

Education in Forensic Anthropology: Appraisal and Outlook

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ABSTRACT: Increases in the awareness and participation of physical anthropologists in forensic investigations have resulted in growing concerns over the training of students with specializations in forensic anthropology. A survey of United States universities shows that forensic anthropologists provide training to large numbers of students in basic osteology and smaller, but still significant numbers of graduates and undergraduates in forensic anthropology. Their work augments that provided by physical anthropologists whose interests lie in osteology and skeletal biology. Discrepancies exist in the course topic content in training provided by these two groups (forensic anthropologists and osteologists) which may have implications for the future, especially if some students are unaware of the legal role and responsibilities of anthropologists in the forensic sciences.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic anthropology, education

The rise of forensic anthropology and its establishment as a field within the forensic sciences over the past 25 years has been well documented (1–3). As forensic anthropology has grown as a discipline, it has attracted many new practitioners and has become more consistently integrated into the investigatory process. With the development of the field, however, forensic anthropologists have also become increasingly aware of the need to develop professional standards to which they hold themselves accountable and by which forensic scientists in other fields, who may call upon their services, can verify their competence.

Forensic anthropology is applied osteology and the application of techniques of skeletal analysis *within the legal context*. Because forensic anthropology incorporates most of the techniques originating with the analysis of human skeletal material from archaeological sites, the two fields have been closely linked. A good forensic anthropologist must, by definition, be a good skeletal biologist. There is frequent interchange of researchers between the fields of archaeological and forensic analysis, with forensic anthropologists working on archaeological skeletal collections and archaeological osteologists taking forensic cases on occasion. This has led to a sentiment within physical anthropology that the two subdisciplines are interchangeable, and that forensic anthropology offers little that cannot be done equally well by an osteologist. Recognition of the unique responsibilities of the forensic anthropologist has been accorded little attention.

Because not all forensic anthropologists are formally trained in

forensic investigation and analysis, we must acknowledge discrepancies in expertise and experience among those who identify themselves as experts in this field. This is, in large part, due to the manner in which the field was established, growing out of the academic fields of osteology and skeletal biology. As individuals within university anthropology departments were called upon by the local law enforcement community to assist in the identification of human skeletal remains, they intermittently provided this service. Many became intrigued by the field and began to focus more exclusively on casework and research with forensic applications. Some who entered the field early established the graduate training programs with a specialization in forensic anthropology which now produce a large portion of the new practitioners. Despite these programs, many practitioners enter the field in the more casual manner characteristic of the initial development of forensic anthropology.

In 1971, 12 physical anthropologists, including some who were already members of the General Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), formed a separate section within the parent organization which focused on the incorporation of anthropological techniques into the repertoire of forensic skills (1,4). The Physical Anthropology Section of the AAFS has since experienced rapid growth particularly within the last ten years. This expansion has included many student members who now form over a quarter of the section membership. Due to the influx of new practitioners, the American Board of Forensic Anthropologists was established in 1977, with the aim to provide a certification program in forensic anthropology (2). The original founders were already established in the field and agreed upon a basic set of qualifications including a doctorate in physical anthropology, prior experience with forensic cases, and involvement with the medicolegal community. New members are required to undertake a rigorous examination which assesses familiarity with the appropriate literature and ability to interpret biological information from skeletal material. As of 1995–96, there were 49 individuals who had been board-certified as forensic anthropologists, all of whom are required to update annually the organization on their professional activities in order to retain their certification. As professional groups, the Physical Anthropology section of the AAFS and the ABFA, must make every effort to include those individuals who have moved, and are moving into the field from avenues outside formal programs. We must endeavor to grant them access to supervision by established forensic anthropologists, experience with cases, and inclusion in the national and regional professional organizations.

The recognition of forensic anthropology has risen, both within the AAFS, through participation and activities of the section members, and with the general public, through the media and through the publication of several popular books by prominent practitioners (5,6). As a result, a relatively high volume of university students

¹Anthropology Board, University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA.

²Anthropology Department, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI.

