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Laboratory Custodians: The Unsung Heroes of the Higher Educational Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Laboratory Custodians in Higher Education Institutions offering Criminology Program in City of Manila.

Anchored on Role Theory (Biddle, 1986) and Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959), the study aimed to document their daily routines, perceptions of value, challenges, recognition, experiences, and suggestions for improvement.

This study draws on experiential research design. Ten Laboratory Custodians were purposely selected and interviewed using a validated semi-structured interview guide. Data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis.

Five major themes emerged: (1) Daily lived experiences characterized by a structured cycle of preparation, active supervision, and closing procedures that shift from high-intensity operational support during regular semesters to strategic restoration during summer; (2) Perceptions on task and value as silent but essential facilitators and anchors of laboratory operations, distinct from general maintenance; (3) Specific challenges including resource constraints, equipment inventory issue, handling of materials and specialized forensic tools, and time pressure during consecutive classes, with coping mechanisms through rigorous organization, task prioritization and support networks; (4) Recognition and unrecognized where simple verbal appreciation and public acknowledgement significantly enhance motivation, while lack of visibility leads to feeling of being undervalued; and (5) Suggestions for improvement including regular training on safety and equipment handling, adequate personal protective equipment, fair workload distribution, automated inventory systems, and students accountability programs such as safety orientations and custodian for-a-day initiatives.

The study concluded that Laboratory Custodians are indispensable, safety critical partners whose preventive works forms the operational backbone of laboratory functionality.

This research contributes to institutional understanding of support staff experiences and highlights the need to integrate custodians more fully into the academic ecosystem. By centering their voices, the study offers a foundation for policies that enhance safety culture, staff well-being, and educational effectiveness.

The study proposed a five-module Laboratory Operations and Safety Management Manual as output.

Keywords: *Laboratory Custodians, Lived Experiences, Safety Management, Criminology Laboratory, Role Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Higher Educational Institutions*

INTRODUCTION

The Bachelor of Science in Criminology remains one of the most in-demand program in Philippine higher education. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) offering this program are mandated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to maintain a functional criminology laboratory supervised by a Laboratory Custodian. Despite this mandate, the role is often misconstrued as that of a general check, and its significance remains largely unrecognized among learners.

Laboratory Custodian perform a critical function in criminology education. They ensure safe utilization of laboratory equipment and supplies, uphold the physical safety and users during experiments and implement institutional rules governing laboratory use. They also assist faculty in preliminary testing of experiments to ensure accuracy and safety.

As stipulated in CHED Memorandum Order No. 5, Series of 2018, Highlighting the Section 17, laboratories must be provided with adequate water supply, lighting, ventilation, and specialized equipment, and must include a separate office for administrative functions. The same order tasks Laboratory Custodians to assist the Dean in preparation of the Laboratory Development Plan and its corresponding budget.

Furthermore, custodians provide first aid for minor injuries incurred laboratory activities and assist in transporting students to the clinic in cases of serious accidents. While these responsibilities are clearly defined, questions persist as to whether custodians are adequately trained, compensated, and recognized. This study seeks to explore their lived experiences and challenges to provide a deeper understanding of their contributions to criminology education.

Research Problem

The study explores the experiences and challenges faced by Laboratory Custodians in Criminology Program. Moreover, to enhance understanding of their unique perspectives and contributions to the discipline. First, to describe the daily lived experiences of laboratory custodians as they perform their responsibilities in higher educational institutions. Second, to determine how laboratory custodians perceive their task and value within the academic community. Third, to identify the specific challenges encountered by laboratory custodians and the coping mechanisms they employ in fulfilling their duties in higher education settings. Furthermore, to analyze how laboratory custodians make sense of the recognition or unrecognition they receive from faculty, students, and administrators. Lastly, is to propose a relevant program based on the key findings of the study that addresses the needs and enhances the well-being and recognition of laboratory custodians.

Assumptions of the Study

Laboratory Custodians in Higher Education Institutions are shaped by various factors including institutional resources, safety infrastructure, professional recognition, workload, training opportunities and policy implementations. First, excessive workload and staffing pressures are widespread, with foreign studies showing that over half of higher education employees work beyond full-time hours and experience work-related stress, while local studies document inadequate facilities and outdated equipment that increase operational burdens. Second, compensation and career progression remain major concerns, with foreign surveys identifying better pay and limited advancement opportunities as top retention issues, while local evidence of systemic under funding and resource constraints indirectly reflects budgetary limitations affecting laboratory operations. Training and professional development gaps persist, with foreign studies highlighting lack of education programs as a recruitment and retention barrier, and local studies revealing insufficient technical guidance and safety training in laboratory settings. Safety and infrastructure challenges continue, with foreign evidence noting tighter budgets and workforce pressures in academic labs, and local studies documenting inadequate spaces, malfunctioning equipment, and safety issues across institutions. Resource constraints and equipment deficiencies are pervasive, with foreign studies showing staff taking on duties outside their job descriptions, and local studies finding that most schools lack advanced laboratory apparatus and chemicals, with thousands of schools having no laboratories at all.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the experiences and challenges faced by Laboratory Custodians in Criminology Program. Moreover, to enhance understanding of their unique perspectives and contributions to the discipline. Lastly, this research study will seek answers to the following questions:

1. To describe the daily lived experiences of laboratory custodians as they perform their responsibilities in higher educational institutions.

2. To determine how laboratory custodians perceive their task and value within the academic community.

3. To identify the specific challenges encountered by laboratory custodians and the coping mechanisms they employ in fulfilling their duties in higher education settings.

4. To analyze how laboratory custodians make sense of the recognition or unrecognition they receive from faculty, students, and administrators.

5. To propose a relevant program based on the key findings of the study that addresses the needs and enhances the well-being and recognition of laboratory custodians.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationships among the core variables of the research. The central focus of this inquiry is the laboratory custodian, whose professional experiences form the primary basis of the study.

