



E110 Forensic Science Distance Education: Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs

Lerah Sutton, PhD, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32608; Jason H. Byrd, PhD, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32608*

Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to make attendees aware of the current trends in forensic science education and how the demand for online distance education within the forensic sciences is rapidly growing. After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the fundamental difficulties associated with building a successful distance education program, learn methods to overcome these difficulties, and hear about the student successes associated with these programs. New ways to integrate scene photos, autopsy photos, and case studies within the course will be discussed as well as the implementation of new, in-person, hands-on laboratory class electives.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by educating attendees about the new trends in forensic science higher education. If these same concepts are applied toward continuing education for actively working professionals—a plan that is currently in progress—it will serve to improve the quality of distance-learning continuing educational opportunities available to professionals working within the forensic sciences.

Unique to Florida, but mirrored in other states, is the Earnhardt Family Protection Act, which overrides Florida's open public records laws as they relate to autopsy and crime scene photographs, preventing the copying, distribution, or viewing of these photographs. Violation of this law is a third-degree felony and violates Florida State Statute 406.135. As many of the faculty within these online programs have built their forensic careers in Florida, this law may have proved prohibitive to providing students with the type of engaging case studies needed to further their education. However, special permissions and online security techniques have been implemented to allow the use of the photographs to provide students with the highest-quality educational experience possible. Techniques that are otherwise difficult to describe online can be supplemented with optional hands-on lab classes that give students the opportunity to immerse themselves in an intensive course that complements the online course they have previously taken.

An additional component of learning is though discussion and debate with fellow students, which is often overlooked or absent in online education. Methods to encourage and stimulate discussion are integrated within each course to ensure students receive a well-rounded education. This model has, thus far, proven extremely successful as demonstrated by the online programs performing far beyond the initial market projections for student engagement. If these same concepts are applied toward continuing education for actively working professionals, a plan that is currently in progress, it will serve to improve the quality of distance-learning continuing educational opportunities available to professionals working within the forensic sciences. Offering a myriad of courses designed for the working professional (i.e., courses that may be taken on a flexible schedule from anywhere the student has computer access and an internet connection), students and participants at any level of education and experience, from the newest beginners to the seasoned professionals, may find courses tailored to their specific needs and offered either fully online or supplemented with in-person hands-on learning.

Education, Distance Learning, Forensic Science