CSI and its spinoff, CSI Miami, are two of television’s most popular programs. Each week millions of viewers watch fictional crime scene investigators collect and analyze forensic evidence, solve crimes and vindicate victims.

While the programs push the reality envelope, many of the forensic challenges and investigative techniques are based upon the work of real-life professionals like Stetson Professor Carol Henderson, who has served as a technical consultant for CSI Miami.

Henderson directs the new National Clearinghouse for Science, Technology and the Law, established in August at Stetson University College of Law.

“Scientists, lawyers and judges are overwhelmed by the amount of information required to keep pace with new developments in science and technology,” Henderson said.

A comprehensive collection

The clearinghouse at Stetson will serve as a central location for access to law, science and technology material. Twenty student researchers at Stetson College of Law and Nova Southeastern University have joined Henderson and her team to create a comprehensive bibliography of court decisions, scholarly publications, books, journals, articles and other resources in the fields of law and science.

“We’re creating a resource to help lawyers, judges, law clerks, law enforcement and laboratory personnel find data that can help them with evidence,” Henderson said. “We now have the technology to help expedite court decisions. For example, we can determine what year ink was manufactured. This helps courts decide cases that involve document forgery.”

Informing the world’s lawyers, judges and investigators

Burgeoning technology will also help the clearinghouse disseminate this collection of information. The information gathered will be made available online and in a searchable CD-ROM. The CD-ROM will include resources on topics such as DNA, toxicology, bite-mark evidence, biometrics, forensic psychology and more. The CD-ROM will also include bibliographic references to case law, scientific journals, law review and bar journal articles, broadcast programs, professional organizations, conference abstracts and proceedings, dissertations and other materials.

The CD-ROM will be distributed in early 2004. It is being developed pursuant to a cooperative agreement between the National Institute of Justice and the National Forensic Science and Technology Center in Largo, Fla. This data collection also will serve as the pilot for a comprehensive online resource that will make bibliographic information on science, technology and law available worldwide.

The clearinghouse will establish a reference collection at Stetson’s Law Library and Information Center. The general public may visit and use the collection or obtain collection...
Understanding scientific evidence

Professor Carol Henderson, director of the National Clearinghouse for Science, Technology and the Law, with Research Director Serri Miller.

materials through inter-library loan. “Very few law schools will have a collection of science and technology research this comprehensive,” Henderson said.

New partnerships

Partnerships with other law schools and federal and state agencies will be an essential part of the collaborative effort of the clearinghouse. Stetson will co-sponsor the NIJ/West Virginia University National Conference on Science and the Law, March 14-17, 2004, at the Hyatt Regency in Tampa. The conference will be open to the public. “We’re planning to examine the case of Jeffrey McDonald, a U.S. Marine doctor who was convicted of murdering his pregnant wife and two young daughters,” said Henderson, referring to the case made famous in the best-selling book, *Fatal Vision* by Joe McGinnis.

Bringing science to the legal classroom

Despite the fact that attorneys frequently cite scientific evidence, Henderson says most lawyers have little scientific education—only 5.3 percent of applicants have majored in the natural sciences. Professor Henderson’s presence at Stetson will help offset that shortcoming. In spring 2004, she will begin teaching a Scientific Evidence course. Law students will view an autopsy, learn to process a crime scene, argue a motion in limine, depose an expert witness and cross-examine an expert. Guest speakers will discuss document examination, pathology, entomology and related forensic science topics. “This will be a very advanced skills course in trial advocacy,” Henderson said.

Federal support

Professor Henderson conceptualized and wrote the clearinghouse’s initial proposal, program narrative and budget. Congressman Bill Young, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, was instrumental in obtaining the funding for the project. The project funding is administered by the National Institute of Justice, the research and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. The clearinghouse is fully funded by Congress for fiscal year 2003.

The promise for the future

The National Clearinghouse for Science, Technology and the Law at Stetson University College of Law is charting new territory for the collection and distribution of information, destined to shape the future of legal education.

To learn more about the clearinghouse or to obtain a copy of the CD-ROM resource scheduled for release in spring 2004, contact Professor Henderson at (727) 562-7316 or watson@law.stetson.edu.