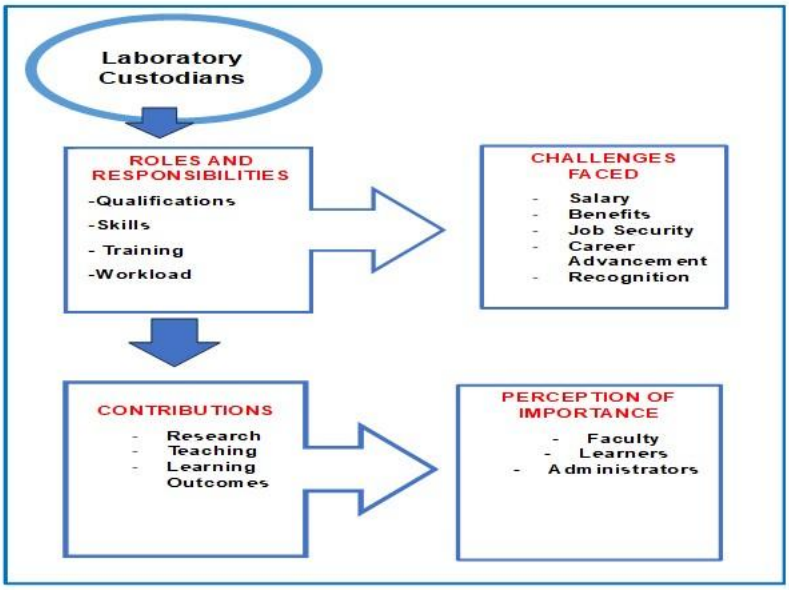


Figure No. 1 Conceptual Framework

The components of the framework are organized into four key dimensions. First, Roles and Responsibilities encompass the qualifications, technical competencies, professional training, and scope of workload assigned to laboratory custodians. Second, Challenges Encountered refers to difficulties related to compensation and benefits, employment security, opportunities for career advancement, and the extent of professional recognition received. Third, Contributions denotes the custodians' vital involvement in supporting institutional research, instructional activities, and the achievement of student learning

outcomes. Fourth, Perceived Professional Value reflects the perspectives held by faculty members, students, and school administrators regarding the significance and essential role of laboratory custodians within the academic community. The directional arrows connecting the components signify the interrelationships among these dimensions and their collective influence on the custodians' professional standing. The entire framework serves as the Research Paradigm of the Experiences and Challenges of Laboratory Custodians, as presented in Figure 1. To generate the necessary data and validate these relationships, the study employs a systematic process of inquiry utilizing a researcher-designed interview guide, in-depth interviews, direct observation, and rigorous thematic analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories that explain the lived experiences of Laboratory Custodians: Role Theory and Social Exchange Theory.

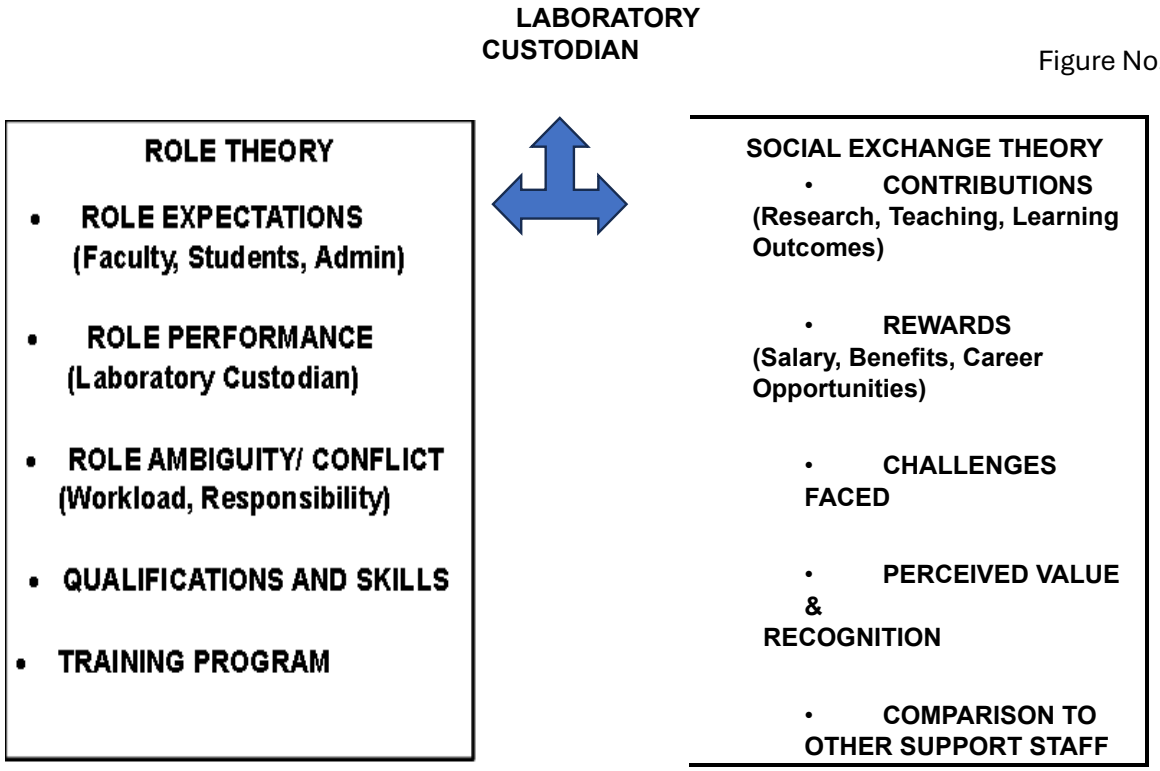


Figure No. 2

Figure No. 2 Theoretical Framework

A. Role Theory (Biddle, 1986)

According to Role theory (Biddle, 1986) defines roles as a set of behaviors and activities that are expected from a person in a certain position, and how challenges may arise when roles

appear to conflict with or oppose each other, leading to role overload. This theory will help the researcher to understand the dynamics of Laboratory Custodians within the Academic Setting. Faculty, Learners and School Administrators have certain expectations of what Laboratory Custodians should do Laboratory Custodians enact their role by performing specific duties.

B. Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Homans, 1958)

Social Exchange Theory posits that social behavior results from an exchange process where individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs. The theory emphasizes reciprocity, where contributions in the form of effort, time, and skills (costs) are expected to be reciprocated with recognition, support, fair compensation, and career opportunities (rewards). In this study, Laboratory Custodians invest significant costs, including physical labor, exposure to chemical and biological hazards, and extended working hours, particularly during summer semesters. In return, they expect rewards such as institutional recognition, professional development, and adequate resources. When the exchange is balanced, custodians experience satisfaction and motivation. However, when costs outweigh rewards, such as when heavy workload and safety risks are met with lack of recognition and limited training, dissatisfaction and disengagement occur.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design and methodology, population and locale of the study, scope and delimitation, data gathering tools, data gathering procedures, treatment of data, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis Framework and in-depth interviews. A qualitative research method is utilized to explore the lived experiences and challenges encountered by Laboratory Custodians in Criminology programs. Through this approach, data regarding their experiences, challenges, and contributions within the field of Criminology are gathered.

A semi-structured interview guide is administered to Laboratory Custodians to elicit qualitative data regarding their perceptions and experiences related to their roles and functions. Responses gathered through this interview are subjected to descriptive analysis to identify patterns and relationships. This systematic and organized approach ensures that conclusions are derived from factual data and actual lived experiences.

Research Locale or Study Setting

This study is conducted at ten (10) selected Higher Education Institutions in the City of Manila. The locale is purposefully chosen as the setting for exploring the experiences and challenges of Laboratory Custodians in Criminology programs.
The City of Manila is selected because the majority of Criminology programs are concentrated within this area. As of 2025, ten (10) institutions offer the Criminology program within the City of Manila, making it an ideal locale for this research.

Participants or Data Sources

The participants of this study consist of ten (10) Laboratory Custodians employed in Higher Education Institutions offering a Criminology Program in the City of Manila. All participants have served for at least one to two semesters at the time of the study, ensuring adequate exposure to laboratory operations, institutional challenges, and regular interactions within the Criminology laboratory setting.

These personnel are responsible for the maintenance, management, and operation of Criminology laboratories. They vary in educational background, age, and prior work experience, but share the common characteristic of being directly involved in preparing laboratory materials, maintaining equipment, ensuring safety compliance, assisting faculty and students during laboratory classes, managing inventory, and performing other custodial duties specific to Criminology laboratory operations.

Participant selection follows specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. To qualify, participants must: (1) be currently employed as Laboratory Custodians in a Higher Education Institution located in the City of Manila; (2) be assigned to Criminology program laboratories; (3) have served for at least one to two semesters; (4) have signed an informed consent form; and (5) be available for in-depth interviews and observations during the data collection period.

The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in phenomenological research. This method allows the researcher to intentionally identify and recruit participants who meet specific criteria aligned with the study objectives. The sample size of ten participants is determined based on the principle of data saturation; wherein additional participants are unlikely to yield new thematic insights. This approach ensures that selected participants are information-rich cases capable of providing indepth understanding of the experiences and challenges of Criminology Laboratory Custodians, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the inquiry.

Research Instruments or Materials

The primary research instrument is a semi-structured interview guide designed for in-depth interviews with Laboratory Custodians. The guide contains open-ended questions organized into thematic sections covering participants' work experiences, encountered challenges, and contributions to the Criminology Program.

Interview questions are developed based on multiple sources: an extensive review of related literature on laboratory management, the roles of Laboratory Custodians in higher education, previous studies on support staff experiences in academic and laboratory settings, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis Framework, which informs question structure to facilitate effective coding and theme development.

The interview guide undergoes expert validation by specialists in the field of Criminology prior to data collection. Validation ensures that questions are appropriate, relevant, clear, and comprehensive in addressing the study's objectives and research questions. To further establish instrument trustworthiness and dependability, the guide undergoes pilot testing with two (2) Laboratory Custodians who are not part of the final sample. Pilot testing refines question wording, identifies ambiguous items, and confirms suitability for Braun and Clarke's analytical approach.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher prepares and submits a formal letter of request to the Dean of the Graduate School seeking approval to conduct the study. The letter outlines the research purpose, objectives, target participants (Laboratory Custodians of Criminology programs), methodology (in-depth interviews), and ethical standards to be observed.

Upon Graduate School approval, formal permission is sought from the Deans or Heads of the participating Higher Education Institutions.

Once institutional approvals are secured, face-to-face interviews are scheduled at times and locations convenient to the participants to minimize disruption to their duties. All interviews follow the validated protocol; responses are documented through note-taking and audio recording with explicit permission. Upon completion, interviews are transcribed verbatim and subjected to Thematic Analysis.

Data Analysis

Data processing follows three sequential stages: transcription, coding, and thematic development. During transcription, all recorded interviews are documented in full, preserving participant remarks and contextual details. In the coding stage, transcribed data are systematically reviewed and coded according to thematic relevance.

The final stage involves identifying patterns, categories, and overarching themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Thematic Analysis Framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final analysis.

Braun and Clarke's method is selected for its systematic yet flexible approach to qualitative inquiry, enabling the researcher to identify recurring patterns and insights directly aligned with the study objectives. Thematic Analysis is particularly appropriate for this inquiry as it enables a rich exploration of the lived experiences and challenges of Laboratory Custodians in higher education.

Ethical Considerations

An Informed Consent Form is administered to all participants prior to interview commencement. The document clearly explains the study's purpose, participant rights, estimated duration of participation, and confidentiality protocols.

The consent form is written in clear, understandable language and details the research objectives specifically, an exploration of the experiences, challenges, and contributions of Laboratory Custodians in Criminology programs.

Participation is entirely voluntary. Participants are informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty or negative consequence. All identities and provided information remain strictly confidential and anonymous. The researcher personally distributes and explains the contents of the consent form to each participant, allowing ample opportunity for questions and clarification before signing.