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at all levels have been drawn to the field. Although several educational programs at doctoral granting institutions have, in the past, provided a solid foundation of specialized training in forensic anthropology, the individuals who headed the programs have recently retired, leaving the future of their programs in question (although moving towards resolution at the time of this writing). The ability of students to access specialized training programs, therefore, has recently become an issue for discussion within the forensic anthropology community (7,8). A second issue of importance to forensic anthropology is the type of training necessary. As a group we must address the requirements of a graduate program in forensic anthropology and form mutual understanding of how these goals may best be achieved. Clearly, some uniformity of curriculum and course content would seem desirable, as would the establishment of guidelines delineating how, when and to what extent students should become involved in casework.

Another area of concern within the disciplines is the rate of production of individuals being trained in established programs and the ability of the market to bear this swift expansion. With the limited market for academic positions within physical anthropology, what other options are available for newly trained individuals? What level of degree is best suited for the jobs? What level of expertise within forensic anthropology should be acquired at each degree and how is this to be defined and measured? Once trained, these individuals must incorporate themselves into already existing organizations, thus allowing them to gain both breadth and depth of experiences, and to expand their knowledge of the field. Continued participation at regional and national levels allows researchers and practitioners to exchange information and stimulate concern over professional competence.

The impetus for this paper grew out of two forums of discussion about the future of forensic anthropology (7,8) instigated by the authors and others out of concern for the direction of the discipline. These forums attempted to assess the type of forensic anthropology education received during formal and informal study among practitioners of the field at different levels: entry-level graduate students, new Ph.D.s and professors. From the sharing of background information, perceived strengths and weaknesses of training and anticipating potential advances, some areas of concern were raised. An overview, however, of the full range of training possibilities was lacking. The present survey was designed to sample formally a broader group of individuals than had participated in these AAFS meetings. Our goal was to provide an up-to-date assessment of university education programs within field of forensic anthropology with regard to course offerings and content and their level of standardization. To assess the rate of production of individuals who might claim formal forensic anthropology training, we also were interested in providing information regarding the frequency of course offerings and the numbers of students completing courses on a yearly basis. In addition, we hoped to compile information on the individuals teaching the courses, namely how they themselves had been trained, their professional identifications and affiliations, and their ties to the formal organizations of the forensic science community. From such an assessment, we may better evaluate both the current status of the field and the future directions toward which we must strive to provide the best possible education opportunities for students.

A Survey of Education in Forensic Anthropology

To present some concrete assessments of the current status of training in forensic anthropology, the authors prepared and distributed a survey to physical anthropologists involved in human osteology, skeletal biology, or forensic anthropology. This survey sample

was drawn from the 1995–6 American Anthropological Association Guide to Departments of Anthropology (9) which lists most of the departments of anthropology or sociology/anthropology in the United States, Canada, and in Europe. This compendium includes a departmentally supplied listing of its faculty, both teaching and research, along with their highest degree, academic rank, and a brief description of their individual research interests.

Data derived from this listing were used to generate a comparison of those faculty who specify a forensic anthropological focus with those whose interests lie in the broader areas of skeletal research. All teaching faculty were included in the survey sample who listed as an area of specialization either: 1) forensic anthropology, 2) osteology, or 3) skeletal biology. Those listing multiple interests were placed within the forensic anthropologists in preference to their identification as osteologists or skeletal biologists. Those who identified themselves only as either osteologists or skeletal biologists were grouped together. In a few cases, multiple individuals with these specified interests are listed at a single institution. Not included in this sample were: 1) faculty who teach physical anthropology outside of departments of anthropology such as in evolutionary biology, biological sciences, or life sciences; 2) faculty who may cover these topics at the community college level; and 3) faculty whose primary affiliation is with a research institution but who may teach occasionally.

The survey addressed: 1) the number of students trained in osteology and forensic anthropology; 2) the subject matter of this training; 3) the case participation of the instructor; and, 4) the training received by the instructor (Appendix A). Responses were obtained from 32 of the 53 forensic anthropologists (60%) to whom the survey was sent and from 38 of the 82 osteologists and skeletal biologists (46%).

