

EDITORIAL

What Good is a College Degree for an FDE?

Frederick H. Panhorst

Forensic Document Examiner, United States Army Criminal Investigation Laboratory, 4553 N. 2nd Street, Forest Park, GA 30297-5122

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Every few years, various organizations that require a forensic document examiner (FDE) to have a baccalaureate degree, are asked to open a membership window for those who otherwise meet the requirements, but lack the "sheepskin." Sometimes an individual is approached individually (as I have as a Director of the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners) and sometimes it is a proposal at a meeting. It often seems like a request that doesn't want to go away. It also applies to laboratories where there is a vacancy for an FDE. Management will inquire why a degree is required when you cannot receive a degree in forensic document examination from a university. Wouldn't it be cheaper to hire someone without a degree? Having been a supervisor of a forensic document unit, I faced that question every time there was a vacancy in the unit. It becomes a continuing effort to maintain the entrance requirements for FDE's without lowering the "bar."

I haven't heard any arguments to waive the degree requirement that I can support, to include those seeking to acknowledge the hard work and achievements of those practicing FDE's who lack a degree. I know FDEs without degrees who are better than some FDEs with degrees. However, I remain adamantly opposed to lowering the "degree requirement" standard, even for a short time. The same applies to trainees in the FDE field. Allowing non-degreed individuals to train does more harm than good to the FDE discipline. Anyone who has entered the field since the founding of the American Board of Forensic Document

Examiners (c. 1977) knows that a degree is required to become a Diplomate. There was a "window" of time when FDE's lacking a college degree, but meeting all other requirements, were allowed to become Diplomates. This period of "grandfathering" certain Diplomates closed in the early 1980s. Since then, a prospective Diplomate has been required to meet all of the requirements to become a Diplomate. The proliferation and availability of institutions that offer programs for non-traditional students precludes someone from saying that they have not had the opportunity to obtain a college education. They have chosen not to avail themselves of the opportunities available.

We are a profession. One thing that many people consider a hallmark of a profession is an acquired college degree. Webster's defines profession as "an occupation or vocation requiring training in the liberal arts or the sciences and advanced study in a specialized field." We continually argue that to be an FDE you must have at least two years of study in a recognized forensic document laboratory. This meets the requirement for the specialized training, but before that there is the requirement for "training in the liberal arts or sciences." Thus to meet the requirement of being a profession, there is the requirement for some type of formal college education.

With the many *Daubert* challenges to our profession, it would seem ludicrous to step back from these established standards that have been in place for a great many years. Rather than lowering the standard, we should be raising the requirements to become a professional forensic document examiner.

If you concede the requirement for a college degree to become a FDE, the logical question is, beyond the public's expectation that a professional has a college degree, what good is it? To the best

of my knowledge, there is currently no institute of higher learning where one can obtain a Bachelor of Arts or Sciences in Forensic Document Examination. (I am aware that there are some colleges that are looking at a program that will at least include some courses on forensic document examination, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.) But what does the undergraduate degree provide the novice examiner?

I will now have to digress a few years to when my youngest son was exploring the possibility of college. On a lovely fall afternoon in 1993, we visited the University of Evansville. For what felt like the umpteenth time, I was listening to an admissions officer extol the virtues of my son and money attending his institution. Suddenly, I found myself listening. He said that regardless of where you went to college, regardless of what you studied, there were certain fundamental skills that you should obtain or you had wasted your money. These were: the ability to express one's self, both orally and in writing; the ability to logically organize and solve complex problems; the ability to think critically; and the ability to place things in the proper context.

As I have had the opportunity over the years to train individuals as forensic document examiners, I keep coming back to these skills and seeing that they are fundamental and have a great deal of application to the profession of forensic document examination. It doesn't matter what your profession is, whether it be doctor, nurse, engineer, teacher or whatever, you have a requirement for certain basic skills in order to succeed in your specialized training. If you look at most any college program, the first year and even into a part of the second year, the majority of students take, essentially, the same core curriculum subjects. Some math and science, some social sciences, speech and English, history and others. They are interspersed with other subjects, but many times it is hard to determine what the student's major is, even into the second half of their sophomore year. The students are all learning basic skills, fundamental to all endeavors. Specifically then, how do they apply to forensic document examination?

