



A35 Capacity Building of Forensic Scientists

*Elizabeth A. DiGangi, PhD**, Department of Anthropology, Binghamton, NY 13902; *Jonathan D. Bethard, PhD**, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620-8100

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the methods and best practices undertaken for capacity building of forensic scientists, primarily forensic anthropologists, in diverse locations such as Algeria, Colombia, Mexico, and Georgia.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the importance of using an anthropological perspective when training scientists in countries outside of the United States. Cultural sensitivity and awareness are required to ensure that scientific learning objectives are imparted and ideally incorporated into practice.

Forensic scientists trained in industrialized countries often have the luxury of having been exposed to a first-class education, with little expense spared to provide for their training, both theoretical and practical. In the case of forensic anthropology, those of us working in the United States or Canadian contexts in particular (with a few notable exceptions), are able to use that education primarily for isolated missing persons or homicide cases. Ironically, colleagues who work in countries where missing or disappeared persons issues are systemic and widespread have often not had the privilege of a similar education in forensic anthropology. This is due to several factors that are country-specific, but, most generally, it is because forensic anthropology was born as a discipline in the United States and remains one of the youngest forensic sciences, having only been professionalized four decades ago.

As a result, forensic anthropologists or other forensic scientists and law enforcement professionals are increasingly being asked to travel to countries with a human identification issue stemming from dozens to thousands of missing or disappeared persons and train the local anthropologists or forensic scientists. Perhaps the most famous example of this in action would be the tireless efforts of the Argentinean Forensic Anthropology Team, who have traveled to numerous countries to train local practitioners and/or do forensic anthropological work themselves. This presentation discusses the experiences of working in several different countries with the goal of capacity building local scientists and the conclusions regarding best practices.

We have trained forensic scientists and law enforcement personnel from a variety of disciplines but most often forensic anthropologists in Algeria, Colombia, Georgia, and Mexico. The first rule of working with colleagues in another country is also the first rule of applied anthropology, that is, cultural relativism. Further, we must realize the need to be accepting of cultural differences when it comes to relevant issues such as treatment of the dead. Second, we must educate ourselves about the country's context in terms of what the issues have been that led to a need for human identification and what training the forensic scientists already have. It can be tempting to think that we would not be there unless the need existed; however, we must recognize our privilege at having been invited to share our knowledge with local scientists and realize that we are there to learn from them, too.

Further, we must understand that depending on a country's particular socio-historical context, our colleagues may not be able to or willing to implement all our recommendations. We must therefore be able to fully understand the context and, importantly, tailor our advice based on that context. We ask ourselves, "What is an ideal situation to practice forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology—and what practices can be altered in a way that scientific integrity is not harmed when the situation is not ideal?" Non-ideal situations are the rule rather than the exception and range from limitations related to funding to infrastructure to socio-political contexts prohibiting the personnel from conducting anthropological work at all.

Ultimately, we are training our colleagues to practice their own forensic anthropology, and we must do this in a way that is both palatable to them culturally and realistic given each particular context. Finally, we must contemplate if any ethical issues exist. We have worked for both governmental and non-governmental organizations and working for the former may raise certain questions about its agenda and our contribution to that agenda.

Capacity Building, Training, International Collaboration