



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H23 Teaching Forensic Field Methods to Anthropology Students: The University of West Florida Model

A. Joanne Curtin, PhD*, University of West Florida, Department of Anthropology, 11000 University Parkway, Pensacola, FL 32514

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the scope of forensic anthropological field training offered at University of West Florida.

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the field methods course currently offered at University of West Florida, and to open a dialogue with other institutions offering similar courses, with the ultimate goal of improving the training of undergraduate and graduate students in forensic anthropology.

Continuing education courses ("short courses") in the documentation and recovery of human skeletal remains are offered for law enforcement personnel at numerous institutions across the United States. Academic courses devoted to training anthropology students in forensic field methods are fewer in number, and more variable in their content. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the field methods course currently offered at the University of West Florida (UWF), and to open a dialogue with other institutions offering similar courses, with the ultimate goal of improving the training of undergraduate and graduate students in forensic anthropology.

Since 2008 UWF has offered a dedicated forensic field school whose goal is to train graduate students and senior undergraduates in the skills required to handle forensic field recoveries. These situations require solid project management skills. Each forensic case is unique, so responders must be able to assess each scene, make an informed decision as to whether skeletal elements are human or not, devise an efficient strategy for locating, recording and recovering remains, work collaboratively as team members with other anthropology students, and with professionals from other fields (forensic investigators from the medical examiner's office, crime scene specialists from law enforcement, dog handlers, etc.). The data collected must be accurate and meet contemporary evidence standards. Finally, responders must be able to communicate the results of their investigations clearly and unambiguously.

At UWF, students receive training in technical skills such as compass use, line search, establishment of grids, setting up/running an optical survey instrument, excavation, measurement, and field photography, and broader project management skills (ability to assess needs, determine efficient solutions, delegate tasks, contribute constructively to team dynamic, and communicate effectively). Students first receive classroom instruction in relevant field techniques, and then are required to apply their knowledge and skills initially in a series of "mock" forensic scenes including both surface scattered remains and clandestine burials, and later in a real cemetery excavation. Finally, each student is required to write two case reports, one describing the recovery of surface remains, and one for buried remains. Once they have successfully completed the course, students may assist in actual forensic case work, under the supervision of faculty members.

Forensic Field School, Survey Methods, Excavation Techniques