The ability to express one's self, both orally and in writing, seems almost so basic as to not need explanation. Whatever your profession is, if you cannot convey your thoughts and findings to another person, they are not worth much. A doctor who cannot tell the patient the diagnosis and treatment in terms that the patient can under-

stand and utilize, might as well have not done the examination. The patient will fail to follow the treatment plan due to a lack of understanding. The engineer who cannot tell the construction worker how the building goes together will end up with a building that will fail. The FDE who cannot convey his/her findings and how they were achieved to the investigator and judicial body will not serve justice by failing to provide the information needed to arrive at a proper conclusion.

An aspect of a military court-martial is that the panel (jury) can ask questions of witnesses to clarify facts not clearly expressed. I still find myself, on occasion, being asked to clarify things I thought I had clearly explained. Expressing one's self in terms that the layperson cannot clearly understand is a fault of many professionals. The use of jargon and unfamiliar terms only serves to confuse, not inform. Compounding this with an inability to clearly express one's self in common usage English only exacerbates the problem. Effective communication is a skill that requires constant work and review.

The ability to logically organize and solve complex problems is slightly different. Many times an FDE is presented with a single signature and one individual's known handwriting for comparison. Conversely, there are cases that have multiple examination requests (i.e., handwriting comparisons, printing processes, ink examinations, etc.) on hundreds of questioned documents with numerous individuals or sources involved. Sometimes it seems that a majority of the FDE's examination time is spent organizing the documents so that they may be systematically examined. The ability to make sense out of chaos is inextricably found in many aspects of the FDE's work. Logical organization will often reveal patterns that lead to the proper conclusion in solving complex problems.

Thinking critically is a more subtle, but no less important, attribute of a competent FDE. Even when a submitter of evidence has an established track record with me, I question everything they say. How many times is the "suspect" proven to have not done something by the FDE? Periodically a submitter presents documents that the "suspect" has confessed to writing in front of witnesses and the FDE proves conclusively that someone else has written the document? While I was with the Indiana State Police, a fellow FDE was presented with a prescription that the "suspect" had been charged with making (writing). The FDE only had to prove this authorship; after

all, the "suspect" had been arrested passing the prescription. However the FDE eliminated the "suspect" as having written the prescription. A routine check of latent prints found on the document through AFIS (the first AFIS "hit" for the Indiana State Police) revealed the prints of another individual. This individual's handwriting was on file from a previous case. He was subsequently identified as having written the prescription. The first individual had been charged with "making" the prescription (which he didn't) when he should have been charged with "uttering" (passing) the prescription (which he did). Acceptance of unproven facts at face value is the opposite of what is desired in the FDE. He/she must have an inquisitive nature that says "prove it." They must continually think critically of everything presented. Are known standards the handwriting of one individual or several? Is the questioned handwriting all by one person? Are the facts presented by the submitter facts or just intuitive deductions?

Placing things in the proper context is even more difficult to understand. Look at the O.J. Simpson case of almost a decade ago (I recently heard this referred to as the "O.J. Circus"). It was a California case concluded at the trial court level. There were no appellate rulings to affect California or any other jurisdiction. Technically, the case had no legal impact on the judicial system. But few cases have had such widespread impact on the public's perception of what forensic scientists do right and wrong. Shortly after that case, at a grand jury hearing, I was asked about the chain-of-custody regarding some documents. Fortunately, the prosecutor explained the different requirements for chain-of-custody for different types of evidence and when it should be considered an issue. This jurist had certain expectations of what a forensic scientist should be doing from his television knowledge of the forensics and I had disregarded what was happening outside of my sphere of responsibility. (I now take the information I have on the chain-of-custody with me to every hearing.) How often in ASCLD/LAB accredited laboratories do you hear complaints about DNA being the "tail that wags the dog?" What have television shows such as CBS' "C.S.I." done to the public's perception of how forensic scientists perform their jobs? Understanding the context of events outside your discipline is essential to being a successful FDE.

So what good is a college degree for an FDE? I believe that in today's complex, evolving world it is essential for the FDE to obtain those fundamen-

tal skills offered by a college degree: the ability to express one's self, both orally and in writing; the ability to logically organize and solve complex problems; the ability to think critically; and, the ability to place things in the proper context. These fundamental skills provide a sound basis for all endeavors. The acquisition of a college degree provides a benchmark against which an FDE is evaluated. I remain opposed to lowering the bar with regards to the requirement for a college degree.