



A69 Qualifications for Forensic Anthropologists

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand current attitudes toward various qualifications by forensic anthropology practitioners and will gain a clearer picture of where advances for the future should be focused.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by initiating the first steps for developing standards in the practice of forensic anthropology through a discussion of current and proposed qualifications for the discipline.

This presentation is based on an online survey hosted by Western Carolina University and approved by the Institutional Review Board of this institution as well as the University of Nevada, Reno. At the time of this writing, the survey had 258 respondents who, via self-reporting, had performed forensic anthropology casework or considered themselves qualified to do so. Note that not all respondents provided an answer to every question. In this overview of perceived and proposed qualifications in forensic anthropology, three main areas will be considered: education, training, and certification.

Education can be defined as the formal coursework from an accredited school, college, or university, while training can be defined as the formal, structured process of teaching and assessment at a laboratory or other non-educational institution.¹ Together, education and training form the basis for developing qualifications in a discipline.² Qualifications are typically demonstrated via certification or licensing by an accredited body. Presently, forensic anthropology lacks standards for qualifying practitioners in all three of these areas, and the reality is that many people are practicing forensic anthropology without appropriate qualifications.

In fact, when asked if they felt unqualified individuals were practicing forensic anthropology, 92% of respondents answered yes. When respondents were asked what would make an individual unqualified to practice forensic anthropology, the three most common responses were: a lack of training/experience (75%), followed by a lack of adequate education (32%), and unethical behavior (9%), respectively. Moreover, the clear majority of respondents (98%) were in favor of developing standards for education and training in forensic anthropology, and 75% supported developing an accreditation for forensic anthropology educational programs.

In terms of education, respondents had completed degrees ranging from a BA to a PhD. Courses taken during education also varied, with only three courses (human osteology, statistics, and archaeological theory) having been taken by more than 70% of all respondents during their education. When asked what knowledge areas should be required for the practice of forensic anthropology, 15 different areas were agreed upon by more than 70% of respondents, with human osteology being the primary subject area.

When asked what training the respondents had received, the most common answers were assisting with field-based (88%) or laboratory-based (79%) casework. When asked, "What do you think should be required for an individual to practice forensic anthropology?" more than 70% of respondents indicated, "Some period of work supervised by a certified forensic anthropologist" with various other choices, including certification or graduate degrees, falling below 70% agreement. However, in terms of training during education, only 44% of master's programs and 48% of doctoral programs attended by respondents had one or more anthropologists certified by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA) as faculty.

Regarding certification, only 18% of respondents were certified by the ABFA. The responses toward certification by this organization were mixed (both strongly for and against); however, 94% of respondents were in favor of some form of certification for forensic anthropology.

The current push for scientific rigor and the publication of standards in the forensic sciences has presented an opportunity for forensic anthropologists to define qualifications for their discipline. These results demonstrate a clear need and desire for a standardization of qualifications within the field of forensic anthropology. Based on these results, efforts should initially be focused on outlining basic required coursework, which could potentially be overseen by an accrediting body (e.g., the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission). Efforts should then move toward outlining training requirements to demonstrate individual competencies. Certifying bodies could then incorporate these standards in their application processes. In developing these qualification standards, focus should be on developing core competencies to practice forensic anthropology to best prepare practitioners for the discipline.

Reference(s):

1. Scientific Working Group for Forensic Toxicology (SWGTOX) standards for laboratory personnel. *Journal of Analytical Toxicology*. 2015; 39:241-250.
2. Passalacqua N.V., Pilloud M.A. *Ethics and Professionalism in Forensic Anthropology*. San Diego, CA. Academic Press, 2018.

Qualifications, Education, Training