In strict adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012, all gathered information is treated with utmost confidentiality. Identities are anonymized throughout the analysis and reporting process. No monetary or other incentives are offered; participation is purely voluntary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study organized according to the five central problems of the research: (1) The daily lived experiences of Laboratory Custodians in the performance of their responsibilities; (2) custodians' perceptions of their task and professional value within the academic community; (3) specific challenges encountered and coping mechanisms employed; (4) how custodians interpret recognition or the lack thereof from faculty, students, and administrators; and (5) the propose program based on the study's findings.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke framework. The chapter integrates empirical findings with related literature and interprets results through the lens of Role Theory (Biddle, 1986) and Social Exchange Theory (Thibault & Kelley, 1959), which guided the study's theoretical foundation.

Theme 1: Daily Work and Experiences

This theme describes the daily routines, prioritized tasks, and variations in work flow across the academic calendar.

Daily Work Routine

Custodians follow a clear plan every day. They arrive early, open the lab, check equipment, and prepare supplies. During classes, they help teachers, watch for safety, keep things orderly, and manage waste. At the end of the day, they clean, store tools, update records, lock the room, and get ready for tomorrow.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** "*A typical day starts with checking and preparing the laboratory for classes. I assist instructors in setting up materials, monitor safety and order during activities, and record equipment use. Before leaving, I clean, organize, and secure all laboratory equipment.*"

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"When I arrive at work, the first thing I do is check the laboratory to make sure everything is clean and organized from the previous day. I inspect the equipment to ensure it's properly stored and ready for use, and I restock any supplies that are running low. Throughout the day, I keep the lab tidy, assist with setting up experiments if needed, and make sure safety protocols are followed. Before I leave, I do a final clean-up, secure all the equipment, and double-check that everything is in order for the next day."*

This only shows that custodians do more than clean. And they make sure that the lab is safe and ready all the time. This matches what the school expects from their job.

Prioritized Daily Responsibilities

Custodians consistently identified early preventive inspection, sanitation, and safety verification as their highest priorities. Before classes begin, they verify cleanliness, inspect equipment condition, restock supplies, and manage specialized waste disposal to minimize contamination risks. These proactive measures are intended to identify and resolve issues before instructional activities commence.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"The first tasks I prioritize are checking the cleanliness and safety of the laboratory, ensuring all equipment is complete and in good condition before classes begin."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"The very first thing I focus on is making sure the lab is clean and safe for everyone to use. I also check the equipment to see if it's all stored properly and in good condition. Then, I look at the supplies to see if anything needs to be restocked. Getting these things done early helps the day go much smoother."*

This shows custodians take safety and readiness seriously. They work hard to prevent problems before classes begin.

Workload Variation Between Regular and Summer Semesters

During regular school days, the lab is busy. Custodians work fast to clean, reset, and prepare between classes. In summer, there are fewer classes. They use this time for deep cleaning, repair, inventory, and organizing.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"During regular classes, the lab is busier with daily activities and student use, so I focus more on supervision and maintenance. During the summer semester, there are fewer classes, so I prioritize inventory and general cleaning."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"When classes are in session, my day is pretty busy — I'm constantly cleaning up between experiments, helping set up equipment, and answering questions from students or teachers. It feels like there's always something happening. But during the summer, things slow down a bit since there are fewer classes. I use that time to do deeper cleaning, organize supplies better, and get the lab ready for the next semester."*

This shows custodians adjust their work based on schedule. They keep the lab running during school and fix it during breaks.

Role Theory explains that every job has expected duties and behaviors. The findings show that Laboratory Custodians follow a clear daily routine opening, preparing, assisting, cleaning, and securing the lab. This matches what the school and community expect from their role. Custodians know exactly what they must do and when. They accept their responsibilities and perform them consistently. This shows that their work is guided by clear expectations and shared understanding of their place in the institution.

Theme 2: Perceptions of Professional Role and Value

This theme examines how custodians understand their responsibilities, distinguish their work from general maintenance, and perceive their contribution to institutional goals.

What They Actually Do

Custodians prepare the lab, check tools, help during activities, watch safety, clean, handle waste, and keep records. Their work is different from regular cleaning because it involves special equipment and strict safety rules.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"The most common tasks I perform include preparing materials and equipment, monitoring activities, maintaining cleanliness and safety, and organizing inventory."*
>
> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Checking safety equipment, preparing and issuing materials for classes, and sanitizing work spaces."*
>
> **PARTICIPANT C:** *"Sanitizing lab benches, deep-cleaning specialized glassware, safely disposing of chemical and biological waste, and maintaining stockroom organization."*

These responsibilities exceed standard custodial duties and require technical knowledge, procedural awareness, and consistent attention to detail. Under Role Theory, this represents a specialized role in which behavioral expectations are defined not only by institutional policy but also by the practical requirements of laboratory safety and instructional support.

Distinction from General Campus Maintenance

Laboratory work is stricter than regular campus cleaning. Custodians handle special tools, follow safety rules, manage hazardous materials, and keep detailed records. One mistake can ruin equipment or cause accidents.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"These tasks differ because the laboratory requires stricter safety measures and careful handling of specialized equipment, unlike other areas that focus mainly on general cleaning."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Taking care of the lab is a bit different from other parts of campus because I have to be extra careful with safety and cleanliness especially since there's a lot of equipment and sometimes chemicals involved. I need to make sure everything is stored the right way and that all the tools are working properly to keep everyone safe. While other areas mostly need general cleaning, the lab requires a bit more attention to detail and responsibility."*

This distinction supports the view that Laboratory Custodians occupy a specialized technical role rather than a general service position. The elevated standard of care required reflects the unique risks and responsibilities inherent in managing criminology and forensic laboratory facilities.

