Message from the Director

Now that autumn is finally upon us, it’s a perfect time to send out a fall newsletter and program update. I hope everyone is welcoming the change of seasons and the beauty it brings with it. Just as the leaves around Happy Valley are about to begin turning their vibrant fall colors, so too has the Forensic Science Program experienced some changes in the recent months. We said goodbye to Mr. Stewart Hung, who decided to move on to pursue other opportunities, and to Ms. Jessica Hovingh, who is now pursuing a doctoral degree in Forensic Science. However, we have had the pleasure of welcoming Mrs. Rebekah Jensen, who is joining us as an instructional laboratory teaching assistant and who is also serving as primary instructor for FRNSC 413 this fall and spring. Additionally, Dr. Jennifer McElhoe has taken on some additional teaching responsibilities with the program. A search for one new faculty member is also currently under way.

Our undergraduate and graduate programs are thriving. We now have the largest number of students in the major that we have ever had in the history of the program. In May, we were fortunate to have 36 students graduate with a BS from our undergraduate program, as well as 3 from our MPS program. This fall, we’ve welcomed a new first year class of 7 graduate students who join 9 graduate students in their second year.

With each new season, there naturally comes change. I wish you all the strength and courage to influence the change you wish to see and to take advantage of the opportunities that each new season brings.

Dr. Jason Brooks
Welcome Rebekah Jensen

We would like to introduce the newest staff member and instructor to our program this year, Rebekah Jensen. She graduated with a degree in Physiology and Developmental Biology from Brigham Young University, and taught biology in Providence Public Schools in Rhode Island. While there, she earned her Master’s and expanded her teaching skills with the Teach for America Rhode Island chapter. She has experience teaching at the collegiate and secondary level. Mrs. Jensen is fluent in Spanish, loves bookstores, and tries to bike and hike as much as possible.

While her official staff title is Instructional Laboratory Teaching Assistant, she will be focusing mainly on teaching FRNSC 413 this fall along with Dr. Brooks. Please welcome her to Penn State.

Farewell to Chief Deputy Coroner Judy Pleskonko

It is with a very heavy heart that we announce the passing of Judy Pleskonko, Chief Deputy Coroner of Centre County. Judy passed away on Sept 9, 2023 due to injuries sustained in a vehicle accident. She was a friend of the Forensic Science Program, having given numerous guest lectures on campus and hosting students at the coroner’s office. Her good humor, her devotion to teaching, and her constant willingness to help those in need will never be forgotten.
Notice: Medicolegal Death Investigation Course is Now FRNSC 460, No Longer FRNSC 497

Dr. Brooks’ Medicolegal Death Investigation course has been approved by the Faculty Senate as a permanent elective course. As such, it will no longer be listed as FRNSC 497 in lionpath; moving forward, the new course number is FRNSC 460. Enforced pre-requisites for this course are FRNSC 410 and either FRNSC 411 or FRNSC 413. For those looking to register for that course next semester, make sure you have FRNSC 460 in your shopping cart!

Prospective Grad Virtual Open House

Our third annual Prospective Grad Virtual Open House will take place on Wednesday, November 8th from 6:30p – 8:00p. The program is designed to give prospective grad students a chance to meet faculty, staff, and current students; take a virtual tour of program facilities and instrumentation; and ask questions about the MPS in Forensic Science degree offered by our program. Registration is required to attend: https://psu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJcpd-iorzwqGdB7JpGLrw4k6QEOHjXeb7_A

Dr. Holland Receives the Paul M. Althouse Memorial Teaching Award

Congratulations to Dr. Mitch Holland on being selected for the Paul M. Althouse Memorial Outstanding Instructor Award this year! This award was selected by the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (BMB) Peer Teaching Evaluation Committee in recognition of teaching excellence and the ability of the instructor to meet the needs and expectations of their students. Dr. Jason Brooks, Forensic Program Director, said in response to this achievement, “Mitch’s dedication to our students is well-known and has been recognized beyond our program. I’m very proud to be in the company of the great group of instructors we have in Forensic Science.”
ISHI presentations

