

SLUG: PSU FORENSIC

Contact: John Dillon, journalism faculty, jad53@psu.edu

By Kevin Kline

Penn State journalism student

UNIVERSITY PARK – In just four years, the Penn State University forensic science program has risen from a promising project to one of the most recognized in the country.

The quick climb has been acknowledged by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. In February, the undergraduate program became accredited, meeting the quality standards of the academy's accreditation commission and placing it among 25 programs out of about 200 in the country to achieve the distinction.

According to Bob Shaler, director of the Penn State program and professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, most programs don't normally get accredited the first time they apply.

"We can safely say that the Penn State program is an excellent program and one the university can be proud of," said Nancy Jackson, director of development and accreditation for the academy.

In each of the last four years, the program has had 100 to 125 "pre-major" freshmen and sophomores take classes. The number usually dwindles to about 60 who declare the major at the end of their sophomore year. Fewer graduate because of the difficulty of the courses.

This spring, 13 students graduated, adding to the 28 graduates since its inception.

"The scope and breadth of the material from a student's standpoint is just mind-boggling," said Ralph Ristenbatt, criminalist and senior lecturer of forensic science. "But the upside is [if the students] manage to come out of it, they're probably some of the best in the country."

“When I graduated they told me they had pushed us hard to prepare us to handle anything that came at us in the real world,” said Alex Porigow, a 2008 graduate who works in the crime lab in the New York City Police Department. “I left school nervous I didn’t learn much, but I quickly realized how prepared for the real world I was on my very first interview.”

Three other alumni work with the FBI and another works in the Denver Police Department’s crime lab. Others have gone on to nursing school, law school, medical school or high-level research laboratories, including some involved in cancer research.

“Our graduates are successful and that’s to me what really matters,” said Mitch Holland, the program’s associate director and an associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology. “If our graduates are successful then our program must be doing what it needs to be doing.”

In mid-April, the FBI invited about a dozen Penn State forensic science students to New York for a recruiting meet-and-greet session. The Penn State forensic science program was the first in the country selected to do that, according to Holland. On another occasion, the head of the FBI Laboratory’s DNA analysis unit came in to interview students for positions with the FBI in the biology and forensic DNA field.

The university has provided funding for equipment, the renovation of laboratories, and the renovation of two on-campus crime scene houses, Spruce Cottage and Pine Cottage.

The cottages have fake crime scenes inside and are used for the class on basic principles of crime scene investigation. According to Holland, a man who had been to Hogan’s Alley, the crime scene investigation training room for the FBI Academy, said the cottages – which look like normal residential homes with a front porch, a back deck, two floors, and front and back entrances – were better.

Before coming to Penn State, the forensic science faculty worked for many years in their field.

“Here you have people who have worked in the laboratories, have testified, have done the work. Some programs you don’t have that,” said Ristenbatt, who worked for 17 years in the forensic biology department of the New York City medical examiner’s office. “[Other programs] may bring in part-time adjunct faculty that have those sorts of experiences, but they’re not there full-time to really work with the students.”

The many years of experience outside of teaching has been the source of the program’s only real obstacle thus far. The professors haven’t taught in a long time and have been admittedly rusty in the classroom.

“We’re trying to give students knowledge that we’ve had through experience,” said Shaler. “But it’s one thing to have the experience, and it’s another thing to teach it.”

The professors have used the students to guide them so the classes are meeting the students’ expectations as well as their own, according to Shaler.