in technical, communication, and AI-related skills as a barrier to securing their next opportunity. EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS, JOB SEEKER US REPORT (Fall ed. 2025), <https://www.expresspros.com/file%20library/landing%20pages/job%20seeker%20report%20us/job-seeker-infographic-fall-2025-us.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/3FA6-QQR9>] (last visited June 27, 2026).

¹² U.S. Chamber of Com., *supra* note 3, at 6.

¹³ *Id.*, at 11.

¹⁴ See Neil Hamilton, *Student Professional Identity Formation and the Foundational Skill of Building a Tent of Professional Relationships to Support the Student*, 58 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 865, 871 (2023) (drawing on the National Conference of Bar Examiners' NextGen Bar recommendations, Hamilton observes that employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate competencies such as client relationship management, networking, business development, and cultural competence).

¹⁵ ALLI GERKMAN & LOGAN CORNETT, FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICE: THE WHOLE LAWYER AND THE CHARACTER QUOTIENT 26 (2016), https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/foundations_for_practice_whole_lawyer_character_quotient.pdf (last visited June 27, 2026).

¹⁶ Hamilton, *supra* note 14.

¹⁷ Melissa H. Weresh, *Hidden Lessons, Unforeseen Consequences: Interrogating the Hidden Curriculum in Legal Education and Its Impact on Students from Historically Underrepresented Groups*, 75 ALA. L. REV. 655, 657-84 (2024).

¹⁸ See Craig Cameron & Denise Jackson, *Law Student Engagement in Work-Integrated Learning and Its Impact on Employability and Graduate Employment*, 50 MONASH U. L. REV. 406 (2024) (examining the role of work-integrated learning in developing law students' employability, self-efficacy, and professional skills).

¹⁹ Hamilton, *supra* note 14, at 872 (proposing that "faculty and staff empower each student proactively to build a tent of professional relationships" through a structured, step-by-step approach).

²⁰ Ko Kuwabara et al., *Lay Theories of Networking: How Laypeople's Beliefs About Networks Affect Their Attitudes Toward and Engagement in Instrumental Networking*, 43 ACAD. MGMT. REV. 50, 51 (2018).

²¹ MARISSA KING, SOCIAL CHEMISTRY: DECODING THE PATTERNS OF HUMAN CONNECTION 15 (2021).

²² Kuwabara, *supra* note 20, at 50.

