



E112 Crossing the Border Between Academia and Forensic Science Practice: Managing a Successful Student Internship Program in an Integrated Medical Examiner Office and Crime Laboratory

Jasmine M. Jefferson, MS, Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, Houston, TX 77054-2001; Michal L. Pierce, MS, Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, Houston, TX 77054*

Learning Overview: The goals of this presentation are to: (1) explain the mutual benefits in maintaining a student internship program at a forensic science agency; and (2) illustrate the elements in a successful internship program at an integrated medical examiner office and crime laboratory.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science program by helping attendees gain competence in explaining how a student internship program can mutually benefit a forensic science agency and forensic science students and in illustrating the system to maintain a successful student internship program.

In an effort to bridge the border between academic study and forensic science practice, there has been an observed increase in the number of collegiate programs with a student internship requirement as part of the forensic science curriculum. While many students seek a forensic science internship as an introduction into the field of forensic science, other students purposefully use internship programs as a stepping stone to future employment, establishing contacts, and creating connections for on-going research interests. Allowing students to crossover into the day-to-day functions in a laboratory discipline as part of their curriculum provides an invaluable experience to integrate their academic foundations with real-life experience and to plant seeds for relevant research. Moreover, maintaining an internship program allows eager and competent students to temporarily expand the workforce in a forensic science agency and perform work on various research projects, providing mutual benefits for both the student and the agency.

Managing a successful student internship program at an integrated medical examiner office and crime laboratory is a labor-intensive task, but is essential to exposing students to forensic science culture. As a priority, most forensic science agencies manage a large caseload and continually strive to meet turnaround time objectives. Although managers may identify areas throughout the agency that could benefit from research and development, they may be unable to dedicate lab analysts to develop validation plans or perform the research functions. This is where interns can assist. However, intern recruitment, applicant review, and mentorship require staff and a developed system. Furthermore, once students are accepted to an internship program, they require consistent oversight, a structured schedule, professional development guidance, and end-of-program activities that are critical to providing the student with a comprehensive intern experience and achieving a focused outcome for the agency.

Yearly, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) opens intern positions in numerous forensic science disciplines, including forensic investigations, forensic anthropology, forensic entomology, histology, forensic genetics, trace evidence, forensic toxicology, drug chemistry, firearms identification, and victim's assistance, as well as forensic imaging and administrative services. The HCIFS employs a full-time Training & Development Manager to manage the student programs, including the internship program. The Quality Management Division staffs the Training Manager, who is integral to the success of maintaining the ten-week, full-time summer internship program, and the additional intern program needs throughout the year.

The Training Manager maintains relationships with local colleges and universities as a regular source of student interns, as well as handling recruitment and outreach to a variety of schools. Application processing and screening is filtered through the Training Manager, who also tracks the applicants for each discipline and can initiate additional recruitment efforts for disciplines with multiple project needs. A trained mentor and special project is assigned to each intern once applicants are selected for and accepted into the program. Upon their arrival, the Training Manager provides an orientation to onboard all students to the agency. The Training Manager creates and maintains a formal internship program schedule with pre-scheduled professional development sessions for the interns, which has proven to be one of the most meaningful aspects of the HCIFS student-training program in further preparing students to cross over into the professional forensic science workforce. Additional activities unique to the HCIFS Internship Program, such as an autopsy viewing or forensic investigations field call ride-along, may also be scheduled to enhance the intern experience. At the end of the program, each intern provides a formal presentation to HCIFS managers and staff to summarize the project completed during the program. Finally, the HCIFS Training Manager facilitates the intern performance evaluation process and periodic progress reports with each mentor to ensure administrative documentation is maintained as part of the internship program. In 2019, the HCIFS received 35 intern applications from qualified students; 13 interns were selected for the summer internship program from six different universities.

Forensic Science Internship, Student Engagement, Student Intern