CSI SONOMA
Crime Scene Investigation intern uncovers the real world of forensics.

Aaron Damm has been filing fingerprint cards for days in the windowless office of the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department crime scene investigation unit in Santa Rosa.

“Occasionally I find a mistake and then I feel like a real detective,” he says. Damm has learned how to tell the difference between the ridges, loops and other patterns that make each print unique among the more than 220,000 entries in the county’s records system.

The criminal justice grad planned a future as a police officer before his stint at the CSI unit lit up his awareness of the field of forensics.

His spring semester internship has given him a wider view of the possibilities for career options in the criminal justice field. “I love it,” says Damm, a former kinesiology major who is even working part of the summer although he will gain no credit for it.

“Criminal justice is exploding with opportunities these days as jobs with good salaries lure students away from their studies even before they finish their degree,” says department chair Patrick Jackson. “Many of them come into the field having been inspired by the popular TV show CSI and its variations. That is a major reason why the internship is a crucial part of their education,” he says.

“The mass media has created an image of CSI work that is not at all like the real world,” say both Jackson and Sergeant Scott Dunn, head of the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department Crime Scene Investigation Unit.

Dunn hasn’t watched a single episode of CSI all the way through except when he critiqued an episode for criminal justice students this year in Pat Jackson’s class on media and crime at SSU. “Many of us think we should be paid overtime to watch it,” he laughs.

Nothing happens as quickly in real life as it does on the hour-long TV drama. Most small offices like Sonoma County’s think long and hard before ordering DNA analysis through a private lab, which can cost up to $2,000 each or take more than eight months to complete at the state lab in Sacramento.

There have been some pretty dramatic changes in CSI work in the past 15 years, says Dunn who is assisting his department in acquiring some new technology through Homeland Security Grant funds. One is a new computer system that will allow enhancement of surveillance tapes to a degree not before possible.

Sheriff’s deputies serve as crime scene investigators in Sonoma County. Dunn heads the unit of four detectives which handles about 25 cases a week. He uses the services of interns from SSU or Santa Rosa Junior College during the year.

Dunn stretches to make sure the interns see other criminal investigative opportunities. Since weeks can go by without a significant incident occurring on their shift, Dunn makes up for it by devising mock crime scenes for interns to test their wits.

On slow days, Damm duplicates videotapes, photographs and other materials to fulfill attorney requests. But when occasions have allowed, the sheriff’s detectives have brought him along to witness post-mortem exams and listen in as the forensic pathologist brings the team in the autopsy suite to explain her analysis of the victim’s cause of death.

Damm now knows of over 20 different ways to lift a fingerprint, that most criminals are inept at getting away without leaving evidence at a scene and that homicide is typically one of the most solvable of crimes.

— Jean Wasp

CLASS ACT
More than 400 SSU students a semester find themselves in local internships where they become adept at “seeing the classroom experience in real life,” says Elaine Leeder, dean of the School of Social Sciences.

Asked to serve for approximately 135-150 hours a semester, these students can find themselves in positions ranging from a counselor-in-training to economic policy researchers to a classroom assistant, a legislative aide or a soil analyst. Aligned with their classes in the social sciences, they support after-school programs, jails, prisons, environmental agencies, domestic violence shelters, marine laboratories, sheriffs’ departments and other social welfare organizations.

“They especially help agencies stay in business that are surviving on a shoestring budget,” says Leeder, “and thus can continue to offer critical services to the community.”

Aaron Damm examines a document for almost-invisible indented writing with an electrostatic vacuum box at the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department.