D56 The Value of an Internship to a Forensic Science Education: A Student's Perspective

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After attending this presentation, attendees will emphasize the importance internship participation in the training of future forensic scientists.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the argument to require the inclusion of internship as the best method for training well rounded forensic scientists.

The climate in the post September 11/CSI/OJ Simpson era has been one of unprecedented growth in the number of Forensic Science education programs around the country. The increased popularity of the field coupled with the need better trained forensic scientists in an increasingly technical environment (especially in DNA technology), have raised demand for educated forensic scientists to new heights. With the expansion in the number of programs, there has been like expansion in the number of approaches to training, with different programs emphasizing different requirements in line with what each deems important to turning out quality graduates.

One such variable requirement is the inclusion of an internship requirement into the curriculum of forensic science programs. Some schools include this prerequisite, others do not. One program that includes such a requirement is the Forensic Science Program at Pace University. Pace is a large university with campuses in New York City, White Plains, and Pleasantville, NY, with the forensic science program based out of the New York City campus. In order to receive a degree from Pace, students are required to perform an internship of four hundred hours duration, generally performed over the summer months. It is this obligation that the authors have recently completed.

Upon learning that it would be necessary to intern as part of the program, several obstacles were encountered. The largest of which, and the most difficult to overcome, was the availability of positions with the agencies performing the forensic analyses. No requirement exists for laboratories to accept interns and many do not. Other organizations do, but limit the numbers as a way to minimize resource and training outlays. These factors, along with the increased numbers of students seeking positions, conspire to greatly increase the difficulty of even finding an internship in a given area. Combine this with the rising number of students seeking these openings and number of slots available dwindles quickly. Even if a placement were available, one must still tackle the problems of the requiring the student to effectively work full time for a summer for no pay, and the cost to the student for the credithours earned. All can be seen as potential detriments to a required internship.

Once the position was secured, and the formalities concluded, the perception of the internship requirement began to change dramatically. The learning experiences were three fold. Initially, there was the overview stage, where the student observed the overall workings of the laboratory, how evidence is handled, and how the laboratory tests are performed from the beginning of the process to the end. There was also the field stage, where the intern was afforded the opportunity to observe the work at scenes. There it was learned first hand the importance of the initial handling of the scene and evidence, and how all of the most sophisticated laboratory tests in the world cannot restore the probative value of evidence if the context and it's origin are lost. Finally, there came the contributory stage, where through one or more projects the intern was able to add to the knowledge base of the lab as well as demonstrating ability in a working setting.

While the primary focus of the internship experience is an educative one, other benefits soon noticed from the internships were of an interpersonal nature. It is often said that it is not what you know so much as who you know, and this is as true in the forensic science field as any. While interning, it was evident that it was important not only to learn as much as possible and to perform tasks to the best of ones ability, but to also meet people and develop relationships that will come into play when it comes time for collaboration or the all-important hiring.

From an examination of the author's experiences, it seems that both positive and negative experiences can be associated with the internship process. For the large part, the difficulties were found within the initial process of acquisition and organization, and not with the actual item itself. Once begun, the internship was revealed to be an invaluable learning experience, offering perspective on how this field works in the 'real world.' For no classroom setting, however intricately designed, can hope to substitute entirely for hands on experience in the work setting. Internships result in better-trained forensic scientists, and that ultimately is good not only for the students, but the entire field.

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