Profiles of Forensic Anthropologists and Osteologists/Skeletal Biologists

A comparison of the teaching faculty who identify themselves as either forensic anthropologists or osteologists/skeletal biologists reveals some interesting contrasts (Fig. 1). Forensic anthropologists are heavily represented by full professors or assistant professors with only 7% at the associate level. The osteologists/skeletal biologists are much more evenly distributed throughout the range with

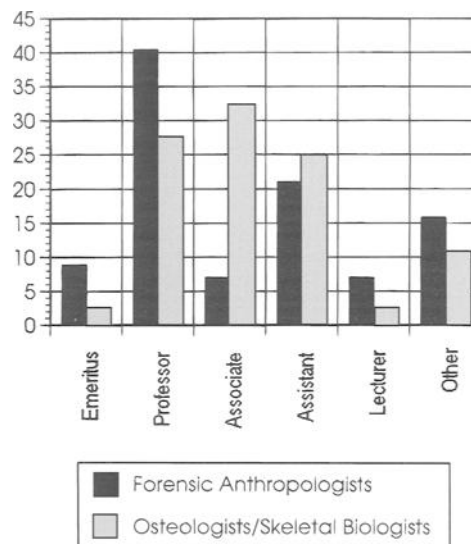


FIG. 1—Percentage of faculty by rank by those who identify themselves as forensic anthropologists and as osteologists or skeletal biologists.

25–32% at full, associate, and assistant levels. The forensic anthropologist category also includes five of retired faculty (8.8%) compared to only two emeritus professors among the osteologists/skeletal biologists (2.4%). It is likely that this number has drastically increased since the printing of the 1995–96 AAA Guide as it is known that several additional full professors in forensic anthropology chose retirement within the past academic year.

The implications of this situation are that many of the graduate programs that have been responsible for training the future generation of forensic anthropologists face an uncertain future. Assistant professors may be in less stable situations, more prone to moving to new locations, or may face political situations within departments which preclude establishment of new graduate programs focusing on applied anthropology. Non-tenure track faculty also are slightly greater among the forensic anthropology group with almost 23% employed as lecturers, instructors, or other adjunct or temporary positions. In contrast, only about 13% of the osteologists/skeletal biologists rank in these categories.

Among the forensic anthropologists, those at the professor rank are evenly distributed between departments providing Bachelor, Master, or Doctoral degrees whereas only one associate professor and two assistant professors teach in doctoral-granting departments. Non-tenure tracked faculty in this field are concentrated in institutions which grant Master's degrees as their highest academic training. Osteologists are found relatively evenly at all three levels, but the non-ladder ranked faculty are primarily at institutions which grant Bachelor's degrees only. This finding supports the earlier suggestion that forensic anthropologists are less well positioned within the academic community to establish new graduate programs due to institutional limitations.

The distribution of degrees among the teaching faculty is similar between the two groups (Fig. 2). The vast majority of both groups hold doctoral degrees with relatively minor numbers (slightly higher in forensic anthropology) holding masters degrees.

Membership in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences differs radically between the two groups. Although 70% of those identified as forensic anthropologists are members at some level as identified by the 1995 AAFS membership guide (10), with 35% of the total group being fellows of the AAFS, only 9.5% of the osteologists are members of AAFS. In a similar contrast, 36.8% of the forensic anthropologists are board-certified, whereas only

4.8% of the osteologists or skeletal biologists have received certification.

Annual Production of Students in Osteology and Forensic Anthropology

One of the aims of the survey was to estimate the minimum number of students produced each year who can claim formal training in osteology and forensic anthropology at some level. In order to accomplish this, we began by estimating the average enrollment in both subjects from information supplied by the survey respondents (Table 1). We then determined which proportion of respondents taught in these areas. Using this percentage, the total number of faculty listing forensic anthropology, osteology, or skeletal biology as their area of interest, and an estimate of the average annual class size and an estimate of the annual production could be made for all forensic anthropologists and osteologists.

Forensic anthropologists are estimated to be responsible for training approximately 879 undergraduate students annually in osteology, while the osteologists/skeletal biologists produce an additional 763 undergraduates. This means that an estimated minimum of 1642 undergraduates are trained each year in the identification of human skeletal material. Graduate training is also substantial, with forensic anthropologists training an average of 148 students annually and osteologists training 118, yielding an estimated yearly production of at least 266 students at the graduate level who are equipped to provide osteological analysis.

