'CSI' spurs campus forensics scene

By Alexander Lemaine
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

September 13, 2004

Three crime-scene investigators inspect the scattered remains of a body tied to the undercarriage of a prison bus.

"The torque of the spinning axle ripped her apart like the rubber off a bad retread," one of them says.

Later, a lab examiner lifts the body's skull out of a boiling pot, examines it and declares, "Skull's not ready yet... enzymes are still eating away at the proteins."

Scenes like these from the smash hit, "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," are part of network television's weekly dalliance with forensics – the application of science to investigate crimes.

The rising acclaim for the show and its spinoffs has triggered an increase in the interest in forensics as a major for college students – even though they don't always have a realistic view of the field.

"It's an intrinsically interesting field of study," said Dr. William Walkenhorst, chair of the Department of Chemistry at Loyola University in New Orleans. "We have seen a strong increase in interest that is due to the popularity of the 'CSI' shows."

On Sept. 23, millions of Americans will once again tune into "CSI" to follow the exploits of forensic investigators in Las Vegas. It has been at or near the top of the ratings since it debuted in 2000, and its popularity has spawned two spinoffs, "CSI: Miami" (returning next Monday) and "CSI: New York" (debuting Sept. 22).

"To watch what goes on in a lab to solve a crime is exciting," said Dr. Frank Scully, dean of Loyola's College of Arts and Sciences.

Loyola offers forensic chemistry as a major. Forensics is also an option as a minor for those studying criminal justice.

Walkenhorst estimates that about one third of the 100 students in the Department of Chemistry, major in forensic chemistry. In 1999, there were only 45 students studying chemistry.

The impact of "CSI" is evident in other universities across the

Schools detect greater interest

It doesn't take a forensic investigator to see the "CSI" effect on college campuses across the country:

For 2003-04, Mansfield University in Mansfield, Pa., enrolled 32 new chemistry majors, more than twice the number from the year before. As of May 2004, admissions director Brian Barden said twice as many confirmed freshmen named chemistry as a potential major than at the same time last year.

All three natural science majors at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, have grown. Biochemistry and chemistry have grown by 33 percent over five years, and enrollment in the school's revamped "community sociology" major, which includes courses for students interested in forensics, has nearly doubled since its creation in 1999.

At Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J., dean of enrollment Susan Christian said increased interest in
country, where the growth of forensic science programs has coincided with the premiere of "CSI."

"There are more and more programs that have forensic science now in their curriculums," said Edward Robinson, an assistant professor of forensics at George Washington University, in Washington, D.C.

Between 1999 and 2002, the number of graduate students studying forensic sciences jumped from 113 to 190 at George Washington.

There were only three students studying forensic sciences at Florida International University's graduate school in 1999. In 2003, there were 28 students in the program.

At the University of California Davis, the master in forensic science program started in 2002 with 11 students. By the fall of 2003, the program's enrollment had more than doubled.

Katalin Korossy, who studies forensic science at George Washington and watches "CSI," said, "I see some people (who) get into criminology because of the show."

Korossy said she has learned about the use of new forensic equipment through the show.

But despite the insight the show provides, "CSI" tends to glamorize the profession, said Robinson.

"It can't represent what's going on in the real world, or people would be bored," he said. "It's got to solve two or three crimes in an hour."

Robinson, who spent 25 years as a crime-scene technician, said that he watches the show regularly and finds it entertaining, but fraught with inaccuracies.

"They blend several job titles into one group of people," he said. "Lab examiners are one animal, and crime-scene techs are another."

Korossy notices the gap between fact and fiction, too.

"I find that people don't want to watch with me because of the inaccuracies I point out," said Korossy. "It's certainly not as glamorous as they show it."

She said that crime-scene investigators do not interrogate suspects, as on the show.

Robinson said that because of "CSI," people without a background in science might think it is easy to get into forensics.

The number of students who don't have undergraduate degrees in chemistry, biology or physics, but still apply to the forensics program has increased since "CSI" began, he said.

"We get some strange applications, because they just don't know any better," said Robinson. "We don't even consider anyone without adequate background."
Walkenhorst said that students at Loyola are able to get a feel for forensics in the real world through internships at places such as the New Orleans Police Department crime lab.

"They come back to us and say it's not like (the show)," he said.

Korossy said that she knows other students who found out the hard way that the profession is not for the faint of heart.

In an Intro to Forensics class, she said, some students "get freaked out by crime-scene photos."

"There can be a lot of blood," she said. "I am fascinated by the way a corpse decomposes."

Robinson believes that "CSI" can be a viable gateway to initial interest in the field of forensics.

"If it sparks an interest in students beginning to study science, that's a great thing," he said. "(But) people have to be aware that it's truly entertainment."

Find this article at:
http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040913/news_1c13csi.html

Click to Print

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.