



D62 The Need for Background Investigations of Forensic Students

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become aware of the widespread lack of vetting of forensic students in the United States. Attendees also will be aware of the opinions of forensic educators concerning requiring background investigations of forensic students prior to participation in their forensic education programs.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by preparing students for forensic careers with the expectations that these students are required to meet less-stringent entrance standards than other criminal justice professionals and other client-centered professions.

Two-year, four-year, and graduate programs in forensic science have proliferated in the last decade. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 19% growth in the forensic science technician occupation between 2010 and 2020. Growth in demand is likely to stimulate additional growth of forensic science programs as universities and colleges struggle to increase enrollment. The National Academy of Sciences has called for standardizing and strengthening forensic science education programs in America. Forensic science programs can be no stronger than the individuals who are educated in those programs. The National Institute of Justice guidelines concerning qualifications for a career in forensic science indicate that entrants into the profession are likely to be required to meet the same background checks as law enforcement officers. The Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission (FEPAC) standards require that accredited forensic science programs inform students that they are likely to be required to undergo the same type of background check as would a law enforcement applicant.

Some associate and baccalaureate and many post-baccalaureate professional education programs require some form of background investigation of their student participants. Most of these programs educate for professions that deliver some form of client service, such as social work, nursing, pharmacology, etc. and require client contact during the educational program. The underlying assumption operative in these vetting requirements is that by virtue of participation in the education program, the student will assume a role in which the student could potentially harm others. While client contact is uncommon in forensic education programs by virtue of the student's participation in the forensic education program, the student develops specialized knowledge that would enable the student to potentially cause great harm with that knowledge.

Voluntary basic law enforcement education programs, in which students are not sponsored by a law enforcement organization, are available in community colleges of many states. Students in those programs typically complete all the requirements for initial entry into the law enforcement profession when hired by a law enforcement organization. Some of the content in those programs provides education and training in law enforcement techniques that are typically shielded from public disclosure laws. Those programs require various forms of background investigation of prospective students.

An online survey of forensic educators with two- and four-year colleges and universities was conducted. The sample frame for the survey was those undergraduate forensic education programs in the United States that are listed on the American Academy of Forensic Sciences website. Most respondents were directors of baccalaureate forensic education programs in public institutions. Almost all respondents reported that their institutions informed prospective forensic students that they would likely be required to undergo a background investigation similar to that used for screening law enforcement applicants. A majority of respondents agreed that their forensic students were aware of disqualifiers commonly used for screening law enforcement applicants. The only form of background investigation used by only a few of those institutions was a requirement for prospective students to provide letters of reference. Almost all respondents either had no opinion or disagreed with any required form of background investigation for prospective forensic students except a requirement for letters of reference. Almost half of the respondents agreed that undergoing a background investigation would help forensic students learn about their future professional and personal ethical obligations than would learning in the classroom about those standards.

Forensic, Student, Background