The number of students trained with a focus in forensic anthropology is substantially less, but still impressive. By our estimates, forensic anthropologists train an average of 616 undergraduates and 129 graduates. The osteologists and skeletal biologists train an additional 70 undergraduates and 77 graduates. This means that a total of 686 undergraduates and 206 graduates annually may claim some formal training in the techniques of forensic anthropology beyond basic knowledge of the human skeleton.

These survey results will obviously underestimate the total number of people who annually receive some training. Not included in this estimate are students at community colleges, some of which offer classes in osteology or forensic anthropology. In addition, there are a number of two-week or shorter courses offered in forensic anthropology by museums, medical examiners offices, and private institutions and universities. Many death investigation courses provided for law enforcement personnel also include a component on forensic anthropology. With these additional possible avenues in which one can receive some exposure to forensic anthropology, it is possible that the number who potentially could

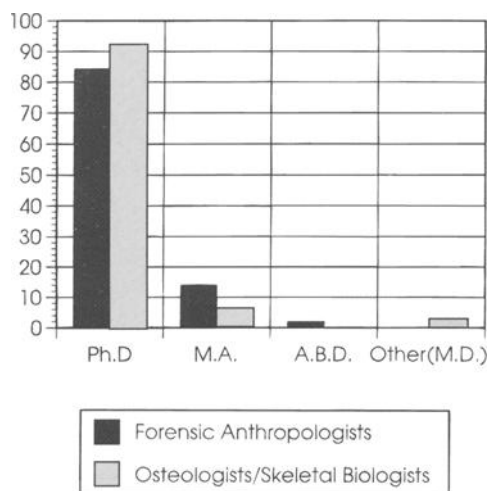


FIG. 2—Highest degree achieved by faculty who identify themselves as either forensic anthropologists or as osteologists/skeletal biologists.

TABLE 1—The average number of students per course per year with some training in osteology and in forensic anthropology and the percentage of faculty conducting courses in these areas (in parentheses) by those who identify themselves as forensic anthropologists and as osteologists or skeletal biologists.

	Forensic Anthropologists		Osteologists and Skeletal Biologists	
	Osteology	Forensic Anthropology	Osteology	Forensic Anthropology
Undergraduates	22.8 (67.6%)	16.7 (64.6%)	10.5 (86.5%)	7.7 (10.8%)
Graduates	5.9 (44.0%)	6.4 (35.3%)	2.9 (48.6%)	8.5 (10.8%)

claim training in forensic anthropology is double that of the above estimates.

Course Content Covered by Forensic Anthropologists and Osteologists/Skeletal Biologists

The survey attempted to assess the course content offered by the forensic anthropologists and osteologists/skeletal biologists. There was a slight difference in questionnaires provided to these two groups, because content in forensic anthropology courses only was requested from the forensic anthropologists, whereas content in either osteology or forensic courses was requested from those identifying as osteologists/skeletal biologists.

Contrasts were expected in the extent of course content overlap between these two groups, as instructors are preparing students to work on different material, provide different types of information, and meet very different levels of supportability. For example, speculation concerning the etiology of a particular skeletal condition is often encouraged on an archaeological specimen, although it may be more hazardous to the reputation of the anthropologist in the forensic setting. Assessments based on minimal circumstantial evidence on archaeological material may be criticized by one's colleagues, but is unlikely to result in impeachment as it may in a forensic case.

The content of courses offered by physical anthropologists who work with human skeletal material can be grouped into three broad categories. The first group is the production of a biological profile of the individual. This includes assessments of sex, age at death, ancestry, and stature. The second category involves the special needs of law enforcement in interpretation of the crime scene and in establishing positive identification. These would include crime scene recovery techniques, estimation of postmortem interval, use of facial approximation (reconstruction), skull/photo superimposition, and the production of reports from actual skeletal cases. The third group focuses on the role that forensic anthropology plays within the medicolegal community. This set of topics includes legal and ethical considerations, public relations, court testimony, and the qualifications of the expert witness.

