One of the first questions asked by a prospective Criminal Justice student is usually “Which degree program is right for me?” That answer will depend on the student’s answer to another question – “what do you want to do in Law Enforcement?”

Degrees for Law Enforcement Positions

Since there are so many career fields in criminal justice it is really important to start thinking about what you really want to do once you complete your degree or training so you get started in the right degree program. A common misconception is that a Criminal Justice Degree is required to get a Criminal Justice Job. Not all the positions in a law enforcement agency are filled by sworn officers, and not all require a criminal justice degree – the FBI, DEA, and even the GBI have crime analysts, computer specialists, accountants, and even employees with such mundane skills as evidence custodians and automobile mechanics! Just because you work for a criminal justice agency does not mean you will have powers of arrest or a badge or gun, and it does not require you to have only a criminal justice degree.

A good example of different degree requirements is the forensics field. Not every police department has a crime scene unit; some have units staffed with detailed police officers, some with civilians with no police powers at all. Regardless of their status, most of the “CSI” field technicians do no further investigative tasks beyond processing the crime scene. They simply collect and process the evidence, turn it in to be examined, and then go process another crime scene - leaving it to the detectives to put the pieces together and solve the case. Detectives are highly experienced police officers, usually with 8 – 10 years of uniformed police work under their belts. The evidence is examined in the crime lab by scientists, primarily with Chemistry or Biology degrees. Fingerprint and Firearms examiners sometimes begin as trained police officers or detectives with at least a Bachelor’s degree. In most cases the crime labs are many miles away and the detectives mail evidence in, and receive the results back months later. Crime laboratory scientists rarely go out to crime scenes, unless they are big ones or are close by.

Prosecutors and Judges are first lawyers, and to become a lawyer you first have to start thinking not so much about graduating from law school, but first getting into a law school. It is a competitive process; each law school usually has about 100 seats in each year’s starting class, and may receive thousands of applications. They usually publish a “profile” of what a successful candidate needs, but in general terms you start with an overall GPA of at least 3.5 after four years in college, a high score on the LSAT examination, and other contributions such as volunteer work, clubs, associations, scholarships, that make you stand out from the rest of the applicants. Law school is generally three years, sometimes four, and they usually are looking for a Pre-Law, Political Science type of undergraduate degree.

ABAC initiated their Bachelor Degree programs in 2008 by inaugurating a Rural Studies Degree. One of the different career tracks in this degree is the Social and Community Development track, which includes useful coursework in Public Administration, Communications, Grant Writing, and other courses which would aid a law enforcement officer in rural Georgia to advance within their department beyond an entry-level position.

The Criminal Justice Associate of Science Degree (AS) at ABAC

This curriculum is designed for the student intending on completing a four-year degree in Criminal Justice or entering into a criminal justice career with some college-level education to enhance their performance and eligibility options.
This type of degree meets the lower division (Core) requirements of a four-year Bachelor’s Degree with six Criminal Justice courses in the designated area for Majors. The student completing this program will receive an Associate of Science degree in Criminal Justice. The student can then choose to either go directly into a law enforcement career, or transfer to another institution to complete the upper division requirements of the four-year degree.

In the Fall of 2012 the Core curriculum changed, so we have developed two slightly different academic pathways, Option A and Option B checklists for the new curriculum.

**SO WHICH PROGRAM IS RIGHT FOR ME??**

If a student were interested in a Federal law enforcement position, such as a U.S. Marshal, FBI Agent, DEA Agent, they should understand almost all Federal jobs require either a Bachelors degree or a Masters degree as entry-level education prerequisites. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) also requires a four-year degree for both the Special Agent and Narcotics Agent positions. Other positions, such as Georgia Probation/Parole Agents may only require a two-year degree, plus specialized experience, as entry-level requirements, but a four-year degree will be required to advance beyond the entry-level position.

Students seeking a two-year degree, with no immediate interest in continuing on towards a four-year degree will probably benefit by first obtaining their Georgia Basic Peace Officer certification at the Police Academy co-located on the ABAC campus, as well as earning a two-year Associate degree. Local law enforcement departments have immediately hired graduates from either degree program who also obtain their P.O.S.T. certification.

Students seeking a four-year degree may want to consider staying at ABAC and completing the upper-level Rural Studies program, the Social and Community Development track; or switching to a nearby institution like Valdosta State, Columbus State, Albany State, Armstrong Atlantic (Savannah) or Georgia Southern University for the remaining two years of a criminal justice BS degree.