Special Tools and Rules

Custodians use gloves, masks, logbooks, and special cleaners. They follow rules to prevent accidents, protect equipment, and keep things sterile. In the criminology lab, they also handle evidence and forensic tools with extra care.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I use inventory logbooks, cleaning materials, and safety gear such as gloves and masks. I follow rules for handling equipment and safety."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Some tools and safety protocols unique to my role include using personal protective equipment like gloves, masks, and sometimes face shields. I use approved lab-grade disinfectants and follow specific cleaning procedures to prevent cross-contamination. I'm trained on how to handle biohazard or specialized waste and follow proper labeling and disposal procedures. I also follow lab safety guidelines closely to ensure both my safety and the safety of students and staff"*

The regular use of specialized protocols shows that custodians do technical work that needs training and skill. Their work is not only about cleaning and maintenance; it also includes quality assurance, risk management, and compliance with regulations, which are all important in managing a laboratory.

How They Describe Their Job

Custodians see themselves as the ones who keep the lab safe, clean, and ready. They work behind the scenes so teachers and students can focus on learning without worry.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"My job is to keep the laboratory clean, organized, and safe so that students and teachers can focus on their work without worrying about equipment or safety issues."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I usually tell people that my job is to keep the laboratory clean, organized, and safe so that students and teachers can focus on their work without worrying about equipment or safety issues. I'm like the behind-the-scenes person who makes sure everything runs smoothly and nothing gets in the way of learning. It might not seem flashy, but it's really important to keep the lab ready and safe every day."*

This self-perception shows a clear understanding of their work. Custodians see themselves as support staff, but they also see themselves as important contributors to the quality of education. This view matches findings that technical staff play a vital role in school operations, even though they often do not receive formal recognition or status.

Contribution to Institutional Mission and Objectives

Custodians believe their work helps the school fulfill its mission. A good lab means better learning. They make sure students can practice and learn safely.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"My job supports the school's mission by ensuring a safe and well maintained learning environment where students can practice and learn."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"My work supports the school's mission by helping provide a safe, organized, and professional learning environment. By maintaining the criminology laboratory properly, I help ensure that students and instructors can carry out experiments, demonstrations, and hands-on activities effectively. A clean and well maintained lab reflects the school's commitment to discipline, responsibility, and quality education."*

This finding shows that custodians link their daily tasks to the larger goals of the institution. Their work is operational, but it is important for education. Without ready and well maintained facilities, the quality of teaching and the development of student skills would be affected.

Perceived Primary Responsibility

Custodians believe that their main duty is keeping everyone safe and protecting equipment. They believe safety comes first.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"The most important job of a Laboratory Custodian is to ensure the safety, organization, and proper maintenance of all laboratory equipment and facilities."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I believe the most important job of a Laboratory Custodian is to make sure the lab is always safe and ready for use. It's about paying attention to the small details like keeping everything clean, organized, and making sure equipment is in good shape so that students and teachers can focus on learning without any worries. In a way, we're helping create the best possible environment for education to happen."*

This perception reveals that custodians internalize responsibility far beyond cleaning. They view themselves as guardians of safety and operational integrity an expanded understanding of their role that formal job descriptions often fail to capture

How Essential They Are

Custodians believe the lab cannot work well without them. If they do not prepare, clean, and check, classes cannot run safely. They are the backbone of the lab.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I believe my work is very essential because practical classes rely on a clean, safe, and well-prepared laboratory."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"A school can have the most brilliant science curriculum and the most advanced textbooks in the world, but if the physical laboratory is disorganized, unsterilized, or unsafe, those lessons can never leave the page. I turn the curriculum into reality every single morning."*

This conviction reflects the reality that laboratory readiness is a necessary condition for instruction. Custodians understand that their work though often unseen directly determines whether educational activities can occur. Their perceived sentimentality corresponds to the critical role they play in daily operations

How Others See Them

Custodians feel people know they are needed but rarely say thank you. Others notice their work only when something goes wrong.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I think the academic community sees me as someone who helps keep things running behind the scenes. They appreciate it but do not always say it."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Students, faculty and researcher's sees my role as a vital important person who can handle their requests with laboratory and ensures success in their learning."*

This perceived inconsistency between reliance and recognition creates tension within the employment relationship. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, users benefit from custodial labor but provide limited acknowledgment or reward creating an imbalance that may affect motivation and satisfaction.

Feeling Part of the Team

Custodians feel they belong because they support teaching and learning. But sometimes they feel overlooked because attention goes to teachers. A simple "thank you" makes them feel included.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"When teachers or students acknowledge my help or simply say thank you, it really makes me feel part of the team."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Honestly, there are times when I feel a bit separate because most of the focus is on teaching and research. But I also feel that my work is connected to theirs, since what I do helps make their jobs easier and safer. When teachers or students acknowledge my help or simply say thank you, it really makes me feel like part of the team."*

This positioning reflects what has been described as the "third space" of professional and technical personnel individuals who are essential to institutional function yet structurally

and culturally distinct from faculty. Their sense of belonging depends largely on relational acknowledgment rather than formal inclusion

What Happens Without Them

Custodians maintained that without their role, laboratory operations would become disorganized, unsafe, and unable to support instruction. They understood that their duties equipment maintenance, safety monitoring, waste management, and facility preparation are not optional but required for compliance and continuity.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"The university could still function, but not as efficiently or safely. Without a custodian, equipment maintenance and safety checks would be neglected*."

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"The university could still function, but laboratory activities would be less organized and less safe without my role, which would affect the quality of learning and operations."*

This assessment is supported by evidence showing that inadequate facility management, limited resources, and poor maintenance directly compromise laboratory quality and safety. Custodians serve as the operational mechanism through which facilities remain usable and safe.

Custodians understand their role clearly. They know their work is different from regular cleaning because it involves special equipment and strict safety rules. They see themselves as the ones who keep the lab safe and ready so others can teach and learn. They believe their work is essential even if not always seen. This shows that they find value and purpose in their duties. Their sense of worth comes not from praise, but from knowing they do something important for the school.

Theme 3: Challenges Encountered and Coping Mechanisms

This theme presents the difficulties custodians face, the support they receive, and the strategies they employ to manage workplace challenges.

Operational and Resource-Related Challenges

Custodians reported consistent difficulties including limited resources, equipment shortages or malfunction, inventory management issues, unfamiliar technology, time constraints between classes, and noncompliance with safety rules by laboratory users.

