

FORENSICS: THE 'IT' SCIENCE

IUPUI PROGRAM GAINING STUDENTS

Every group has one, the cool kid who grabs attention. In the science fraternity, that scene-stealer is forensics.

Over the last decade, between coverage of real-life court cases and dramatized entertainment programs, the science application used to help solve crimes has been brought from a backroom laboratory into the American consciousness.

Its new-found fame has been good and bad, says Dr. Jay Siegel, director of the state's only forensic and investigative sciences degree program at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI). He's quick to clarify that forensics is a serious and complex science – very rewarding, but far less glamorous than often portrayed.

"People have to be serious scientists before they can be forensic scientists. Students have to first get deeply educated in the health sciences and the chemical sciences," he affirms. "That means taking quite a lot of chemistry and biology courses."

Since 2004, that's exactly what students at IUPUI have been doing. Their curriculum also includes physics, calculus, law, criminal justice, as well as the forensics classes that focus on how to take the science they've already learned and apply it the analysis of evidence.

"They learn how to analyze drugs, body fluids, trace evidence, fingerprints and those sorts of things. The laboratory classes are all hands on," Siegel notes. "We also have an internship program – that is not required but we strongly urge students to consider – in which students spend a summer or another semester at a practicing crime lab in Indiana or elsewhere to learn how the skills gained in our program are applied in real crime laboratories.

"We also have them attend court so they can see what court testimony is really like. We sometimes can arrange for

the student to attend a crime scene or two so they can see how things are processed, how evidence is collected and preserved. What they will find out is that it's not a whole lot different than what they learn in the classroom; we don't want to stray too far from what the real crime labs are doing," he explains.

Program coordinator and academic advisor Kristin Shea says student interest in the forensics degree continues to rise. "We currently have 55 students and are expecting 30 new students in the fall based on applications to the university and intended majors. We have a few August graduates, so the program should grow to about 80 students."

Siegel adds, "We're nearing our limits, so if interest starts climbing beyond that, we are going to have to increase the qualifying grade point average for admittance into the program."

Currently, most of the students come from Indiana, but since IUPUI is one of only a few institutions in the Midwest to offer a forensic science undergraduate degree, students from surrounding states are starting to enroll. According to Siegel, one big advantage IUPUI has over other schools is its urban setting.

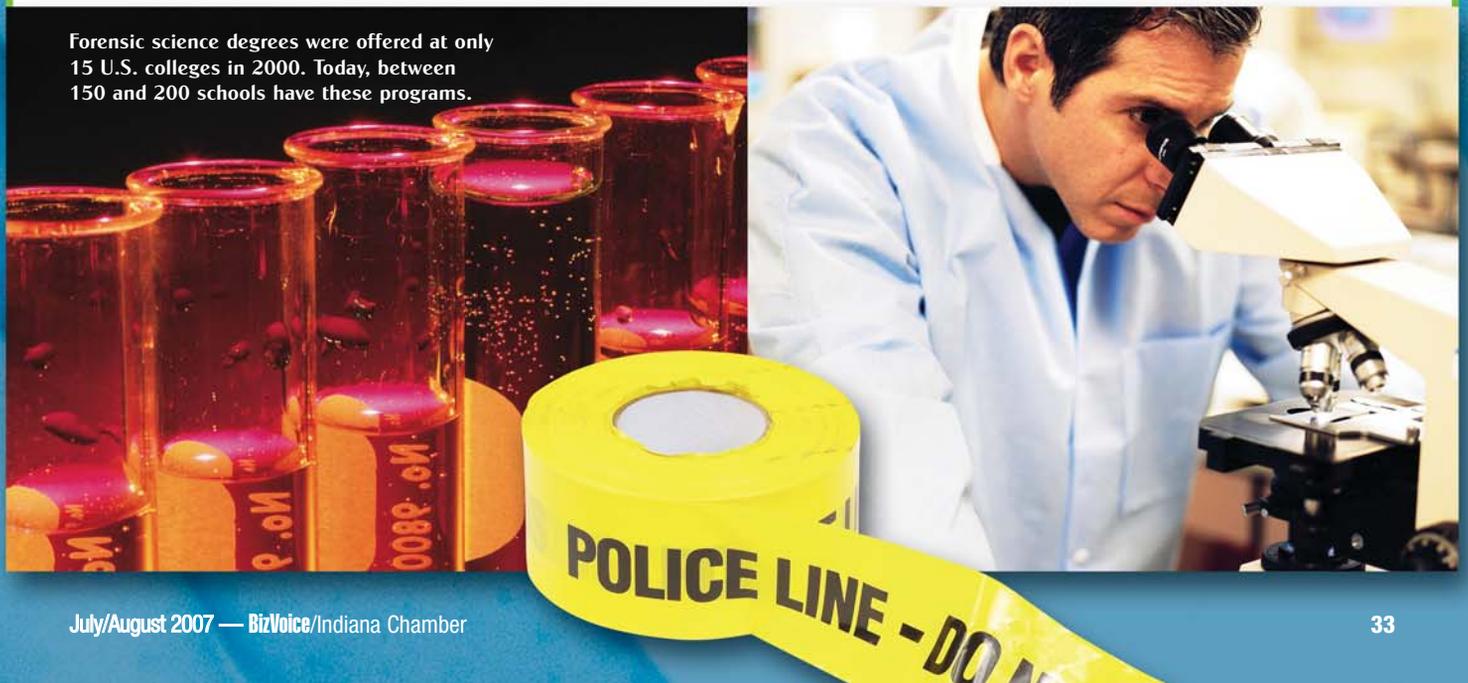
"Most of the universities that teach forensic science are fairly small and a lot are in the rural, private school type of settings. We're in an urban area in the capitol of the state with a crime laboratory just six blocks from our campus. That puts us in a unique position."