- ²³ Adam Ruben, *Nothing but Networking*, SCI.: EXPERIMENTAL ERROR (Oct. 23, 2014), <https://www.science.org/content/article/nothing-networking>; see also Georgina Nightingall & Weston Baxter, *Weak Tie Interactions in Networking: Five Types of Interaction Structures*, 4 PROCS. DESIGN SOC'Y 325, 331 (2024) (observing that networking is often experienced as transactional, prompting scripted self-presentation rather than authentic interaction).
- ²⁴ King, *supra* note 21, at 8.
- ²⁵ SUSAN CAIN, QUIET: THE POWER OF INTROVERTS IN A WORLD THAT CAN'T STOP TALKING (2012).
- ²⁶ HENRIK FEKEUS, THE ART OF SOCIAL EXCELLENCE 81 (2020).
- ²⁷ See generally DALE CARNEGIE, HOW TO WIN FRIENDS & INFLUENCE PEOPLE (1936) (advocating interpersonal techniques for building rapport, making favorable first impressions, and cultivating relationships); see also LEIL LOWNDES, HOW TO TALK TO ANYONE 21 (2003) (ebook) (offering practical strategies for conversational success and positive first impressions).
- ²⁸ Weresh, *supra* note 17, at 662, 673.
- ²⁹ Some may even feel at an inherent disadvantage: Weresh observes that students from underrepresented backgrounds may fear negative judgment when they are unfamiliar with or unable to conform to culturally established norms. *Id.* at 673.
- ³⁰ See Hamilton, *supra* note 14, at 872.
- ³¹ Kuwabara, *supra* note 20, at 58.
- ³² Mark S. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, 78 AM. J. SOCIO. 1360 (1973).
- ³³ Aric K. Short, *Curative Identity Formation Themes to Counteract Law School's Hidden Curriculum*, 2 J.L. TEACHING & LEARNING 123, 126 (2025).
- ³⁴ King, *supra* note 21, at 43.
- ³⁵ *Id.* at 9.
- ³⁶ Abram D. Anders, *Networked Learning with Professionals Boosts Students' Self-Efficacy for Social Networking and Professional Development*, 127 COMPUT. & EDUC. 13, 16 (2018).
- ³⁷ NATHAN A. PEREZ & MARCIA BALLINGER, THE 20-MINUTE NETWORKING MEETING—PROFESSIONAL EDITION: LEARN TO NETWORK. GET A JOB. (2016).
- ³⁸ Ayla De Schepper et al, *Social Networks in the Transition from Higher Education to Work: A Systematic Review*, 40 EDUC. RSCH. REV. art. 100551, 6 (2023) [hereinafter *Transition*].
- ³⁹ *Id.*
- ⁴⁰ Anders, *supra* note 36, at 13.
- ⁴¹ Ayla De Schepper et al, *The Importance of Graduates' Perceived Network Quality in Their Transition to Work: A Longitudinal Approach*, 59 EUR. J. EDUC. art. e12786, 3 (2024) [hereinafter *Network Quality*].
- ⁴² *Id.*
- ⁴³ CHERE B. ESTRIN, THE PARALEGAL JOB SEARCH HANDBOOK: A GUIDE TO YOUR FIRST PARALEGAL JOB 163 (2026).
- ⁴⁴ *Id.*
- ⁴⁵ Anders, *supra* note 36, at 14.
- ⁴⁶ King, *supra* note 21, at 11.
- ⁴⁷ Karen Graziano, *Implementing Professional Development Approach to Pre-Law Advising: How to Build a Bridge to Law School and the Legal Profession through Legal and Professional Development Courses, Professional Societies, and Mentoring*, 2 J. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING 35, 51-52 (2017).
- ⁴⁸ Anders, *supra* note 36, at 14, 16; *Network Quality*, *supra* note 41, at 2.
- ⁴⁹ Daisy Hurst Floyd, *Pedagogy and Purpose: Teaching for Practical Wisdom*, 63 MERCER L. REV. 943, 952 (2012) (describing a required first-year course integrating professionalism and ethical identity formation). See also Hamilton, *supra* note 14 (arguing that faculty should proactively help students build professional relationships as part of professional identity formation).
- ⁵⁰ *Network Quality*, *supra* note 41, at 2. See also Shweta Mishra, *Social Networks, Social Capital, Social Support and Academic Success in Higher Education: A Systematic Review with a Special Focus on 'Underrepresented' Students*, 29 EDUC. RSCH. REV. art. 100551, 2 (2020) (discussing how structural inequalities affect individuals' ability to form diverse networks and access valuable social capital).
- ⁵¹ *Transition*, *supra* note 38, at 4.
- ⁵² TONI JAEGER-FINE, BECOMING A LAWYER: DISCOVERING AND DEFINING YOUR PROFESSIONAL PERSONA 229 (2d ed. 2023).
- ⁵³ Kanar, *supra* note 4, at 148.
- ⁵⁴ *Id.* at 149.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Graziano, *supra* note 47, at 50.

⁵⁷ Alongside doctrinal coursework, students conduct attorney interviews, develop résumés, prepare recommendation requests, personal statements, and addenda, cultivate a professional online presence, and intentionally build professional relationships, culminating in a capstone presentation on a chosen area of law. *Id.* at 52-53.

⁵⁸ Marcia Chatelain, *We Must Help First-Generation Students Master Academe's 'Hidden Curriculum'*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Oct. 21, 2018), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/we-must-help-first-generation-students-master-academes-hidden-curriculum/> [<https://perma.cc/H347-J4AG>].

⁵⁹ Short, *supra* note 33, at 148.

⁶⁰ Floyd, *supra* note 49.

⁶¹ Graziano, *supra* note 47, at 51-52.

⁶² *Id.* at 52-53.

⁶³ *Id.* at 60.

⁶⁴ Kanar, *supra* note 4, at 148.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 156.

⁶⁶ Mishra, *supra* note 50, at 7-11.

⁶⁷ Anders, *supra* note 36, at 25.

⁶⁸ *Legal Career Skills*, UC IRVINE DIVISION OF CONTINUING EDUCATION, https://ce.uci.edu/courses/course-details?eventId=LAW_X401.3 (last visited June 27, 2026).

KEYWORDS: NETWORKING, PARALEGAL EDUCATION, LEGAL EDUCATION, HIDDEN CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, NETWORKING SELF-EFFICACY, INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING, NETWORKED LEARNING, CAREER READINESS.