B146 Women in (Forensic) Science

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain a better under- standing of the cultural aspects of why women are so prevalent in the pro- fession of forensic science and how to attract and retain quality employees leading to a diverse workforce.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing an appreciation for the underlying reasons of the current workforce in forensic science.

Encouraging women to pursue science, engineering, and technology (SET) careers is an important part of creating a capable, diverse workforce. A portion of this encouragement entails experiencing viable female role models in the sciences and as portrayed in the popular media. As Julie King noted in her editorial (*Science* V308, 29 April 2005), while industry sees the advantages in a diverse workforce, academia has yet to inculcate these practices into its own diversity. However, one scientific discipline has attracted an inordinate number of females to its academic ranks: Forensic science.

Most forensic science programs are overtly female in population—the program at West Virginia University has been 62% to 67% female since its inception. The Introduction to Forensic Science course taught to last year was 86% female. This pattern is repeated in forensic science programs in the U.S. and abroad: The Higher Education Academy and SEMTA (the Sector Skills Council for the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies) published an overall rate of 67% for the U.K. (1) This pre- dominance of females in forensic science is mirrored in operational forensic laboratories (the discipline's "industry"); for example, Minnesota's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Forensic Science Laboratory is 72% female and 60% of South Carolina's Law Enforcement Division Forensic Science Laboratory are female.

Why is forensic science such as attractive SET career for women? Several factors may provide indications. Changes in the way the media portray women (and minorities) in science, especially forensic science, may have encouraged women. In the 1990's, women and minorities were

under-represented as leads in television series with a scientific theme; however, the current slate of *CSI* dramas have generally improved this representation.

	1994-1997 (%'s) (2)		**2002-2005 (%'s)**
	U.S. Population	**Science in Prime Time**	***CSI***
White			
Male	41	75	41.2
Female	42.1	13.2	23.5
Black			
Male	6	8.3	11.8
Female	6.6	1.4	11.8
Hispanic	11	0	1.8
Asian	3	0.7	0

Is this one of the lesser known results of the so-called "*CSI* Effect"? Men and women scientists in equal numbers report seeking a career in science due to the influences of science fiction media in their childhood (3). Perhaps the way the science is employed in the media portrayals makes a difference. Women are more interested in medical research than men (3) and medicine has obvious social import as does forensic science. As one female students explained when asked about her personal motivation for forensic science, "I could use my [science education] more to help people. I saw I had more options than in medicine." Additionally, reality-based shows like *Forensic Files* portray the industry by interviewing real forensic scientists—most of whom are women. Other forms of reality-based media can be influential, such as books written by female scientists aimed at children and young adults (4).

By studying the motivation of why forensic science is dominated by women, other SET academic disciplines could benefit in the recruitment and retention of a diversity of quality students. The predominance of females in forensic science has implications that affect not only academia but ultimately will affect the demographics of the industry, employer culture, and employee satisfaction as well (5). Diversity is a key to success but only if managed appropriately. Although the academy and industry of forensic science may have caught on to attracting a diverse workforce, their next challenge is to learn to manage it (6, 7).

References:

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Women, Personnel, Forensic Science

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