Due to differences in the survey forms, forensic anthropologists appear to discuss some categories of basic biological profile development to a lesser extent than does the other group (Fig. 3). It is likely that these topics are covered in osteology courses by the former group of instructors. With this caveat, there appears relatively equal coverage between the two groups. This comparison, however, masks the within group differences in coverage which reveals that ancestry or "race" assessment is less likely to be discussed by the osteologists/skeletal biologists. Among forensic anthropologists, discussion of ancestry is equivalent to that of sex and age, and differences between the groups most likely reflect coverage of this topic in osteology courses by the forensic instructors. Stature estimation appears to be a relatively safe category, receiving high levels of coverage by all groups.

Specialized techniques, such as the use of histological analysis or discriminant function analyses as those available on FORDISC (11) as well as the older forms (12), are discussed to a much lower extent by both groups than are the broader topics which often rely on nonmetric, morphological techniques. This may reflect a reluctance to discuss unfamiliar techniques, or an inability to provide laboratory and classroom equipment necessary to provide instruction of these techniques to a larger group of students.

The second course content category starts to reveal the extent of differences in training. With only one exception, presentation

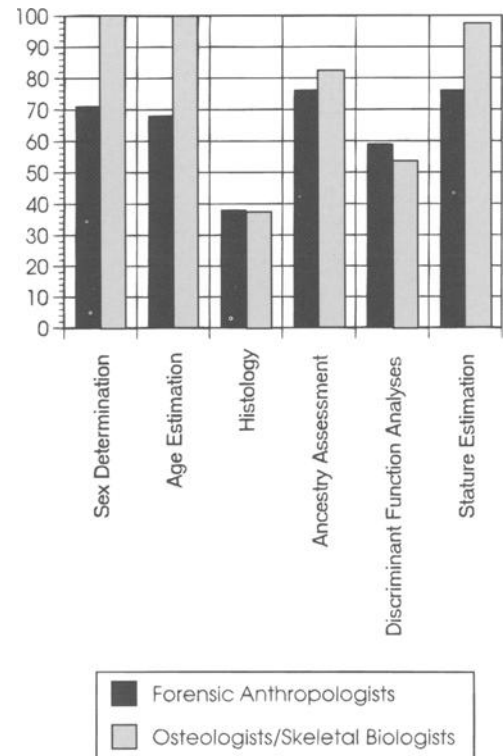


FIG. 3—Comparison of the percentage of instructors covering specific topics of applicable to forensic anthropology in determining the biological profile.

of material in the areas of scene investigatory techniques and personal identification is significantly less among the osteologists/skeletal biologists (Fig. 4). The single exception is the use of actual cases from which written reports are generated. It cannot be documented in this survey whether or not these "cases" are forensic or archaeological in origin, but this does demonstrate that all those who work with skeletal material are committed to the use of real bones rather than casts or computer simulations in instruction.

The final grouping provides an interesting mix in the levels of coverage (Fig. 5). In general, the forensic anthropologists provide much greater educational opportunities in these areas with specific emphasis on the legal aspects of the discipline, including responsibilities, court testimony, and qualification as an expert witness. Both groups have relatively high levels of discussion on the topic of ethics, although this may, for the osteologists/skeletal biologists, relate more to reburial/repatriation issues and the public display of human skeletal material rather than to problems of disclosure, conflict of interest, and inclusion of personal information in public presentations.

Both groups were remarkably low in two areas. One is that of public relations. Because physical anthropology has recently experienced a series of crises in terms of public image, especially with regards to the study, curation and display of human skeletal material, this is particularly distressing. A perceived lack of respect for the dead by the scientific community is partly responsible for enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which facilitates return of many of the large archaeological collections of human skeletal material and associated grave goods currently held by universities and museums to tribal control for reburial or separate curation.

