INTRODUCTION

On Friday, November 13, 2015, the Center for Forensic Excellence held its first meeting of forensic educators from Maryland colleges and universities. Faculty representatives attended from the University of Baltimore, Coppin State University, Loyola University, Prince George’s Community College, and Stevenson University. The meeting was held in response to challenges and opportunities in forensic higher education that were raised at the Center’s inaugural meeting which was held on May 15 and attended by federal and state prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and forensic professionals. During the meeting attendees observed that college and university graduates need to be better prepared for the forensics workplace. As a result, the Center’s advisory board convened a meeting of Maryland forensic educators and employers for the purpose of identifying opportunities to improve student skills and prepare graduates to enter the forensics workplace.
FORENSIC EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS

The November 13 meeting began with advice from the forensics employer community to forensic educators including the following:

- Students without knowledge of the basics should not be approved to proceed through programs. Basics include application of subject-matter knowledge, ability to communicate effectively, and execution of values that promote credibility, integrity, and ethical behavior.
- The forensics community is seeking students with skills to:
  - Work under pressure, including testifying under cross-examination and public speaking.
  - Write reports, which require strong grammar and writing skills throughout, with attention to detail.
  - Communicate effectively and understand how to write reports without injecting personal or professional biases and opinions.
  - Understand the difference between academic and forensic report writing.
- Students would benefit from forensic internships prior to graduating to help develop workplace skills.
  - Paid internships help students financially and also motivate them to be more productive while they receive hands-on learning and mentoring from seasoned forensic specialists.
  - The forensics community is faced with challenges in creating internship programs that include ensuring interns are placed appropriately, confirming they meet accreditation standards, and verifying they receive suitable background and security clearances.
  - While there are administrative and funding challenges surrounding forensic internships, the experiences would provide students opportunities to work with professionals in their chosen field and become viable, experienced job applicants when seeking employment upon graduation.
- Forensic employers provided the following suggested solutions:
  - Implement a competitive process for desirable internship opportunities.
  - Offer development programs such as Toastmasters and Dale Carnegie for students.
  - Research successful programs at other institutions, such as Utica, Norwich, and the Department of Defense.
  - Combine a master's degree with other certifications (e.g., fraud examiners, etc.)
  - Develop a forensic doctoral program to increase the pool of qualified faculty.
- In addition to convening a meeting of forensic educators, the Center’s advisors recommended that the Center:
  - Identify the gap between the knowledge students have gained and the expectations of their employers.
  - Explore how to close the learning gap.
  - Develop solutions on how to strengthen forensic internship programs.

FORENSIC EDUCATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The forensic employer expectations from the May 15 meeting were presented for discussion at the November 13 meeting and resulted in the following:

- Regarding meeting employer expectations that students are able to work under pressure and be able to testify and speak in public, forensic educators recommended the following:
- Work with students on time management, such as having them perform a time inventory to identify how they are utilizing their time.
- Support PASS programs (Planning for Academic Success of Students), a mentoring program designed to help students develop strategies for academic success.
- Offer hands-on/mock trial case learning so students can practice testifying from preparation through delivery.
- Simulate real-life situations as best as possible.
- Ensure students know how to meet deadlines.
- Establish policies regarding deadlines across programs or institutions.
- Follow through on consequences, e.g., give a 0% on a late paper instead of reducing the grade.
- Show compassion, but hold students accountable.
- Set up expectations properly with students at the beginning of each course/session.
- Explain to students that if they cannot meet forensic educator expectations they will not be able to meet forensic employer expectations.
- Work with students to encourage them to strengthen their work ethic.
- Faculty members to serve as role models for students by demonstrating professionalism and integrity in their actions.

- Regarding meeting employer expectations that students understand the importance of ethics and integrity, forensic educators recommended the following:
  - Establish a set of principles (timeliness, respect for others, etc.) that sets expectations from the beginning of a course.
  - Require buy-in from students on developing and following their own code or set of principles.
  - Ensure that the educational institution agrees on the importance of ethical standards and integrity.
  - Encourage peer feedback and critiques on assignments, research, papers.

- Regarding meeting employer expectations that students have adequate writing skills and pay attention to detail, forensic educators recommended the following:
  - Task students with more written assignments.
  - Provide tutoring and other writing resources and services.
  - Increase use of written essay examinations that focus on application, analysis, and critical thinking.
  - Provide thorough, straightforward, critical feedback on writing assignments.
  - Share forensic education ideas among faculty at all levels of education, include pre-college educators where critical thinking, writing, and ethical training begin.
  - Reinforce to students that a successful career in forensics requires strong written and oral communication skills.

- Regarding meeting employer expectations that students be able to communicate without personal bias or opinions, forensic educators recommended the following:
  - Include ethics in every course.
  - Emphasize objectivity and help students avoid allowing their personal feelings to influence their work by analyzing cases and illustrating showing proof through facts, not opinion.
  - Provide examples of both satisfactory and inadequate reports for students to use as a basis for their improvement.
  - Explain and illustrate the differences between how the media and pop culture portray forensics compared to an actual career in forensics.
• Regarding meeting employer expectations that students should have real-world experience (internship, practicum, etc.), forensic educators raised a number of challenges, including the following:
  o Fewer opportunities exist.
  o Difficult to place students appropriately.
  o Students early in their college careers are limited because most labs/agencies only want to place juniors and seniors.
  o Employers want an immediate return on their investment.
  o Internships must be mutually beneficial.
  o Employers do not have time to train.
• After raising the above-mentioned challenges forensic educators recommended the following:
  o Schedule practicums that include students observing the scientists/employers without hands-on involvement.
  o Arrange for students to work on quality assurance projects that do not require their involvement in forensics work, but do require them to understand standards and processes.

Overall, there was extensive involvement and agreement by those in attendance regarding the above recommendations and observations. Attendees also affirmed that when educators across different institutions collaborate, new opportunities open up for the students to develop the skills necessary for success in forensics. In addition, to accomplish that, resources need to be expanded, both educationally and professionally, in order to grow these opportunities for students.

At the conclusion of the meeting, forensic educators were advised that the notes from the November 13 meeting would be published and discussed with employers at the 2016 annual meeting. Those attending also were invited to contact the Center if they were interested in serving as members of the Committee on Forensic Higher Education being contemplated by the Center.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Upon consideration of the above, the Center for Forensic Excellence recommends the following:
• Publish the notes from the November 13 meeting to gather input from those that attended both the November 13 and May 15 meeting in order to finalize and issue a report.
• Continue to encourage communication among forensic educators by:
  • Form a committee of interested forensic educators to help guide the Center’s Advisory Committee in addressing forensic higher education challenges and opportunities.
• Invite forensic educators to attend the annual meeting of forensic employers.
  o Offer continuing professional education and training in report writing and testifying.
  o Consider establishing a speaker’s bureau and inviting interested forensics professionals to participate.

In addition, the Advisory Committee is recommending that the Center hold at least one annual meeting for Maryland forensic leaders to collaborate and continue to identify challenges and opportunities.

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1 Attendees were advised about the longstanding Maryland Consortium of Criminal Justice College Educators (MCCJCE) that holds quarterly meetings at the various colleges to exchange ideas, and review articulation agreements, textbooks, assignments and best practices. The Center also has learned that the National Science Foundation has a program (Research Coordinated Networks or RCN) dedicated to establishing networks with all sorts of public, private, industrial and government institutions to promote research, undergraduate education, and career preparation. The link to the program is http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=11691. Of particular interest could be the possibility of incorporating internship stipends into the network grant.
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