



J2 Education and Training in Forensic Document Examination: A Discussion of Issues and Ideas

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how members of the field of forensic document examination view training and education practices. Current discussions of the advantages and challenges of changing training and education paradigms will be highlighted in the context of examiner opinions.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic sciences community by presenting conversations about the importance of creating systematic and standardized training programs with empirical and measurable benchmarks to demonstrate mastery and competence of trainees.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) has been engaged in efforts to improve the reliability and validity of the methods, procedures, and conclusions in all areas of forensic practice. OSAC discussions have included topics such as the cross-disciplinary standardization of reporting language; creation of clear, concise, and empirical standards for demonstrating expertise in the field; and meaningful, recognized certification or licensure. Among these discussions is the specification of programs of study that will qualify trainees to gain employment as experts in the field. Conversations around forensic document examination have included debates about the merits of modular training compartmented to a 24-month program of study; identifying a single recognized certifying organization; requiring certification for trainers/mentors; requiring private laboratories to adhere to the standards set for government labs; and standardization of document examiner education and training.

Previous research addressing the training and education of Forensic Document Examiners (FDEs) revealed that the most common factor that FDEs cited as a positive contributor to their training was access to high-quality materials ($n=34$). For instance, the availability of textbooks, publications, and actual cases allowed FDEs to build upon the knowledge and experience of experts. Hands-on experience with trainers ($n=22$) as well as working with highly skilled trainers ($n=30$) were also among the most common things listed contributing to high-quality FDE training. Finally, FDEs reported that the repetition inherent in working through many cases gave FDEs experience that directly applied to work that they would be conducting in the field ($n=18$). A few participants ($n=4$) indicated that being taught to take a conservative approach to document examination ensured that their opinions and conclusions were defensible and supported by evidence.¹

This presentation will compare the results of a recent survey of the education and training background of professional document examiners (National Institute of Justice Award # 2015-DN-BX-K069) with results from the 2014 survey, highlighting similarities and differences in their views on current training and suggestions for improvement. The current movement toward an educational model of training standards and practices will be discussed.

Further discussion will center around the ongoing discussions in the field about creating standardized training programs that incorporate the identification of relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities; creating measurable and objective course goals; specifying learning objectives that incorporate introductory-, intermediate-, and mastery-level goals; creating valid and reliable measures of learning; and creating objective and measurable benchmarks for determining training effectiveness. This discussion will include information about identifying constructs to be measured, how to measure the reliability and validity of assessment techniques, and constructing standardized tests and measures.

Reference(s):

1. Merlino, M.L., Freeman, T.M., Springer, V., Dahir, V., Hammond, D., Dyer, A.D., Found, B.J., Smith, L., and Duvall, I. (March 31, 2014). Final report for the National Institute of Justice grant titled *Validity, Reliability, Accuracy, and Bias in Forensic Signature Identification*. Submitted to Gerry LaPorte, National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC.

Professional Training, Education Models, Professional Development