Frequently Asked Questions

• **What kind of degree do I need to work in forensic science?**

The most common entry level requirement is a 4-year Bachelor of Science degree in a natural science such as chemistry, biology, geology, or physics. Given the increasing use of automated instrumentation and DNA technology, a solid grounding in analytical chemistry, organic chemistry, biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology is often desired. Scan through some of the job listings to get a better idea of typical entry level requirements ([www.aafs.org](http://www.aafs.org)).

• **What kind of jobs can I expect to find in forensic science?**

There are many options - city, county, or state lab; private labs that specialize in DNA testing (for the most part); and federal agencies such as DEA, ATF, FBI, and even the FDA, which does forensic work on food and pharmaceuticals.

• **How is the job market in forensic science?**

At the moment, the prospects are good and getting better. The biggest push is in the area of DNA typing, and many of these jobs are available at private rather than public (government) entities. A huge backlog of DNA evidence has accumulated and is increasing by the day. Many additional forensic scientists are needed, and are being hired, to tackle this backlog. Even in the traditional forensic specialties (Chemistry, Firearms, Toxicology, etc.), the demand for forensic scientists is quite good. The only "gotcha" to be aware of is the fickle nature of government spending, particularly at the state level. Recessions hit state and local government harder than at the federal level. As a result, some years are good, some not so good. Patience and persistence in the job search, combined with a realistic attitude, flexibility, and an early start, are your best guarantees of success.

• **What kind of salary can I expect to make as an entry level forensic scientist?**

Entry level pay varies based on locations and entity. As a rule of thumb, starting salaries with a B.S. are in the range of $35,000 to $40,000, rising to $60,000 to $70,000 after several years of experience. Browse through the job listings to see what is being offered and remember to take into account the cost of living in the area.

• **What are the job conditions for a typical forensic scientist?**

Conditions are much like any lab position with a few unique aspects. Labs are usually shared, as is the office space. Once you get involved in casework, you will be subpoenaed and will be required to appear in court. These are not flexible and are not changed to meet your needs. Expect to put in extra hours to meet the case work demands. Most labs have "comp time" meaning that you get time off for addition hours worked in lieu of overtime pay.
• Can I work part-time in the field?

Usually there are no part-time positions. It is almost always a full-time job and can involve nights, weekends, and extensive travel. Crime scene work can happen anytime and may require hours or days at a remote site.

• What are the academic requirements for completing a degree (or minor, certificate, etc.) in your department?

EWU’s Forensic Science Program requires a total of 150 credits hours of courses that are heavily concentrated in the natural and physical sciences, and include courses in Chemistry, Physics, Math, and Biology, along with 5 courses that focus on forensic science. To declare Forensics as your program (i.e. option), you must successfully complete 45 credits of a set of specified “core” science courses with a combined GPA of at least 3.0 in those courses. Once those are completed (typically at the end of the 2nd year of study) students can officially enroll in the Forensic Program and proceed with the remaining coursework. More information about the forensic program can be found on line at:
http://www.ewu.edu/cshe/programs/chemistry/forensic-science-program-information

• Why does the EWU forensic science option require so many credit hours of courses?

The curriculum was designed in consultation with the Washington State Patrol and modified to meet the guidelines issued by Forensic Science Education Program Accreditation Commission (FEPAC; fepac-edu.org), in order to provide our graduates with the competitive edge needed for entry level positions in state and federal crime labs.

• How does the internship work?

An internship is a required and important component of our forensic science program, providing our students with a “real-world” forensic science experience. Internships are usually completed during the Summer Quarter between the 3rd and 4th years of study following the completion of our Organic Chemistry series. The WSP and ISP labs have internship slots available in several locations in the Inland Northwest and can accommodate different scheduling requirements. There are other options within the region that will provide valuable laboratory experience that is related to the forensic sciences.

For internship work at a State forensic laboratory, you will be required to complete an internal application that will include transcripts and a written essay. The internships are competitive and will require an excellent academic record and demonstrated skills in basic sciences. You will also be required to pass a background check administered by the agency where you will be stationed.

Upon acceptance, you will be able to register for the internship course, CHEM 495, and discuss an appropriate start time with your internship supervisor. Upon completion, you will be evaluated by the laboratory personnel with whom you worked with, and submit a written summary to your Department’s Forensic Science Advisor. All internships will required the completion of a set of documents which are administered through EWU Career Services (documents and instructions are available on-line at EWU Career Services)

• Can I enter this program as a transfer student?