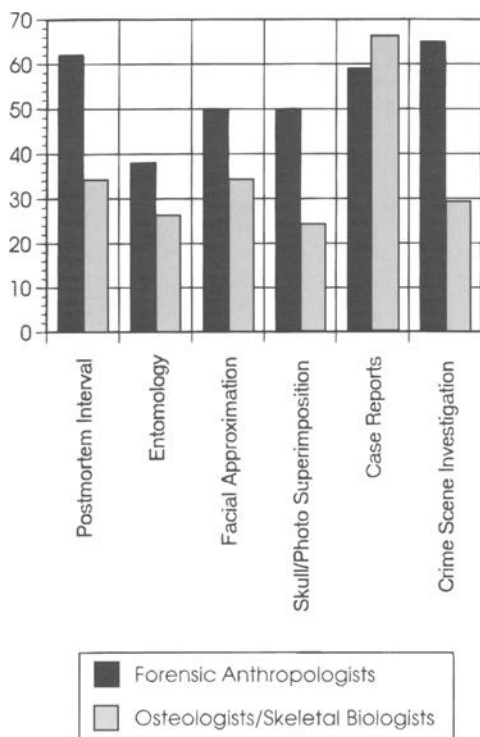


FIG. 4—Comparison of the percentage of instructors covering specific topics of applicable to forensic anthropology in assessing the crime scene and personal identification.

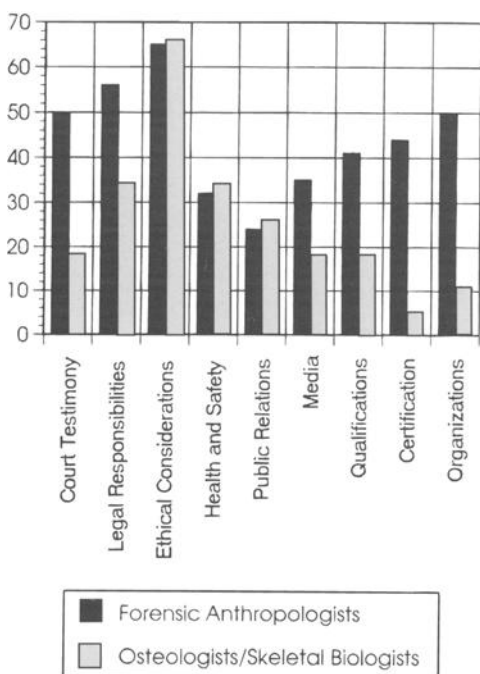


FIG. 5—Comparison of the percentage of instructors covering specific topics of applicable to forensic anthropology in the role of forensic anthropology in the medicolegal setting.

The other area is of even greater concern with regard to the training of students because it deals with the issues of health and safety. In general, the handling of skeletal material from archaeological situations has been regarded as generally safe, although there are the dangers usually associated with archaeological experience such as exposure to fungal infections. In sharp contrast, forensic cases may bring with them a host of infectious agents, the presence of which is largely undetermined at the time of exposure. The use of universal precautions needs to be emphasized along with preparation in the form of vaccinations and established procedures in the event of exposure. Lack of training potentially will increase the risk of disease among students. This situation could have drastic consequences in terms of the willingness of academic institutions to support forensic training.

Participation in Forensic Casework

The final aspect of the survey on case participation provided some rather troubling information in terms of the current state of forensic involvement. The vast majority (94%) of those who identify as forensic anthropologists are actively participating in case work. Of these, 75% also involve students in these experiences, providing them with exposure to actual cases in the field and laboratory as well as preparing them to handle the difficulties of encountering human remains in various stages of preservation.

Sixty-five percent of the osteologists/skeletal biologists also are actively involved in forensic case work. Of these 67% also involve students. Although this is commendable, it must be viewed in the light of the previous information that less than 10% of this group are AAFS members and less than 5% are board-certified. Fifty-eight percent of these who are conducting case work do not have the benefit of formal training or formal affiliation in forensic sciences. Although their forensic work may be of high quality, it also seems to exist outside the most current exchange of information about new techniques, limitations on old techniques, and the implications of a changing legal environment. These individuals are also less likely to be exposed to any assessment of their work provided by AAFS through review of case reports at the time of application and promotion, or through the certification application process and examination of the A.B.F.A.

Discussion and Conclusions

Given the variety of training formats and content as revealed by this survey, questions must arise about comparability, which in turn, give rise to questions regarding the definition of a "forensic anthropologist." This may eventually have consequences in the judicial arena regarding the awarding of expert witness status. Although the survey addressed the educational foci within forensic anthropology, it did not attempt to confront the larger issue of "self-identification" within the field. Most forensic anthropologists have, at some point in their careers, personally encountered individual "graduates" of various training experiences who claim to be forensic anthropologists. These individuals may ingratiate themselves into the medicolegal community by offering assistance to the medical examiners, for example, whenever the discovery of a set of human remains is made public. They have been known to mail out letters offering their services to local law enforcement agencies along with business cards which profess their status as forensic anthropologists. Although the Physical Anthropology Section members of the AAFS and others with doctorates in the field would certainly not consider these individuals to possess adequate training in forensic anthropology, this is not the issue. The issue

is that, having completed a course in osteology or forensic anthropology, either as part of a degree program or in a workshop format, these individuals consider themselves to be trained and advertise themselves as such.