The school will be an even stronger competitor for talent once its graduate program is in place, either in fall 2008 or 2009. "Then, we can take scientists who have a bachelor's degree in chemistry, biology or toxicology and educate them in the forensic sciences," Siegel states.

Right now, however, he is more than content with the undergraduate program "growing by leaps and bounds."

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Forensic science degrees were offered at only 15 U.S. colleges in 2000. Today, between 150 and 200 schools have these programs.



Forensics

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“We’re starting to attract very, very good students from the high schools who otherwise may have gone to Indiana, Purdue or Notre Dame for example. But because of forensic science, they want to come here.

“Ultimately, this is a kind of program that will keep highly educated Indiana graduates in the state because of the need for educated crime laboratory personnel, and we are supplying them now,” Siegel assesses.

“We have a brand new laboratory for the Indiana State Police that hires forensic scientists; that’s going to be a continuing job market for our people – and our people are so well educated in the sciences that they can go into other areas like the medical sciences and chemical sciences. . . . From an economic standpoint, this is very important for the state and will help with its continued revitalization.”

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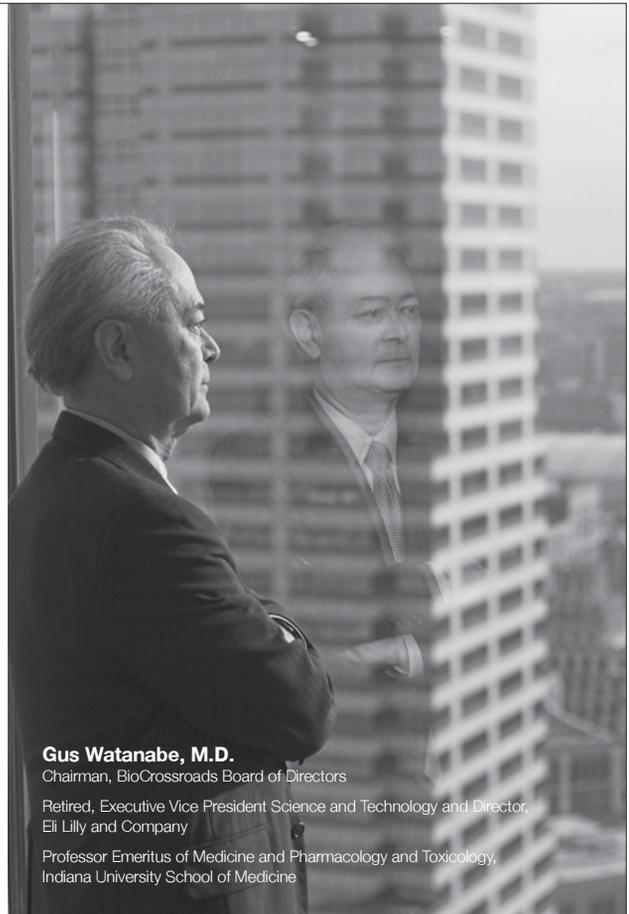
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