

CSI Classroom Prepares Students for Real-World Investigations

Essential: of the utmost importance; basic, indispensable, necessary; includes photography, fingerprint collection, toolmark identification. That's how a student attending the National Forensic Science Technology Center (NFSTC) class, Essentials of CSI Training, might define the term.

From January to August 2010, NFSTC used funding from the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) (Grant No. 2008-DN-BX-K201) to hold 16 sessions of "Essentials," a no-cost blended-learning course that pairs 16 hours of online course work with 24 hours of hands-on, instructor-led practical activities. In all, 232 individuals from 40 states received training. (For more information on blended learning, see "Blended Learning Mixes Methods," *TechBeat* Summer 2010.)

Retired Milwaukee police officer and present-day Ron Smith & Associates consultant Scott Campbell served as instructor for the hands-on portion of the course, working with NFSTC Instructional Services Coordinator Lori Sullivan to develop the overall curriculum. Campbell's instruction provided most of his students with their first hands-on training in techniques related to collecting physical evidence; most students work at very small law enforcement agencies and would never have the opportunity to participate in this type of training without the NIJ-funded project.

"The main goals are to introduce the students to how to process crime scene evidence, how to handle and recover different kinds of physical evidence," Campbell says. "We start off with what is physical evidence and how it can help solve a crime. We begin by measuring and sketching the evidence, then we can recreate the scene. Before they lift a fingerprint, they need to be able to photograph a fingerprint. We spend a lot of time with photography. Sometimes your only physical evidence will be a photograph, such as in a domestic violence case where a victim says 'my boyfriend grabbed me around the neck,' and she has bruises. The officer needs to be able to photograph that to verify her story."

After completing the prerequisite online coursework, students walk in with a core foundation of theoretical knowledge, which allows the onsite training to focus on

practical-based activities. After two days of hands-on learning about trace evidence such as hair and fibers, learning different methods of lifting latent fingerprints, and taking impressions of their own shoes, students are put to the test on the final day when they process evidence from a "burglary" that occurred in the NFSTC mock crime scene house. Upon completion of the course, participants can return to their agencies and often immediately apply the skills they've learned when processing crime scenes, in addition to sharing these skills with their colleagues.

"The skills we send them back with are the skills that they would need to do basic auto thefts, burglaries and assaults, although they could do a homicide as well," Campbell says. "We do a survey on the first day and some of the students' agencies don't have one homicide a year. They may not have one in five years. They're

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NIJ has funded development of a follow-up training program that continues where the Essentials of Crime Scene Investigation program concluded. Current plans for the intermediate-level program will expand investigators' skills in areas such as:

- Sequential processing.
- Light sources and theory.
- Techniques for advanced fingerprint processing.
- Advanced footwear collection and documentation.
- Forensic field testing.
- Specialized photography.
- Detection techniques for trace evidence.

The program will be delivered in a similar format as the Essentials course, using a blended approach that provides online theory to prepare trainees for an intensive, multi-day, hands-on training experience at the National Forensic Science Technology Center (NFSTC).

going to get 50 stolen autos, 100 burglaries, a lot of property crimes, and those crimes are where we get the physical evidence.”

“We have found that the most needed skill [used in processing those property crimes] is photography,” Campbell explains. “Cameras are hard to learn because everybody has a different camera and it takes a lot longer to learn. They come in with a camera and say ‘here’s what my department gave me, how do I work it?’ And the department figures, ‘well, it’s a point and shoot camera, it’s easy, just go ahead and turn it on and point and shoot.’ That can work, but I call them point and hope cameras because it doesn’t always get what you want. I would say that almost every post-class survey says that the first skill they can apply when they get back to work is photography.”

Officer Gary Helton of the Kenton County Sheriff’s Office in northern Kentucky says the photography portion of the class was a tremendous help.

“Photography was my weakness, and being able to take good photos, with very little light, or no light, and to get my camera to do what I want it to do instead of what it wants to do is the most important thing I think anybody could take away from here,” Helton says. “I didn’t know anything about cameras and after these last two days, I’m very comfortable with them.”

Helton, who serves as a member of the evidence-collection team for his 40-man department, says he had no previous opportunities to participate in this type of training. Fellow student Phoenix Perez, a forensic scientist with the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences, had previously taken scientific training classes, but no classes on evidence collection.

“Everything I’ve learned is pretty much new but photography is a big thing. We spent a lot of time on photography and I did not know anything about it,” Perez says.

She adds, “For me, crime scene visits are few and far between, but it’s beneficial for someone on my team to have this type of knowledge.”

Providing forensic science training to criminal justice practitioners like Helton and Perez is a core mission for NFSTC, which also leads the combined efforts that make up the NIJ Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. For more information on NFSTC and its other training programs, visit <http://www.nfstc.org/>.

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CSI Intermediate(continued)

Target audience: Crime scene investigators who meet the following criteria:

- Successful completion of a basic or introductory crime scene investigation training program.
- Three-plus years of crime scene experience.
- Sound working knowledge of camera equipment and thorough understanding of the basic principles of crime scene photography.

In addition, potential students must:

- Work for a publicly funded state, local or tribal agency as a professional law enforcement practitioner. (Note: Federal employees and contractors are not eligible.)
- Process crime scenes as a primary job function.
- Possess a reasonable level of skill in English, arithmetic and computer keyboarding.
- Have access to a computer with Internet access and Flash player (version 9.0 or higher) and Adobe Acrobat Reader.

Classes are expected to be announced in summer 2011 via the NFSTC website at <http://www.nfstc.org/> meetings, and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) training portal (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/training/welcome.htm>). This program is funded through NIJ award 2010-DN-BX-K266.



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