



D73 Why More Women Are Pursuing Forensic Science Graduate Degrees Instead of Other Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Degrees: A Qualitative Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will evaluate reasons why women are pursuing forensic science graduate degrees. Attendees will also be able to assess reasons why women are discouraged from pursuing a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) degree at the undergraduate and graduate level of education.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by examining the reasons why women are choosing to pursue forensic science graduate degrees over other STEM graduate degrees. The reasons why women are not choosing STEM graduate degrees can shape forensic science laboratory policies to prevent women from leaving the field of forensic science in the future.

Although women are qualified and capable of being successful in STEM majors, only a fifth to a third of the STEM fields are composed of women. The loss of talent, diversity, and creativity is cause for concern for the future. Forensic science undergraduate and graduate programs nationally average 78% of the student body as female. The purpose of this research was to determine why women are choosing forensic science as a career path over other STEM majors. A survey was sent to current female forensic science students and recent graduates. Based on their answers, many knew they wanted an undergraduate degree in forensic science before they started college. They were also greatly influenced by popular forensic television shows and fiction books.

The appeal of forensic science to the women surveyed is mainly a combination of being able to do something different every day, something that has a direct application on people's lives, and can bring justice to a victim. These are things that are lost in many STEM research laboratories. The respondents stated that forensic science laboratory work is dictated by what crime has been committed and provides excitement and interest on a daily basis.

A follow-up research project tried to determine at what point during a woman's education she is mostly likely to be discouraged from pursuing a STEM undergraduate or graduate degree and what are the most common sources of that discouragement. The survey was sent to female university faculty teaching biology, chemistry, physics, biomedical sciences, forensic science, and medicine. Almost all the respondents decided to pursue a STEM degree prior to entering college. The types of discouragement for those pursuing STEM degrees identified in the survey were compared to the responses from women who received forensic science graduate degrees to identify any differences. Less than half of respondents were discouraged from pursuing a STEM degree either prior to or during their undergraduate degree primarily by family members. Those that chose forensic science as an undergraduate or graduate major were encouraged to pursue their degree.

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