This is certainly cause for great concern not only among the section members of the AAFS, but for other forensic scientists, attorneys, judges, etc. who are dependent upon forensic anthropologists in court. It is hoped that individuals without extensive doctoral level coursework and experience in forensic anthropology would not be awarded expert witness status in any court. As ABFA certification increases among Section members, a network of qualified individuals is being formed. However, the ABFA certification is not yet required of all practicing members of the section, and, as there are no licensing standards nor advertising regulations for forensic anthropologists in each state, those who have been "trained" (to whatever degree) can continue to "practice". Thus, at present, the issue of training large numbers of students without proper caution and regard for the implications of misrepresentation must be re-examined. We certainly feel that all forensic anthropology courses should minimally contain a discussion of the certification process, legal responsibilities, and ethics.

This overview of the current status of forensic anthropology sheds light on a number of important goals for our profession. First, as a scientific community, we must work to broaden our Section's membership, targeting those osteologists and skeletal biologists who have active interests in this area but who may be unaware of the Academy or disinclined to participate. Second, we must work with the medicolegal community and agencies which are aiming for some standardization of techniques to develop awareness of the minimum acceptable levels of forensic anthropological training. Third, we must be more willing to develop mechanisms through which we can aggressively monitor the quality of forensic anthropological casework and training. This will be a difficult task which may be in opposition to a faculty commitment to "academic freedom". Finally, and most importantly, we need to strive together to design a workable system for providing superior training for an optimal number of students for whom employment in either academic or medicolegal settings is likely. We need to develop an integrated system whereby those regions where there is a high caseload matched with programs which can provide the academic training. An established network of internships and postdoctoral programs could supplement the academic portions of formal study. These could target not only those students produced by programs specializing in forensic anthropology, but also provide the needed exposure to forensic casework for students whose programs are restricted to archaeological skeletal analysis. Similarly, such programs could serve as sabbatical programs for osteologists who wish to move into forensic work in their local area.

In summary, the members of the Physical Anthropology Section of the AAFS and the ABFA can ignore neither the growth of the discipline in popularity and recognition nor the growth in numbers of potential practitioners. The future of the discipline is dependent upon establishing further standards and guidelines for training and status beyond those that are currently in place.

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Additional information and reprint requests:

Alison Galloway, Ph.D.
Social Science One
University of California
Santa Cruz, CA 95064

Appendix A - Survey Questions

1. Do you teach human osteology? Y N
If so, how often? _____
Average class size?
Undergraduates _____
Graduates _____
2. Do you teach a separate course or courses in forensic anthropology? Y N
If so, how often? _____
Average class size?
Undergraduates _____
Graduates _____
3. If you teach a separate course or courses in forensic anthropology, please check which of the following areas you cover.
(Osteologists/skeletal biologists - When teaching either osteology or forensic anthropology, please check which of the following areas you cover.)
Sex determination _____
Age determination _____
Histological techniques _____
Ancestry or race determination _____
Discriminant functions _____
Stature estimation _____
Interval since death _____
Entomology _____
Facial reconstruction _____
Skull/photo superimposition _____
Case reports on actual cases _____
Crime scene techniques _____
Legal responsibilities _____
Ethical issues _____
Health and safety concerns _____
Public relations _____
Media interactions _____
Court testimony and depositions _____
Qualifications _____
Professional affiliations _____
Certification _____
4. Do you participate in forensic anthropological case work? Y N
Do you include students in this work? Y N
5. Do you offer a graduate program in forensic anthropology? Y N
In last 10 years:
Number of MA theses in forensic anthropology _____
Number of PhD dissertation in forensic anthropology _____
Number of students who have gone on to work in forensics _____
6. Was forensic anthropology part of your formal training in graduate school? Y N