They also faced exposure to potential hazards and pressure to maintain standards despite inadequate supplies or support.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"Handling limited resources, managing equipment damage or loss, ensuring students follow safety protocols, and maintaining the laboratory's cleanliness despite heavy daily use."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"One of the most significant difficulties I face is working around specialized equipment and materials that require extra care. In a criminology laboratory, even small mistakes in cleaning or handling can cause damage or safety issues. Time constraints can also be challenging, especially when labs are used frequently and need to be prepared quickly between classes"*

These challenges illustrate **role ambiguity and role conflict** concepts within Role Theory that occur when expectations are unclear, resources are insufficient, or responsibilities exceed formal authority. Custodians are expected to maintain perfect facility readiness but are often denied adequate resources, decision-making power, or institutional support.

High-Pressure Situations

The most intensely challenging experiences involved time pressure during consecutive class sessions, equipment shortages immediately before instruction, and safety incidents such as chemical spills or improper waste disposal. These situations required rapid assessment, immediate action, and effective communication all performed under significant stress.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"There was a time when several classes were using the laboratory consecutively, and everything became messy very quickly. I had to clean, organize, and inspect all equipment within a short time-frame so the next class could begin safely."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I felt particularly challenged when multiple classes were scheduled on the same day and some equipment was missing or damaged, which required quick coordination with instructors and extra effort to prepare the laboratory on time."*

Such circumstances place custodians in high-responsibility, low-authority positions they must resolve operational crises without formal power to prevent them from recurring. This structural imbalance contributes significantly to occupational stress.

Institutional and Supervisory Support

Custodians identified supervisors, deans, and faculty members as their primary sources of support. Assistance included guidance, resource allocation, schedule adjustments, repair authorization, and policy enforcement. When support was available, custodians felt more capable and confident in performing their duties.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"My supervisor is usually very understanding and supportive whenever I face challenges. They listen when I raise concerns and try to help by providing extra resources or adjusting schedules when possible."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I receive guidance from our Dean like identifying the most priority equipment and materials"*

Supervisory support directly addresses role stress by clarifying expectations, providing resources, and reinforcing legitimate authority. Studies confirm that positive supervisory relationships are strongly associated with job satisfaction and performance among technical personnel.

Stress Management Strategies

To cope with workload and pressure, custodians relied on organization, planning, task prioritization, routine adherence, and maintaining a positive outlook. Many practiced brief mental breaks, deep breathing, or personal reflection to restore focus during demanding periods.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"By staying organized, planning tasks ahead of time, and maintaining a positive attitude. I also take short breaks when possible."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"When things get hectic, I try to take a few deep breaths and focus on one task at a time instead of getting overwhelmed by everything all at once. I also find it helpful to stay organized and plan out my work so I'm not rushing at the last minute. And whenever I can, I make sure to take short breaks to recharge—even just a few minutes can make a big difference in keeping me calm and focused."*

These adaptive practices reflect individual resilience in the face of structural limitations. When institutional support is insufficient, custodians rely on personal organization and psychological strategies to sustain performance.

Sources of Assistance During Difficulties

When challenges arose, custodians turned primarily to supervisors, department heads, colleagues, and safety officers for guidance and technical support. Reliance varied by situation—administrative issues were directed to supervisors, while technical or safety concerns were addressed with specialized personnel.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I rely on my supervisor and coworkers for advice, support, and teamwork when challenges arise."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"When I face challenges, I rely on my direct supervisor and my coworkers. They are usually willing to give advice, assistance, or clarification when needed. Knowing that I can ask questions or request help makes my work less stressful and helps me handle problems more effectively."*

This pattern demonstrates that effective laboratory management depends on professional networks. However, the need to seek approval or technical guidance also highlights gaps in training, authority, and resource availability that could be addressed institutionally.

Professional Motivation

Custodians remained motivated primarily by observing the positive impact of their work—students learning safely, classes proceeding smoothly, and the facility functioning effectively. Pride in service, sense of responsibility, and occasional expressions of appreciation sustained their commitment.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"Knowing that my work helps students learn safely and effectively and contributes to the success of the school's academic programs."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"What keeps me motivated is knowing that my work directly supports students and faculty in their learning and teaching. I take pride in maintaining a clean and safe criminology laboratory, and it feels rewarding to know that my efforts contribute to a professional and productive academic environment."*

Social Exchange Theory says people weigh effort against reward. Custodians work hard often more than required but face limited supplies, heavy workload, and lack of training. To keep going, they look for other rewards: seeing students learn, knowing they help others, and simple thanks from people. These small rewards keep them motivated despite difficulties. They cope by staying organized, working as a team, and keeping a positive attitude. This shows that support, respect, and appreciation matter as much as salary or benefits.

Theme 4: Recognition and Professional Valuation

This theme examines how custodians experience recognition, what forms they value most, and how they interpret limited acknowledgment of their contributions.

Experiences of Recognition

Custodians recalled specific instances where faculty members, students, or administrators expressed gratitude for their work acknowledging facility readiness, cleanliness, safety, and reliable service. These moments were described as meaningful and deeply motivating despite their infrequency.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"There was a time when a faculty member thanked me for keeping the laboratory organized during a busy semester. It made me feel appreciated."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Yes, I remember one time after a busy week of back-to-back lab sessions, a faculty member personally thanked me for keeping everything organized and running smoothly. It wasn't a big moment, but those few words really meant a lot to me. It made me feel appreciated and reminded me that even small acts of recognition can make a big difference in how valued you feel at work."*

Recognition validates professional worth and confirms that custodial contributions are observed and valued. Even brief acknowledgment carries disproportionate significance because it is rarely provided or expected.

