

# Collaboration is key to the success of ASU's forensic school, director says

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News  
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The field of forensic science has expanded rapidly over the past decade, with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projecting a 14% growth in employment in this area over the next 10 years.

Arizona State University has responded to that growth by offering classes in forensic science as far back as 2014, and then establishing the [School of Interdisciplinary Forensics](#) on the [West Valley campus](#) in 2023.

Researchers in the school study everything from bones and decomposing bodies to bullet shells and shattered glass — using their findings to help law enforcement solve crimes.

Disciplines offered include forensic biology, forensic chemistry, forensic psychology, forensic cyberscience, forensic anthropology, forensic entomology and more.

All of this work has combined to make ASU's program the only one of its kind in the nation.

"We are the only school of interdisciplinary forensics in the country," said [Hank Fradella](#), the school's newly appointed director. "As such, I envision SIF becoming a national model for how to integrate scientific, psychological and legal perspectives into a coherent and unified approach to justice."

Fradella, a criminologist and legal scholar, brings deep expertise in both law and behavioral science to his new role. He came to ASU in 2014 and became the associate director of the [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) before coming to the School of Interdisciplinary Forensics this year.

Here, he shares his plans for further expanding the program and how ASU gives students an edge in the ever-evolving field of forensic science.

*Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.*

**Q: SIF has already grown tremendously in its offerings since being established in 2023, and plans are underway for further interdisciplinary forensic programs. What will that look like?**

**A:** We are expanding in many directions, such as digital forensics, and developing new programs in wildlife forensics and humanitarian forensics.

We anticipate partnerships with many other units at ASU, including the [John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering](#) on ventures related to forensic pathology; the [School of Human Evaluation and Social Change](#) on a forensic anthropology program; the [W. P. Carey School of Business](#) on investigation of fraud; the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#) on the role that wildlife forensics plays in environmental conservation and Indigenous rights protection; the [Fulton Schools of Engineering](#) on designing and validating analytical instruments, digital imaging systems and AI-enabled forensic tools; and the [psychology department](#) to help address the shortage of qualified forensic psychologists in Arizona.

But these are just some examples. The possibilities are endless since nearly every discipline has potential forensic applications.

**Q: How does ASU's interdisciplinary approach give students and researchers an edge in the evolving field of forensic science?**

**A:** One of ASU's key strengths is its ability to bridge disciplines, and that is especially critical in forensic education and practice. The most complex problems in justice — whether related to wrongful convictions, digital evidence or human rights investigations — cannot be solved within a single academic silo. At SIF, students learn to think across boundaries, integrating scientific rigor with legal reasoning, ethical awareness and technological literacy.

That breadth prepares graduates not just to enter the workforce, but to lead it — to design new systems, shape policy and adapt to technologies that don't even exist yet. It's that integrative mindset that gives ASU graduates a distinct edge.

**Q: What opportunities exist for students to engage in real-world forensic research?**

**A:** One of the hallmarks of SIF is our commitment to experiential learning. Through internships in crime laboratories and programs like our developing Cold Case Lab, students work directly with law enforcement agencies, advocacy groups and partners across Arizona to apply forensic science, data analytics and investigative reasoning in ways that have tangible impact on real families and communities.

Beyond Arizona, our students engage globally through the Humanitarian Forensics and Wildlife Forensics programs. Both include opportunities for international fieldwork and policy research.

We are also expanding into the virtual world by pursuing simulation-based learning with [Dreamscape Learn](#) so that students can navigate immersive forensic scenarios. These hands-on experiences would not be peripheral to our students' education, but rather would be central to preparing the next generation of forensic professionals.

## **The school's growth is not just about size; it's about influence and impact on the justice system.**

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**Hank Fradella**

Director, School of Interdisciplinary Forensics

**Q: What do you think makes ASU uniquely positioned to lead the nation in the field of interdisciplinary forensics?**

**A:** ASU's scale, structure and mission make it uniquely suited to lead in this field. Unlike traditional universities organized around narrow disciplinary units, ASU's transdisciplinary model encourages collaboration. That's precisely the kind of environment needed to advance modern forensic science, where issues of science, technology, human behavior and law are deeply interconnected.

ASU also has a universitywide commitment to access and innovation. That means we are not only advancing forensic science at the theoretical level but also ensuring that knowledge is applied in service to society.

Our partnerships with state agencies, the courts and international organizations exemplify how ASU brings science to bear on real-world justice issues. That combination of intellectual breadth, institutional agility and social purpose sets ASU — and SIF — apart nationally.

**Q: What are some of the most promising AI-driven tools or methods you see reshaping forensic investigations in the next few years?**

**A:** Deep learning algorithms are already improving the precision of DNA mixture interpretation, which is one of the field's most persistent challenges. AI systems in digital forensics are automating the recovery and triage of massive datasets from mobile devices and cloud environments. Emerging applications such as AI-assisted 3D modeling in crime scene reconstruction and natural language processing for threat analysis or authorship attribution are also gaining traction, offering investigators new ways to extract meaning from complex evidence.

**Q: As the school's new director, what is your vision for its growth over the next five years?**

**A:** This year, our faculty is creating a five-year strategic plan that outlines new degrees in interdisciplinary forensics built around the indisputable premise that the future of forensic practice depends not only on collaboration across disciplines, but also between academe and both public sector agencies and private industry.

For instance, [Sreetharan Kanthaswamy](#) is spearheading several new projects under what we call the Arizona Forensic Science Initiative. Through it, we will expand our partnerships with agencies, labs, researchers and institutions around the world.

Equally important, we are investing in research infrastructure that allows faculty and students to work on applied problems with real impact. Whether through a Cold Case Lab that [Lauren Weidner](#) is developing or the partnerships with the Arizona Supreme Court that [Karey O'Hara](#) and [Cortney Simmons](#) are leading, SIF continues to connect classroom learning with global practice. The school's growth is not just about size; it's about influence and impact on the justice system.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Forensic science major Amanda Brasch (left) teaches West Valley Open Door attendees about methods for detecting blood at a crime scene on Feb. 8. Photo by Chris Goulet/Arizona State University

## Text image(s)



Hank Fradella