On the scene: An accelerated forensic science program

By Eric Jay Toll for GCU News

Creeping down a dingy hallway lit by ancient incandescent bulbs, the door at the end seems to move closer inch by inch. The floor creaks with every step, making stealth impossible. Nerves are on edge, muscles tense, and there are sounds behind that door, with light leaking beneath.

One more step before grabbing the doorknob, and before reaching for it, the door flings open.

“They’re here!” shouts the door opener. Stepping into the room, there are detectives, and there is a body on the floor, and everyone’s looking at you.

Being a forensic scientist can lead to a career as a crime scene investigator, but it’s not like streaming video shows. That one aspect of the profession draws the most publicity. It may also draw students' attention to content that isn’t confined to 60 minutes, excluding commercial breaks.

Some entering the Forensic Science program in the College of Natural Sciences at Grand Canyon University don’t realize the vast array of opportunities beyond crime scenes or the reality of forensic scientists' role in securing convictions.

The misconception is a two-fer, according to Professor Melissa Beddow, program director for the Bachelor and Master programs at GCU. Some students know the field, some have misconceptions, and others thought it would be a cool career after streaming the shows.

“(A) big misconception…is how much science is involved,” she said. “(There’s not)…a lot on the shows, and…a lot of times it's fabricated.”

Learning reality in the nationally-accredited forensic science programs, GCU program opens a path forward. Many students want to get from the classroom into the lab and onto crime scenes as soon as possible. A master degree is required for many related certifications to accomplish that goal.

GCU now offers an Accelerated Bachelor and Master of Science to get further in the profession faster. The accelerated program has students graduating with the two degrees within five years. The program is available on campus and online.

“Our program also has to meet laboratory accreditation requirements when it comes to chemistry credits and certain classes,” Beddow reports. “(Students must pass) ANAB certifications from the ANSI National Accreditation Board.”

To move students to pass the rigorous requirements and work as crime scene investigators, GCU structures credit loads and course sequencing to meet those national standards (ANAB). The procedures are pounded into the students.

“It's very eye-opening to double-check and be thorough with all your work,” said GCU Forensic Science Senior Christian Merryman. “Another big thing is to always document. It's ingrained into our heads, pictures, notes.”

Merryman notes that comprehensive crime scene documentation is necessary to ensure that all possible evidence is available to the prosecution for use against the suspect. He has the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to real-world experience through his internship at the Phoenix Crime Laboratory. Completing his bachelor degree requirements in Spring 2026, Merryman is ready to move into the Master side of the double-degree so he can certify to process DNA.

“I love it,” said Genesis Vera, also a Forensic Science senior, of her internship in the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s office and lab. “It definitely has prepared…(and) it opened more doors for me as to what forensics is also about, because honestly, when you hear ‘forensics,’ you think ‘CSI,” you don't think that like you don't think of the DNA or the toxicology aspect.”

Getting students from “this isn’t like video” to sequencing DNA is a curriculum that keeps building on the previous semester. The first year gets general education requirements out of the way with the foundational courses. Those cover the gamut of the responsibilities from critical thinking, writing and general biology. One course that starts in the first year that seems out of place is the photography sequence. That spans three classes from how to use the camera to what’s necessary for forensic documentation of a crime scene.