HOT CAREER

Hiring remains brisk for paralegals

JOB TITLE: Paralegal
DESCRIPTION: Paralegals help lawyers prepare cases by checking facts and researching laws. They may draft mortgages and divorce agreements, prepare tax returns, secure loans for a corporation and review government regulations.

A paralegal specializes in one area of the law.

MEDIAN ANNUAL SALARY: $25,000
PROJECTED JOB GROWTH: 75 percent.
The use of paralegals will continue to grow rapidly, as more companies become aware that paralegals can perform many legal tasks for lower salaries than lawyers.

Competition for jobs should remain keen, however, as the growing number of persons pursuing this career keeps pace with job growth. Graduates of well-molded programs should have better opportunities.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING: Employers generally prefer formal legal training. Two- and four-year programs are offered at colleges and universities, community and junior colleges, and business schools.

Certification is not necessary, but may enhance employment opportunities. An ability to organize large amounts of information is essential.

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training.

ENGINEER A BRIGHT FUTURE

By Jill Radken

Surrounded by excellent entry-level salaries, the challenge of rebuilding America's aging roads and bridges, plus a chance to protect the environment, college students are choosing civil engineering careers in record numbers.

More than 9,000 bachelor's degrees in civil and environmental engineering were conferred last year — an increase of more than 10 percent over 1982, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE).

"You can see it nationally, you can see it regionally, you can see it locally," said Mishac Yegian, chairman of the civil engineering department at Northeastern University. "It's an exciting time for the profession."

Much of that enthusiasm lies in the tremendous opportunity for students to literally rebuild America. Seven of every 10 highways and roads need repairs, and two of every five bridges are deficient, according to federal figures.

"We've been putting off reconstruction," said Burton Segall, civil engineering professor at the University of Massachusetts/Lowell. "We've got to rebuild some of it."

Michael Kupferman, chairman of the civil engineering department at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, agreed: "The buzzword has been infrastructure."

Civil engineers are spearheading efforts to repair these decaying lifelines and rebuild aging cities to 21st-century standards. Most experts agree this rebuilding is essential for the United States to compete in the emerging global economy.

Projects such as the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, Boston Harbor cleanup and Massport's airport expansion are examples of local efforts to improve Boston and its surrounding community, said Yegian.

Civil engineering is also attracting more women and minorities. Bachelor's degrees in the field have surged for both groups. Degrees rose nearly 20 percent for women last year, and almost a third for African Americans, reported ASCE.

"The field has changed a lot," said Segall, pointing out that women, once virtually absent from his department, now constitute about 16 percent of the students.

Environmental engineering ranks as one of the hottest career options for young civil engineers. Many of today's students, part of a generation raised to appreciate their natural surroundings, find that environmental engineering lets them build a solid technical career while protecting America's fragile wetlands, forests, rivers and seashores.

Degrees in this specialty skyrocketed nearly 50 percent last year. Engineering's focus on protecting the environment, combined with the passing and enforcement of stricter laws and regulations, place a premium on this expertise.

"Environmental engineering has taken on a life of its own," said Kupferman, pointing to popular career paths such as an in-house engineer for a large company or a private consulting.

Given these immense challenges, career-minded students are finding high-level entry salaries. The average starting salary for civil engineers was $22,000 last year, ASCE research reveals. Mid-career civil engineers with master's degrees or engineering licenses earned an average of $36,000 to $38,000 last year.

(End note: Photo by Tanya DeBella)