

Private Eye School

WOULD SAM SPADE HAVE MADE THE GRADE?

SHE SAYS SHE'S a librarian, but it's clear she isn't here to shelve books. "I'm interested in working on crime cases," she says in a shy and sunny voice. And she isn't the only one. About fourteen students are assembled at the Bay Colony Corporate Center in Waltham for the inaugural professional investigation course offered by the Boston University Center for Professional Education. From January until June, they'll spend almost every Saturday — some 160 hours — learning how to plumb public records and the Internet for information, collect and handle physical evidence, interview witnesses, and conduct surveillance, thereby earning a certificate in professional investigation.

To be sure, a professional investigation course seems an odd fit with the center's other offerings, such as financial planning, facilities management, and accounting. But Ruth Ann Murray, center director, says the curriculum isn't about training stereotypical hard-boiled PIs to tail cheating spouses. Today's professional investigators are increasingly screening prospective employees, uncovering insurance fraud, and tracking perpetrators of computer-related

crime such as identity theft and electronic copyright infringement. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 43,000 jobs in the professional investigation field in 2004, a figure that is expected to grow by up to 26 percent by 2014.

"This is a profession that requires some training if you want to do it well," says Murray. "It involves serious issues."

"It's a rich field to be in right now," agrees program director and lead instructor Tom Shamshak, a professional investigator and former president of the Licensed Private Detectives Association of Massachusetts. "We're helping those who take the course put together a portfolio of deliverables, so that when they get the BU certificate, they can walk right into the marketplace with records-research projects they have produced, investigative reports they've authored, videos of interviews they've conducted, and surveillance photos they've taken."

Shamshak leads three of the course's seven components, including Investigative Interviewing and Practice Management for Professional Investigators. Licensed investigators and attor-

neys who specialize in background research, interrogation, the role of investigators in the legal system, and other disciplines teach the remaining units.

The curriculum is "old school meets new school," according to Murray. The student workbook *Foundations of Professional Investigation*, for instance, contains a section on scene investigation, which discusses ballistics, DNA profiling, and forensic odontology (the study of dental remains). But students are also taught the science of observation — how to diagram a crime scene, how to read facial expressions, and how to tell if somebody's lying. They videotape a fifteen-minute investigative interview and write a report about what it reveals. They tail volunteers around a shopping mall and snap surreptitious photographs.

The wide-ranging curriculum matches up well with the diverse motives of the students. Some students, such as John Dalli, president of a Worcester public-records research company, are taking the course for professional development. And several students are considering career changes. These include a retired parole officer who says the course enabled his first foray online and Amy Cosindas, a hospital software analyst contemplating a future in computer forensics.

"On a daily basis, I do a lot of investigation into why things went wrong," says Cosindas, who fixes the hospital's computer snafus. "I need to get all the details, ask a lot of questions about what the user did to find out what happened." Through the course she is learning about software tools used to pry evidence from computer hard drives. "There's something about it that I just love," she says.

Sitting across from Cosindas, the librarian mulls her future sleuthing options.

"I'm still interested in criminal defense, but I think a steady diet of that could be kind of depressing," she says. "But working corporate intelligence could be fun. Tracking missing people or identity theft could be fun. And computer forensics seems fascinating. Since I've been here, I've learned that there's so much more to investigation."

CHRIS BERDIK

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