Yes. If you are currently in a community college, it would be helpful to complete the necessary Math courses which would allow you to enroll in MATH 161 (Calculus I) at EWU, along with any introductory chemistry, biology, and physics courses that you have time for. You should check to insure that all of these science classes will transfer to EWU (Transfer credit information is available on the EWU home page, www.ewu.edu. Follow the various links under the Admissions tab).
• **Can I finish the EWU program in four years?**

This program is NOT included in the "Finish in Four" program, however, it is certainly possible to do so (starting as a freshman). In order to accomplish this in a streamlined fashion, you should be ready to enroll in MATH 161 (Calculus I) in the first Quarter at EWU. If you can't, that will add at least a quarter and probably more to your stay since this math is a pre-requisite/co-requisite for first year chemistry courses. It is also important to complete your forensic internship during the summer between your junior and senior years of study.

• **What percentages of students continue on to graduate school or professional school?**

Approximately 15% of the graduates from the forensic science program have decided to continue their studies to obtain a MS or PhD degree at other universities. Please keep in mind that the forensic program at Eastern and the corresponding four year BS Chemistry-Biochemistry degree does meet the basic entry requirements for employment at State or Federal forensics science laboratories. However, obtaining a higher degree will provide an additional competitive edge in the forensic job market.

• **What types of qualities/characteristics do you see in successful students in your field?**

First and foremost students should have an interest and strong aptitude for math and science. Having an inquisitive nature, good oral and written communication skills, an aptitude to solve “puzzles”, and enjoying lab work are all desirable qualities. However, the job itself frequently requires long hours of lab work and though there are opportunities to assist at crime scenes, it isn’t as glamorous as what is shown on TV. So being willing and comfortable doing relatively routine and often tedious work much of the time is also important. Given the high GPA standards for the program (not to mention the total number of credits needed), it is also necessary to “hit the ground running” so to speak and focus on doing the best you can. I always encourage students to get involved with the forensic science club, becoming a lab TA or course Tutor, and starting a research project early in their 3rd year are all helpful and valuable.

• **What do I need to know about this program that isn't in your brochures?**

There are a few things that I like to point out to students early on in their pursuit of this degree. The first is that given the overall number of credits required to complete this program, it may take longer than 4 years to complete it. Careful schedule planning from the outset is critical to make the most efficient use of your time here. Also a focus on your studies is mandatory from the outset, particularly in light of the 3.0 minimum GPA needed in the initial “core” courses to proceed on with the forensic program. Finally, it is important to note that for employment in law enforcement/forensic science (as well as for most internships within the law enforcement community), it is necessary to pass a thorough background check including a polygraph test. The polygraph test will include questions such as prior drug use. If there is anything questionable in your past or present that will come up in these checks/tests, then all the hard work pursuing this major and career may be for nothing. If you think this is a possibility, then I would encourage you to discuss the matter with your advisor ahead of time before getting too far into the program.

• **Are Criminalistics/Forensic Science and Criminology/ Criminal Justice the same areas of study?**

The media and many members of the public are under the mistaken impression that "Criminalistics" and “Criminology” describe the same field. They are both part of the criminal justice system but the similarity ends there. Criminology is a social science that focuses on the social aspects of crime. People who desire a career as a police officer or in corrections need a background in this field. Criminalistics/Forensic Science is a natural science that applies the principles of chemistry, biology, physics, geology, etc. to legal matters. People who want to work in crime laboratories or in related forensic sciences need a BS degree in one of the natural sciences.
• **I'm only interested in doing crime scene work. Do I still need a science degree?**

Most likely. There is no standard on how agencies or jurisdictions handle crime scene processing and analysis. In some cases, police officers are primarily responsible, but they may require the assistance of forensic scientists in special circumstances (e.g. clandestine lab processing). In most major centers, a special crime scene unit exists that is responsible for processing scenes, documentation, and evidence collection. Other places have an on-call system where laboratory scientists provide assistance at major crime scenes. The latter situation is used by the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab System.

Keep in mind that as the technical demands of evidence collection and documentation increase, the necessary qualifications of crime scene personnel will increase accordingly. Check some of the job listings, looking specifically for crime scene personnel to get a better idea of the job requirements ([www.theiai.org](http://www.theiai.org)). If your goal is primarily crime scene work, it would be best to obtain a Criminal Justice Degree, but to maximize your competitiveness, try to complete a minor in one of the science fields.

• **Is it true that the Washington State Patrol built a new lab on the EWU Campus?**

Indeed it is. The building is located on Washington Street across the street from the EWU Child Care facility and directly behind the WA State Archives Building. The single-story building has about 32,000 square feet of space including a garage facility for search and examination of vehicles. The following forensic specialty areas are housed in the building: Chemistry, Biology/DNA, Trace-evidence, Firearms/Toolmarks, and Questioned Document examinations. EWU students will have the opportunity to contribute to research projects during their Internship course, attend presentations by forensic scientists, and get involved with various activities at the lab if they join the Forensic Science Club.