

DAILY SOUTHTOWN

Crime scene rooms at Moraine Valley Community College to assist criminal justice studies



David O'Connor stands in the bedroom crime scene room in Moraine Valley Community College's new crime lab at the Palos Hills campus. (Janice Neumann/for the Daily Southtown)



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The crime science investigations about to start at Moraine Valley Community College may not pack the wallop of television dramas, but they've already got students excited about the possibilities of working in the field.

"With this class, instead of just reading the information from a book we'll be able to actually see how it's done and have a professor who has used this information," said Angelique Snedden, who has taken a handful of criminal justice classes. "Investigation is the starting point of getting people convicted."

Snedden, who lives in Blue Island, has a personal stake in understanding how these things work. She said she has had three friends who were victims of homicide and she endured domestic violence before extricating herself from the situation.

"I like to be able to understand everything that's going on," she said.

Snedden said she wanted to major in psychology but then saw how it could be applied to criminal justice.

"Having things like that happen to someone you know really makes you want to understand why or how they can happen, so we can maybe see signs and prevent them later on," she said.

There's also the draw of criminal justice professors who have worked in the field, like David O'Connor, who came up with the idea for the lab and new course and will teach it.

O'Connor has been an attorney for 38 years, 20 as a prosecutor including with the Cook County state's attorney's office, and the last 18 in private practice.

He's taught in the criminal justice program for 37 years, including courses in investigations, serial killers, corrections and criminal procedures, regarding what police can and can't do.

"I've seen things go right and things go wrong in the courtroom," said O'Connor. "I think it's important our criminal justice students have a better foundational understanding as far as what crime scene investigators have to deal with at crime scenes."



David O'Connor, who teaches criminal justice at Moraine Valley Community College, stands in front of the science building where he will teach a special forensic and crime scene investigations course in a new crime lab this fall. (Janice Neumann/for the Daily Southtown)

That also means distinguishing between real investigations and television or movies.

"A lot of times on TV and movies, there's a kernel of truth in what they're saying and showing," O'Connor said. "We're going to disavow the students of any notion that some of the things they see on television is how it actually occurs."

The crime lab is still in the works but is expected to be ready for the start of the course on Aug. 18. It's built to look like a small apartment with a bedroom, which has a bed, bureau and mirror; living room with a couch, TV and view of outside; and office space with desk, credenza and small TV.

There was already a mannequin sprawled on the floor in each room, resembling victims of crime, as well as some of the first few pieces of furniture.



David O'Connor surveys the living room crime scene in the new crime lab at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills. (Janice Neumann/for the Daily Southtown)

"The way we kind of constructed this is it's three separate rooms in which any one of the three can be our crime scene," said O'Connor. "As happens sometimes in real crimes, not all crimes are contained in one room."

A larger room has a window view of the three so the crime scene investigator can watch and critique students. It also functions as a collaboration room. The classroom is right across the hall.

Topics in the new forensic and crime scene investigations course include crime scenes; crime scene photography; latent fingerprints; footwear and tire impressions; DNA, bloodstain and biological evidence; trace and toolmark evidence; violent crime scene and evidence collection and packaging; and report writing and courtroom testimony.

A prerequisite class is investigation and criminal evidence.

O'Connor has kept in touch with many individuals from his days as a prosecutor, so was able to organize help from outside agencies, including the Illinois State Police, which will provide an investigator for various course modules, and an evidence technician who recently retired from the Orland Park Police Department.

One of the Cook County state's attorney's office's forensic scientists will teach students about DNA and biological fluids, and "how those items, when collected properly, can provide tremendous evidence for the trial attorneys."



David O'Connor stands in front of science building at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills. O'Connor teaches criminal justice at the school. (Janice Neumann/for the Daily Southtown)

Students will also learn the importance of processing crime scenes with professionalism.

"This is probably the most exciting thing the criminal justice program has ever experienced," O'Connor said. "It's certainly rare for this to be offered at the community college level."

While O'Connor came up with the idea, he had the support of President Pamela J. Haney, Dean of Career Programs LoShay Willis, Criminal Justice Program Coordinator Michael Espinoza, who is also department chair of public service, and professor Michelle Skelton.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for our students and our program overall," Espinoza said.

Snedden agreed and said she hopes to either do private investigation or possibly crime scene investigation after graduation.

"All the forensics and DNA ... everything has evolved so much that there's so much more we can do with it now," she said.

Janice Neumann is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.
