



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## CREATING A FAMILY OF CLIENTS FOR PARALEGAL STUDENTS

How do the members of the Litigant family educate the Middlesex Community College (MCC) paralegal students in the practice of law? Sue, Lowell, Grandpa Bradford, children Alison and Christopher Litigant are all involved in a multitude of legal issues—their lives look like a season from “Boston Legal”—personal injury, lewd behavior, even murder!

### Meet the Litigants

In the fall, Susan and Lowell Litigant moved into the Middlesex neighborhood when they bought their new home. Of course, there were some issues with Grandpa Bradford taking out the trash...naked. And there was that unfortunate incident when Alison found a piece of a severed finger in her hamburger. But for the most part, life was good.

In the spring, things really started to heat up for the Litigants. While mowing the grass at their new home, a rock flew up and hit Lowell in the eye—blinding him. So after resolving his medical problems, it was clear that Lowell and Susan needed a vacation. The couple happily left their kids with Grandpa and rented a beach house. But soon after their vacation started, the police received a frantic 911 call from Lowell sobbing that Susan had fallen down the stairs and was unconscious in a pool of blood. The coroner pronounced Susan dead at the scene, and ultimately Lowell was charged with first-degree murder.

This family is a lawyer’s dream...literally! The Litigant family was dreamed up by the paralegal faculty at Middlesex Community College to help students learn legal principles through the use of case scenarios.

### Using Case Scenarios

As in many disciplines, learning general rules and principles is the first step to understanding the subject, but it is not until students learn to apply those general principles to new situations that they really learn to “think like a lawyer”—or in our case, a paralegal.

For example, a student in business law will learn the concept that an employer is responsible for his employee’s actions if the actions are within the scope of the employee’s job. The next step is for the professor to propose a scenario. Christopher Litigant works as a delivery driver for Middlesex Pizza. While delivering a pizza in his car, he hits another car. Is his employer, Middlesex Pizza, liable? The answer depends on whether Christopher was acting within the scope of his job responsibilities. (In this situation, Christopher appears to be doing what he was hired to do, so Middlesex Pizza will be stuck with the bill!)

This use of case scenarios is a common way to involve students in thinking about the law and how it gets applied in real situations. But at MCC, we have taken it one step farther by creating a hapless family with lots of problems. This same family is used by all of our paralegal professors in their courses.

### How the Litigants Came to Be

In the early years of the Paralegal Program at MCC, all students took the same eight required paralegal courses. A natural bonding took place because all of the students were taking the same courses and studying the same subject matter. However, about five years ago, we had a conversation with our advisory board members that led us to believe there was a need for a wider variety of paralegal courses that would reflect current legal trends and prepare students for specialized areas of employment better. After much discussion, we settled on a course of study that includes four required paralegal courses—taken by the entire student body—and four (or more) paralegal electives to be chosen from a wider offering of specialized paralegal courses. But while this approach solved a curricular problem, it created another problem. Students were no longer taking the same courses together at the same time. Because ours is a commuter college, the faculty worried that this would lead to a sense of isolation among our students. As we know from the results of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), engaging community college students in the classroom through active learning leads to deeper learning and student success.



The answer to this concern came from a “best practice” of one of our outstanding adjunct professors, Judge Bob McKenna. As the faculty talked over the problem, we all recognized that we could spot Judge McKenna’s students instantly; they were the ones talking about characters from his case studies, Sadie McGonigle and Louie the Lip. Judge McKenna consistently used the same client names throughout his course, in a wide variety of scenarios. And you could hear his students, past and present, laughing together about the latest goings-on of Sadie and Louie the Lip.

We wanted that same feeling of a “commonly shared experience” to run through our entire program. As we considered our options during a faculty meeting, we agreed to apply for a college mini-grant to create a series of scenarios for our new family of clients. One of our long-time adjuncts got the ball rolling by creating the family’s biography. We met over the summer and organized into teams of two professors each who taught at least one paralegal course in common and began creating scenes from the family’s life. The scenes readily presented a number of legal issues that could be used in our classrooms. The final step was to review the scenarios to ensure that all of our facts were consistent.

A problem we did not address was how to keep the facts in chronological order. Depending on how the students chose to schedule their electives, Sue Litigant could be murdered in the fall and magically buying a house with her husband in the spring. But we have found that the students are more than willing to “go with the flow!” They are willing to suspend disbelief—something they may have learned from watching re-runs of TV shows.

As we had hoped, the students have reacted positively to their new clients. But one unexpected benefit of the project is that it has brought our entire faculty closer as well. Our faculty had never worked on a programwide project before; and as a former adjunct myself, I had often found it difficult to grasp the whole scope of a program’s curriculum while concentrating on my own classroom. Working on curriculum together gave us the opportunity to talk about what was going on in the program as well as in our own classrooms. We shared our own best practices and thoughts about what made good practical assignments. And we simply spent time together with our colleagues in a casual setting. All together, 11 of our 15 faculty, adjunct and full-time, contributed to the project.

### **Applicability to Other Areas**

One concern is finding ways for students to relate to each other. Because most community college students spend less time on campus than they would at a

residential college, they have fewer opportunities to interact with each other. By creating characters that they all come to know, we created opportunities for interaction. It is as if the entire paralegal program is watching the same “soap opera” story. Although the use of the Litigant Family was done in the context of legal studies, it is likely that it would work as well in other subject areas. Math departments could have math families; history departments could create a historical family. Creating the families and their backgrounds could be a project for an Honors class.

This past summer our department has been working to expand the number of scenarios involving The Litigants, by creating ethical issues for paralegals who are asked to handle the Litigants’ legal woes. Additionally, we have begun to explore the possibility of expanding the family experiences by creating videos, PowerPoint presentations, avatars, or other visual media. This expansion could open up the possibility of involving faculty outside our department and allow students to showcase other talents.

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