

Centers of Excellence

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Editorial

Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2) Juliet: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Whether of people, institutions, or things, are names really of no importance? Often we can consult a thesaurus and find alternatives that will serve just as well. But especially in this age of 'sound bites' names and titles may convey a subtle meaning (positive or negative) that effect an unconscious response better than any pavlovian bell. As a defense attorney in a homicide case would it matter if your client went by the nickname "Killer"? When I hear or read some institution described as a "center of excellence", simultaneously my blood pressure goes up and I have to fight my gag reflex. Today, more and more institutions have this designation. Don't believe me? Just perform a Google search and enter the term, "center of excellence." I got 1.3×10^8 hits. I don't care much about use of the term in other fields, but it particularly irks me to see it used in forensic science and its subdiscipline, criminalistics. An NIJ website leads us to a YouTube video <http://www.nist.gov/coe/forensics/index.cfm> which asks: "What is the Forensic Technology Center for Excellence? The video answers with 'A Team of professionals facilitating new forensic technology for criminal justice and forensic practitioners. Combating Crime, we support office of justice programs. We support NIJ. We support research and development and advancing technology by determining technology needs, Planning technology programs, developing solution by demonstrating and evaluating, By disseminating knowledge. We function as a trusted partner to connect practitioners with innovative technology, with protecting court rooms from "UNPROVEN" technologies, By transferring knowledge and best practices.' All good intentions (the road to Hell?), but there is no mention of any stringent requirements they had to meet to earn the title of Center of excellence. Quoting from a NIST website http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/fingerprints_biometrics/biometric-center-of-excellence "NIST announced today that it has selected a consortium led by - - - to establish a new NIST-sponsored center of excellence for - - -. The - - - new Center will be funded in part by a \$25 million award from NIST over five years." One would think after the Brandon Mayfield fiasco the FBI would lie doggo, but no, they've created the Biometric Center of Excellence, with fingerprints included in their eight modalities. Instead of this title being created, awarded, and funded by some governing government organization, wouldn't it be fair if said institution had to first conclusively show that according to Daubert criteria they were entitled to this descriptor?

For example:

What performance tests have been carried out by disinterested parties that clearly show the institution's work product meets the standard of "excellent" (must first be defined).

What is the known or potential rate of error for their work product?

Have the methods used in producing their work product been subject to peer review?

Are there established standards controlling the techniques they use?

Have they shown that the methods they use are generally accepted by the forensic science community?

If one's place of employment does not have the "center of excellence" descriptor, then it must be something less. Hmm, what are some antonyms for "excellence"? I find "mediocrity; unimportance; failure; imperfection; inferiority, and chopped liver." Most criminalists employed in such "mediocre" crime labs have had to pay to take exams for individual certification by the American Board of Criminalistics (ABC), study hard on their own time for the exams, and then after passing and receiving certification have to yearly document their continuing education and every five years pay more to ABC in order to maintain their certification. These same criminalists if employed by a certified forensic lab or one seeking certification by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors – Laboratory (ASCLD-Lab) will have worked hard together with their coworkers to prepare for a visit by an ASCLD-Lab inspection team to see if their lab meets the requirements (including ISO requirements) for ASCLD-Lab certification. And from the laboratory budget a not insignificant sum will have been paid to ASCLD-Lab for this privilege of being inspected. And providing they meet certification requirements, then every five years the lab must pay more to ASCLD-Lab for recertification. So what do all this money, time and effort accomplish for the ABC-certified criminalist or her ASCLD-Lab-certified crime lab? Any long-winded attempt to explain to a lay group (jury?) its significance and the time and effort involved in their achievement will quickly have the groups' eyes glaze over in boredom. But in today's environment of 'sound bites', having "Center of Excellence" in the title of a place of employment will tell anyone all they need to know! In the advertising world, "puffery" is defined as "a promotional statement or claim that is in no way supported by objective data." As used by NIJ, NIST, and the FBI, the descriptor, "CENTER OF EXCELLENCE", is mere PUFFERY! Active in criminalistics over thirty years, he is author or co-author of over sixty journal articles and book chapters, and is the editor for, "Forensic Analysis on the Cutting Edge: New Methods for Trace Evidence Analysis", published by Wiley-Interscience in Aug. 2007.