In September, two of our second-year grad students, Erin Brownfield (left) and Jade Korber (right), and Associate Research Professor Jen McElhoe, presented posters of their DNA-related research at the International Symposium on Human Identification (ISHI) in Denver. Erin’s poster was about “Long Range Mitogenome Sequencing Using the PacBio Sequel Ile System.” Jade’s poster was on “Mitogenome Sequencing of Human Hair Shafts Using an MPS Approach: Drift of Heteroplasmic Variants and Impact of DNA Damage on Data Interpretation.” Dr. McElhoe’s poster was entitled “An Assessment of Probabilistic Approaches to mtDNA Mixture Interpretation.” Congratulations to you all on your presentations - you make us so proud!
The Holland Research Group Taking Strides to Improve the Mitochondrial DNA Database

The Holland Research Group was recently written up in Forensic magazine online about their research efforts to triple the size of the forensic mitochondrial DNA database. From the article, “…the National Institute of Justice has awarded a team of researchers from Penn State $770,000 to sequence the mitochondrial genomes of 10,000 Pennsylvanians. This will more than triple the size of the existing database and provide a crucial point of reference for use in human identification cases.” You can read the article in its entirety at https://www.forensicmag.com/607120-Team-to-Triple-Size-of-Forensic-Database-of-Mitochondrial-DNA/

Congratulations to all our Spring 2023 Graduates and Award Winners!
BS in Forensic Science
Jamie Alegria
Zahraa Al Lawati
Gabrielle Appleby
Ashley Arzaga
Kassandra Bradburn
Madeline Casey
Kalyn Cayne
Ana Delgado
Karah Dickson
Morgan Downing
Gia Haemmerle
Brady Jefairjian
Madeleine Kelly
Payton Kuhn
Emma Law
Ashlee Loewy
Tara Lyons
Kerry McCann
Grace Miller
Katiana Nelson
Abigail Northeimer
Paris Petersen
MacKenzie Reed
Reikley Reiser
Marissa Reith
Emanuel Rios
Corey Rutt
Jerimiah Seba
Jayci Sekeras
Marina Smith
Katelyn Tedford
Sanjana Thiagarajan
Amy Vasquez
Alexandra Vinci
Phoebe Wentzell
Kenneth Wong

MPS in Forensic Science
Taylor Maslin
Kerry McCann
Paola Roldan-Arroyo

Awards for Academic Excellence Spring 2023
Awards for Teaching Excellence Spring 2023
Mr. Mike Kusluski

First Annual Welcome Mocktail Mixer a Success

The Forensic Science Program welcomed both new and returning students this year with a non-alcoholic Mocktail Mixer in the first week of September. Students, staff, and faculty were invited to try one of five signature mocktails for the event: Crime of Passion Fauxjito, CSI Sangria, Crime Lab Lemonade, Criminalist’s Little Helper, or a Luminol Jello Shot. Special thanks to the Forensic Science Club for providing the pizza. We look forward to our second annual mixer next fall!
Thank You to All Our Haunted-U Volunteers

The Forensic Science Program partnered with Penn State’s Alpha Xi chapter of Delta Delta Epsilon International Forensic Science Honor Society (DDE) to participate in this year’s Haunted U – a night of spooky science for kids presented by the ECOS Office of Science Outreach. This year, our program sponsored spooky cottage tours in Halloween decorated Pine and Spruce Cottages, and offered some fun forensic themed activities for the kids in attendance, including ghost prints, fingerprint monster faces, secret notes, a glow in the dark room, and the poisoned zombie room. Thank you again to all the students and staff who participated – it was a spooky good time!
Forensic Science Club Haunted House to be Held October 20th and 21st from

The Penn State Forensic Science Club will be holding their annual Haunted House fundraiser on Friday, October 20th and Saturday, October 21st this year. This year's theme is related to the works of Stephen King. Caution: there will be creepy clowns!

The event will run 8:00p - midnight, with the first half hour of each night as "kids hour" meaning the horror will be turned down slightly to accommodate younger haunted house goers. Tickets are $4.99 per person. Tickets can be purchased
the night of the event at Spruce Cottage. The ticket gets you the haunted house tour through both Pine and Spruce.