Most Valued Forms of Recognition

Custodians consistently valued sincere verbal appreciation, respect for their expertise, and cooperation with laboratory rules above formal awards or financial incentives. They wanted to be seen as competent professionals whose judgment and contributions were respected.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I value simple but sincere recognition such as verbal appreciation or acknowledgment of my efforts. It shows that my work is seen and valued."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Simple verbal appreciation or a quick "thank you" from the professors and students after a long lab session. I also deeply value when people show respect for my role by actively following lab cleanup guidelines and disposal rules."*

This preference reflects the social exchange principle when material rewards are limited, respect, status, and appreciation become the primary currency of fair exchange. Custodians seek relational equity: respectful acknowledgment commensurate with their contributions.

Experiences of Limited Recognition

Custodians reported that their preventive work was frequently invisible users noticed facility readiness and safety only when standards were not met. Their contributions were often taken for granted, and they were sometimes viewed merely as cleaners rather than technical personnel.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"My work often goes unnoticed because it happens behind the scenes, and people usually notice only when something is missing or not prepared."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"Sometimes I feel like my work goes unnoticed because it's behind the scenes, and people only really think about it when something goes wrong. It can be a bit discouraging when the effort I put in to keep the lab safe and clean isn't acknowledged. But I understand that it's just part of the job, and I try to focus on knowing that what I do helps the whole school, even if it's not always seen."*

This invisibility is structural: successful preparation creates an appearance of effortless facility readiness. Because their work prevents problems rather than producing visible outputs, custodians face a systemic recognition deficit documented among technical personnel across institutions.

Making Sense of Invisibility

Custodians interpreted limited acknowledgment as inherent to their role preparation is meant to be seamless and unobtrusive. They viewed the absence of complaints, accidents, or disruptions as evidence of effective performance, sustaining professional pride despite limited visibility.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I understand that my role is mostly in the background and that others may not always see the effort involved in maintaining the laboratory."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I try to remind myself that just because my work isn't always visible doesn't mean it's not important. Sometimes the things people don't see are the ones that keep everything running smoothly behind the scenes. I focus on doing my best and take pride in knowing that I'm playing a key role, even if it's quiet and out of the spotlight."*

This perspective represents adaptive resilience. By redefining invisibility as evidence of success, custodians maintain professional satisfaction despite structural inequities. However, this adaptation should not obscure the need for institutional recognition

Desired Understanding of Their Role

Custodians wanted faculty and students to understand that their work involves technical knowledge, specialized safety practices, and constant vigilance not merely cleaning. They sought respect for the complexity, responsibility, and professional judgment required in laboratory management.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I would like them to understand that my work is important for their safety and learning, and that maintaining the laboratory requires responsibility, time, and careful attention."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I want them to understand that maintaining a laboratory requires highly specialized technical skill and constant vigilance, not just basic cleaning."*

This finding confirms that role clarity is mutually beneficial: when users understand custodial responsibilities, they are more likely to cooperate, respect boundaries, and acknowledge contributions thereby improving workplace relationships and operational outcomes.

People expect fair treatment and appreciation in return for their effort. Custodians work hard every day, but their work often goes unnoticed. They feel valued when someone simply says "thank you." They do not ask for money or awards they only want respect and recognition. When their effort is ignored, they feel unimportant. This shows that **respect and sincere appreciation are powerful rewards**. When people feel recognized, they work harder and stay longer. When they are ignored, they feel less motivated and valued.

Theme 5: Recommendations and Proposed Program

This theme presents custodians' suggestions for improvement and the proposed Laboratory Operations and Safety Management Manual as the study's primary output.

Recommended Institutional Interventions

Custodians proposed comprehensive improvements including regular professional training, adequate safety equipment, fairer workload distribution, improved communication, better inventory systems, and enhanced recognition. They also recommended student accountability programs to reduce misuse and facilitate shared responsibility.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"Regular training and workshops for Laboratory Custodians to enhance skills in safety management and equipment handling."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"If I could suggest something, it would be a program that offers more training and resources specifically for laboratory custodians, so we can do our jobs better and feel more confident. It would also be great to have more open communication with faculty and staff to better understand each others needs. And honestly, just having more regular recognition and support would make a huge difference in how valued and motivated we feel every day."*

These recommendations directly address the challenges identified throughout the study: limited resources, insufficient training, role ambiguity, workload pressure, and lack of recognition. Together, they form an integrated agenda for improving laboratory operations and custodian well-being.

Training and Resource Needs

Custodians identified specific needs including advanced safety training, hazardous material handling, emergency response, equipment maintenance, inventory management, and forensic laboratory procedures. They emphasized continuous, hands-on learning rather than one-time orientation.

> **PARTICIPANT A:** *"I need more training on advanced laboratory safety procedures, equipment troubleshooting, and proper inventory management, as well as access to updated tools and materials for efficient maintenance."*

> **PARTICIPANT B:** *"I think more hands-on training with the latest lab equipment and safety procedures would really help me feel more prepared and confident. Sometimes it feels like things change fast, and having updated resources or refresher courses would make a big difference. Also, easy access to troubleshooting guides or quick support when something goes wrong would be really helpful in making my work smoother."*

These needs confirm that Laboratory Custodians perform technical functions requiring ongoing professional development. Without adequate training, safety risks increase, equipment deteriorates, and custodians cannot fully meet institutional expectations. Based on the findings, the proposed Manual and Program will clarify duties, set standards, and provide training.

This supports Role Theory in which clear rules help everyone understand what to do and what to expect. At the same time, the program includes training, support, and recognition. This supports Social Exchange Theory that when the institution provides training, tools, and respect, what custodians receive will improve what they give to the institution.

General Discussion

Laboratory Custodians described their work as a structured cycle: preparation, active supervision, and closing procedures to keep laboratories safe, functional, and instruction ready.

They arrive early to unlock facilities, inspect equipment, and restock supplies. During operations, they monitor activities, assist with experiments, enforce safety rules, prevent evidence contamination, and manage hazardous waste.

