

Creating, Maintaining and Expanding a High Impact Academic Program

The purpose of higher education is to facilitate student growth and creative thought development with capacity to apply their learning. Interdisciplinary course-work is the most effective strategy to achieve these outcomes. What can we learn from a small HBCU in Savannah, GA with a thriving interdisciplinary forensic science program, in spite of declining institutional enrollment? The forensic science (FSCI) program at Savannah State University (SSU) resides in the Department of Chemistry & Forensic Science. This relatively new BS degree program in forensic science is a four-year program with two concentrations: forensic chemistry and Forensic Biology. The program was approved by the University System of Georgia, Board of Regents in March 2011 and launched in Fall 2011 with an initial enrollment of 6 students. Since then, the program has rapidly grown and, as of Fall 2019, the student enrollment is 103. Additionally, approximately 50% of SSU forensic science graduates (2014-2019) are either in graduate study in the physical and life sciences, employed in a forensic science relevant field or closely related science/technology disciplines.

The forensic science program actively engages in immersive integrative student-centered research, teaching them to integrate resources of several disciplines in problem solving. At the beginning of Fall 2017, the program completed development of the first in the nation, one-of-a-kind, 3-D virtual reality crime scene facility for training undergraduates, sponsored by the US Department of Education, Title III program. Forensic Science students are involved in research scholarship programs funded by the NIH (RISE, NIBIB), NSF(PSLSAMP), DoD and NASA, preparing graduates for careers in biomedical sciences, healthcare, industry, law enforcement, GBI, CIA and FBI.

This program teaches us that our STEM students need to become more resourceful and can overcome unnecessary thought limiting boundaries. We can help our students become creative thinkers as they learn to make connections between multiple disciplines. The forensic science program at SSU is designed to improve student depth of understanding, communication across disciplines, ability to troubleshoot and solve complex problems, as well as to enhance creativity with potential benefits to society. An examination of the inner workings of this program may give us some insights on useful strategies for student success.