

New EWU Program Trains Students to Solve Crimes

By Sarah Coomber



the program is there is nothing else like it in Washington or even the Northwest," said Barry Logan, director of the Forensic Laboratory Services Bureau of the Washington State Patrol. "It's a great opportunity for people in the Northwest."

The State Patrol oversees forensic services for all state law enforcement departments and provides expertise in tasks ranging from responding to crime scenes to shutting down methamphetamine laboratories to analyzing evidence. Currently about 160 employees work in the state's eight forensics laboratories.

"We have a real need to recruit forensic scientists for our system with the

Wearing a white lab coat, Suzanne Bell, associate professor of chemistry, presented the following whodunit scenario to her class:

There was a kidnapping, and the perpetrator left a handwritten ransom note. Several pens were rounded up from suspects and labeled with their names. The students would use a technique called thin-layer chromatography to compare the color qualities of ink taken from the note with inks from the other pens. By the end of class, they would determine whose pen was used to write the note.

Sound more intriguing than the usual chemistry assignment?

Welcome to forensic science, a new emphasis for students pursuing bachelor's degrees in chemistry and biochemistry at Eastern Washington University. The class "Introduction to Forensic Science" debuted spring quarter.

Angie Sanders, a senior from Vancouver, Wash., was among the students taking the introductory course. Graduating in June with a criminal justice major, she said she wished she could have taken more forensic science courses.

"I like puzzles," she said. "I like to pull things apart and find out what happened."

Sanders is looking for work as a crime scene technician. She wants to help determine how and why crimes occur and offer victims' families some closure.

During Bell's ink analysis lab, students took silica gel-coated cards marked with a dot of the unknown ink and added ink

dots from the "suspects'" pens in a horizontal line. Then they placed the cards in beakers containing solvents. As the cards wicked up the solvent, the inks' different components separated out into vertical lines of colors—reds, yellows, greens, blues, violets and black.

"Black is not just black," Bell explained. "It's a wide mix of colors."

The students looked for matches between the inks in a scene of patience and quiet analysis—quite unlike the fast-paced, often danger-filled portrayals of television's crime-solving shows.

"We want to try to dispel some of the myths," said Bell, who—in addition to her doctorate in chemistry—has a master's degree in forensic science and spent three and a half years with the New Mexico State Police Crime Laboratory. Her work there included evidence analysis, crime scene processing and expert testimony in local, state and federal courts. "It's one of those fields that has a lot of glamour associated with it, but the nuts and bolts of the everyday work are quite different."

Students pursuing the forensic science option at Eastern will take lecture and laboratory courses, examine mock crime scenes and hear from guest speakers who work in the field. They will learn how to use advanced instruments and will be introduced to DNA typing and the rigors of courtroom testimony. They also are required to complete an internship in regional laboratories.

Forensic scientists in Washington and Idaho have expressed interest in teaching in the new program.

"One of the important things about



Suzanne Bell, EWU associate professor of chemistry.

state," Logan said.

Forensic science students could be studying in a brand new Washington State Patrol building on Eastern's Cheney campus by 2005, if legislative funding remains on track. The building is intended to relieve congestion in a current forensics facility located in the basement of the Public Safety Building in downtown Spokane.

Already, the State Patrol has been using Eastern's facilities to do DNA typing for the state's felon databank, which catalogs DNA taken from people convicted of violent and sex-related crimes. These DNA profiles can be used to help identify perpetrators of crimes where DNA is left behind.

Bell said Eastern's forensic science program is designed to meet entry-level requirements for local, state and federal forensic science laboratories, which typically require a degree in a natural science with courses in chemistry, biology and physics.

For more information and updates about the Eastern forensic science program and forensic science in general, visit the program web site (chemistry.ewu.edu/forensics/).