At the end of each day, they conduct final checks, clean, store materials, update logbooks, lock the facility, and note pending tasks. Morning routines are proactive, combining preventive maintenance and sanitation so the laboratory is fully ready before classes begin. Custodians perform early inspections of cleanliness, safety, and equipment condition, and manage specialized waste disposal to reduce contamination risks. They operate in a dual mode workflow wherein during the regular semester, they provide high-intensity, real-time support frequent sanitizing, rapid turnaround between classes, continuous supervision. During summer, they shift to strategic restoration: inventory audits, deep cleaning, and repairs to prepare for the upcoming term.

Also, Custodians follow a comprehensive routine: pre-session preparation, equipment verification, instructional support, ongoing monitoring, inventory management, detailed disinfection, waste handling, and facility maintenance.

Their work is safety-critical system maintenance, not general cleaning requiring technical knowledge, strict protocols, specialized equipment handling, and formal accountability through logs, traceability, and policy-guided operations. They use specialized tools and controls: inventory logbooks, proper PPE, compatible cleaning materials, strict safety rules, and heightened security for forensic items such as fingerprint kits and evidence containers. Custodians see themselves as essential, mission-driven partners the "invisible engine" of academic success who make laboratories organized, safe, and ready for learning.

In the Criminology program, they safeguard both assets and the integrity of hands-on learning with sensitive materials. Their work is foundational: a well-maintained environment enables effective practical training and reflects the institution's commitment to quality education. They emphasize meticulous attention to detail creating psychological safety so learners can focus, and physical safety through proper cleaning, disposal, and equipment care. Without their preparation and upkeep, practical sessions cannot run smoothly. They bridge theory and professional mastery, sustaining daily academic momentum.

The broader academic community views them as silent but dependable facilitators that are knowledgeable, responsible, and trusted yet often underacknowledged. Custodians generally feel integrated as partners in teaching and learning, though some feel separated from the academic core. Simple communication, respect, and expressions of thanks strengthen their sense of belonging. They confirm their role is indispensable: without them, laboratory classes would be less efficient, less safe, and more prone to disruption.

Additionally, Custodians face interconnected challenges: maintaining accurate inventories, preventing equipment damage or loss, and handling delicate, sometimes hazardous materials especially when unfamiliar with new tools.

Sustaining cleanliness and safety during busy schedules with limited time between classes is difficult; they must manage chemical and biological waste, unlabeled materials, and broken glass with constant vigilance work that goes unnoticed unless problems occur. The most demanding situations involve consecutive classes requiring rapid disinfection, inspection, and resetting. Missing or insufficient equipment forces immediate checks, coordination with instructors, and improvisation to avoid delays. Support comes from supervisors, deans, faculty, and colleagues through guidance, advice, administrative assistance, and teamwork during peak periods. Custodians manage stress through organization, planning, prioritization, and maintaining a positive attitude. Advance preparation, daily routines, and proper scheduling reduce overwhelm. They focus on one task at a time and take brief restorative breaks to stay calm and focused. For technical and safety issues, they consult safety officers or experienced faculty, though some feel they must solve problems independently when support is unavailable. They are motivated primarily by the positive impact of their work seeing students learn safely and effectively in well-prepared laboratories and take strong pride in preventing accidents and enabling uninterrupted activities. Furthermore, Custodians highly value recognition from faculty, students, and administrators especially during busy schedules, exams, and special activities. Faculty acknowledgment after smooth classes or at semester's end makes them feel seen, respected, and valued. Student gratitude also has a powerful positive effect. They particularly prize simple, sincere appreciation; verbal thanks, respect for their expertise, being consulted on procedures, and having their recommendations followed. Cooperation from users; following rules, cleaning up, and respecting equipment also makes them feel

supported and lightens their burden. Despite these moments, their work is often unseen. Users experience only the ready, clean outcome without recognizing the extensive preparation behind it. Their contribution becomes visible mainly when something goes wrong such as those missing items, spills, delays, so preventive efforts are taken for granted. They understand this low visibility as inherent to their role: when everything works well, it appears effortless. To cope, they remind themselves of their work's purpose and take pride in service. They want stakeholders to understand their role extends far beyond cleaning also it requires time, knowledge, precision, and constant vigilance, including safeguarding sensitive materials and maintaining confidentiality where needed. Lastly, Custodians recommend a comprehensive institutional support program covering skills, safety, workload, resources, recognition, and inclusion. Top priorities include regular specialized training in safety management, equipment handling, chemical and hazardous material procedures, decontamination, and emergency response; adequate resources, proper PPE, updated supplies, maintenance systems, and health monitoring; improved communication, advance notices and updates on schedules, simulations, and hazardous activities; realistic workloads; sufficient transition time between classes, additional support during peaks, and allocated time for deep maintenance and inventory; and shared responsibility; student orientations, clear rules, and experiential activities such as "Custodian-for-a-Day." Training must go beyond basic cleaning to include simulated evidence handling, mock biohazards, forensic tools, spill response, first aid, and proper PPE use, plus capacity building in troubleshooting, preventive maintenance, inventory management, leadership, and communication. This study concludes that Laboratory Custodians in Higher Education Institutions offering Criminology programs are indispensable, safety-critical partners whose structured, preventive workflow forms the operational backbone of laboratory functionality. Their daily cycle of preparation, supervision, and closing adapts systematically to the academic calendar in high-intensity support during the semester, deep maintenance during breaks. They perceive their role as fundamentally distinct from general cleaning in which viewing themselves as the "invisible engine" of academic success who create secure foundations for hands-on learning, bridge theory and practice, and uphold institutional credibility. Despite significant challenges resource constraints, time pressure, and hazardous materials they demonstrate resilience through organization, teamwork, and intrinsic motivation rooted in student safety and success. However, their work is most successful when invisible, leading to feelings of being undervalued or misidentified as ordinary cleaners rather than technical safety partners. They deeply value simple, sincere recognition, appreciation, respect, and cooperation which validates their contribution and strengthens belonging. Accordingly, they advocate for comprehensive support: specialized training, improved communication, realistic scheduling, adequate resources, and shared responsibility. These reflect a clear aspiration to professionalize their role, enhance safety

standards, and foster a collaborative environment where their expertise is recognized and supported ensuring Criminology laboratories remain safe, functional, and instruction-ready.

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