

Forensic Justice

Degree Offered

- Forensic Science, LL.M.

Recent developments have demonstrated that a solid grounding in the scientific method and forensic evidence is critical for any attorney, especially for those practicing criminal law. These developments include more than 300 DNA-based exonerations that have taken place since the early 1990's, the uncovering of numerous scandals in forensic laboratories across the country, and the recommendations put forth by the National Academy of Sciences in a 2009 report.

The WVU College of Law, in partnership with the WVU Department of Forensic and Investigative Science, is a pioneer in the criminal justice field by offering the country's only graduate law degree program in Forensic Justice.

Many American law schools offer upper-level courses in areas such as expert testimony and forensic evidence, but LL.M. programs in law and forensic science remain virtually nonexistent. Currently, no other ABA-approved U.S. law school offers such a degree.

Because WVU has long been a leader in the field of forensic sciences and is also home to the highly regarded Department of Forensic and Investigative Sciences, WVU Law is a natural location for the country's first LL.M. in Forensic Justice.

The LL.M. curriculum makes use of the expertise present at the University and allow LL.M. candidates the opportunity to combine breadth-that is, exposure to a wide range of forensic methods- with depth- the opportunity to conduct original, independent research in a narrower area of interest.

Program Objectives

The Forensic Justice LL.M. is flexible enough to allow experienced practitioners to improve and expand their skills, allowing them to better serve their clients and communities, while also offering new attorneys an opportunity to develop skills that will make them more marketable in their chosen profession, whether that be, for example, as a state or federal prosecutor, a public defender, or an attorney in private practice focusing on criminal defense.

The objectives of the LL.M. in Forensic Justice are to:

- Educate current and future West Virginia attorneys, and those of our region and nation, whose work will help shape the field of criminal law, particularly the areas of prosecution and criminal defense;
- Build on WVU's reputation as a leader in forensic and investigative sciences; and
- Pioneer a much-needed area of advanced academic training.

Admission Requirements

Minimum admission requirements for the LL.M. in Forensic Justice are as follows:

- A J.D. from an ABA (American Bar Association) accredited school (or foreign equivalent, as determined by WVU Law in accordance with ABA guidelines).
- A grade point average of at least a 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) or other demonstrated indicia of likelihood of success.
- A demonstrated interest in or commitment to the fields of science, forensic evidence, and law.

Applicants may include newly graduated J.D. students, professionals (prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges) returning for study after years of practice, or qualified international students.

Curriculum

The program shall consist of a one-year course of study requiring 30 credit hours, which will be evenly split between courses offered by the COL and courses offered by the Department of Forensic and Investigative Sciences ("FIS"). Candidates will also be required to complete a substantial piece of written work, final paper, or field-work project. Students in the program may also have the option to include up to 4 credits in their course of study from relevant WVU graduate-level programs, such as statistics, biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics, provided that these students meet the per-requisite course requirements.

Required Courses

Minimum GPA of 2.5 is required.

Minimum grade of C- is required.

FIS 480	Forensic Quality Assurance	2
FIS 501	Foundations of Criminalistics	3

FIS 514	Forensic Impression & Trace Evidence	3
FIS 620	Forensic Casework Practicum	3
LAW 661	Forensic and Expert Evidence	3
LAW 670	LLM Seminar	4
LAW 671	LL.M. Capstone	4
LAW 688D	Seminar in Science and the Law	2
LAW 712	Analytical Methods for Lawyers	3
FIS 505	Biological and Chemical Evidence	3
Total Hours		30

LL.M. Seminar. The program will require a 3-credit LL.M. Seminar that covers a wide range of topics relating to the role that forensic evidence plays in the criminal justice system, the strengths and weaknesses of various forensic disciplines and other relevant topics. The seminar may feature guest speakers who will present their scholarship or will lecture on current issues in forensic science. Students will be required to engage in rigorous preparation for each seminar discussion and will be expected to develop a writing project that will be presented at the end of the course.

LL.M. Capstone (Research paper or field-work project). The College of Law intends its LL.M. graduates to bring their in-depth understanding of the areas of law and forensic science into their practice in a tangible way. To that end, the 4-credit research paper or field-work project is meant to lay the groundwork for future professional work. For students hoping to contribute to the growing body of legal scholarship focusing on the intersection (and sometimes tension) between law and forensics, the option to write a research paper on an important issue in the field might form the basis for a later journal article. If the paper option is chosen, the paper can be related to an existing course (e.g. a 3-credit course with an additional credit granted for additional required research) or a student-created independent study option. That is, in addition to other program requirements, students must engage in an intensive 4-credit research experience that is coordinated with the approval of the Program Director.

Alternatively, those students wishing to enter private practice or the public sector may wish to work on real world problems. In this instance, the written work product might take the form of an appellate brief, a reply brief, a pre-trial motion relating to expert witness testimony, or other similar pleading. Opportunities to complete such projects may be available through existing experiential learning placements available at the COL or through specific projects developed through student interest. Each project will require approval of the Program Director before it is started and upon completion.

Specializations. Given the nature of the degree, students will earn their LL.M. in Forensic Justice without further formal specialization.

Prerequisites. It is expected that the majority of LL.M. candidates will already have taken both Evidence and Criminal Procedure as J.D. students. In the case of practitioners, prerequisite will be will waived if not met. Prerequisites may also be waived at the discretion of the Program Director after an individual consultation with the student.

Continuing WVU Students. The College of Law anticipates that some of the students in the program may be recent graduates of, or visitors at, the WVU College of Law, and therefore may have already taken some of the classes offered by the program. If such a student has already taken a significant number of the courses listed in the program curriculum as part of the J.D. course of study at the College of Law such that the student will have difficulty taking 30 credits of course work without repetition, then the program director may authorize such student to take other related courses that are not on the initial program curriculum listing. In all events, however, a student shall be required to meet the 30-credit hour requirement.

International Programs. The College of Law already offers a number of international programs for credit, including trips to Geneva, Mexico, and Brazil. The College of Law could approve participation in any of these international programs for the LL.M. credit, with approval of the program director, as long as there is a demonstrable link between participation in the international program and the student's course of study.

Portfolio of Work. All LL.M. students will be required to develop a portfolio of work, consisting of at least four written pieces that are representative of the student's experiences in the course of the program. These pieces may include, but are not limited to, scholarly articles, legal motions, briefs, or memoranda, policy analyses, or draft legislation.

Graduation Requirements

The graduation requirements for the LL.M. in Forensic Justice are as follows:

- A minimum grade point average of 2.5 (on a 4.0 scale) upon graduation
- No less than the equivalent of a C (2.0) in any class counted toward the degree,
- Successful completion of the required 30 credits (including the LL.M. Seminar and the writing or field-work project),
- Completion of the 3-credit LL.M. Seminar, which must be completed in residence at the COL's Morgantown campus unless otherwise approved by the Program Director,
- Successful completion of the 4-credit hour writing or field-work project requirement, and,
- Development of a portfolio of work (consisting of at least four written pieces) that is representative of the student's experience in the course of the Program.