

## Where Law and Science Come Together - Introduction to Forensics

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Forensics students participate in the 2006-07 annual student symposium.

The idea of developing such an interdisciplinary course came to both professors independently. Professor Stone, who is also a defense lawyer, was interested in teaching a course about the implications of the field of forensics on the justice system. His aim was to explore how forensic evidence is used in the courtroom in a very non-technical manner. However, he did not have much of a biological background to supplement his legal expertise. This is where Professor Sleiter came in. As a biology professor, she had previously taught *The Biology of Crime* as a strictly scientific non-majors course but was eager to expand it to include some legal aspects. When she happened to come across a flyer announcing a Forensics in the Law summer school course to be taught by Professor Stone, Professor Sleiter immediately contacted him. Professor Stone was equally enthused, and the two professors planned to offer the course the following semester.

The response from students was overwhelming. At the beginning of the semester, there were over 30 registered students and over 20 more on the waitlist. The class was eventually expanded to accommodate 36 students, but unfortunately many were still turned down.

A typical class hour was divided so that students heard from both Stone and Sleiter on a particular subject. If Professor Sleiter talked about fingerprinting techniques, Professor Stone would follow with a lecture on the use of fingerprint evidence in the courtroom. The discussion between the two professors made classes both interesting and informative. As a biology student myself, I was grateful for the opportunity to also learn about the legal system. Professor Stone always had great stories to tell about his previous cases, which made classes all the more exciting. Professor Sleiter's lab time was also very enjoyable.

The course covered a host of topics, including the history of fingerprinting, blood typing techniques, DNA evidence in the courtroom, and exonerations based on forensic evidence. Several speakers visited the classroom, including Nancy Jones, a Medical Examiner (ME) in the state of Illinois. She spoke about the procedures that the ME's office goes through when they examine a body and determine

cause of death. She even talked about some of her cases and showed us pictures that corresponded to them. Jane Railey, a lawyer, was another guest speaker. She is part of the Innocence Project Initiative at Northwestern University, which aims to exonerate innocent people who have been convicted of crimes. The course also made use of radio programs, articles on different types of forensic evidence in the courtroom, Barry Sheck's book on wrongful criminal convictions entitled *Actual Innocence*.

This class was particularly unique because it had a laboratory component despite being a non-majors biology course. Even with a limited time of eighty minutes per class period, students completed labs on fingerprinting, blood typing, blood spatter and several DNA fingerprinting techniques. The students enrolled in this class also participated in a fingerprinting workshop created specifically for the 10<sup>th</sup> annual student symposium. It was great to see students simultaneously working in lab and novels, discussing forensic evidence and listening to guest speakers' lecture. It was truly an interdisciplinary course! I definitely enjoyed my role as a peer teacher and had a lot of fun interacting with all the students.

Both instructors agreed that it was a great class. They did, however, have one complaint: they felt that the semester just flew by. They were also disappointed that, due to the limited class meeting time, the students had to be split into groups so the professors did not get to learn as much as they would have liked about the other person's field. They hope that this will not be the case if the class is taught again over a three hour time slot. Well, if the beginning of the Spring 2007 semester was any indication, the class should have no problem filling in the future!

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