How to Become a Forensic Accountant

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According to the Federal Trade Commission, Americans lost $12.5 billion to fraud in 2024, an uptick of 25 percent from the previous year. The most common schemes included imposter and investor scams, fake employment opportunities, and e-commerce fraud — all of which the proliferation and anonymity of social media make easier.

This alarming statistic, however, only paints a partial picture. It does not consider corporate fraud, extortion, the laundering of illicit funds, or any number of white collar crimes.

No matter the exact nature of a financial crime, law enforcement agencies and private interests alike turn to forensic accountants for answers and justice. Professionals who are interested in this specialized career opportunity can benefit from learning more about the role and the skills gained from earning an advanced accounting degree.

What Does a Forensic Accountant Do?

Forensic accountants are investigators who specialize in financial crimes. While they are not law enforcement officers who can arrest perpetrators, they work closely with law enforcement officials on cases involving fraud and theft. They are vital to investigating everyone from white collar criminals to organized crime rings that operate on a global scale.

Common responsibilities of forensic accountants include the following:

- Analyzing financial documents to determine the extent and nature of financial crimes and identify perpetrators
- Interviewing suspects, witnesses, victims, and other persons of interest
- Cooperating with law enforcement and regulatory authorities
- Providing expert testimony in court
- Helping organizations establish policies that discourage future incidents

Many forensic accountants work for local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, as well as regulatory agencies, such as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. However, they can also work in the private sector, including for banks, law firms, insurance companies, accounting firms, and financial consulting firms.

Steps to Become a Forensic Accountant

Forensic accountants must have a solid understanding of financial law and intricate corporate accounting strategies. Additionally, they must be adept interviewers and creative and critical problem-solvers. This means that the process of becoming a forensic accountant often involves earning a Master of Accounting and gaining years of practical accounting experience.

Step 1: Earn a Bachelor’s Degree

Future forensic accountants often start their careers by earning bachelor’s degrees in accounting or related disciplines, such as finance. At this level, students take classes on fundamental accounting skills, such as tax planning and financial reporting.

Students may also want to take electives in criminal justice, law, psychology, and other forensics-related topics. The courses help them develop skills to interview persons of interest and cooperate with law enforcement professionals.

Step 2: Earn a Master’s Degree

Educational requirements for forensic accounting positions vary by organization. However, because these professionals must have a deep understanding of accounting principles and practices, many earn a master’s degree in accounting or a similar degree in a field such as finance. Earning a master’s degree can also make professionals more competitive candidates.

At the master’s degree level, students take classes on the advanced skills being a forensic accountant requires such as:

- Accounting information systems
- Entity taxation
- Auditing
- Accounting data analysis
- Risk analysis
- Valuation
- Financial modeling

Many Master of Accounting programs also offer classes focused entirely on forensic accounting. While having a bachelor’s degree in accounting can be helpful, master’s degree programs typically accept students with backgrounds in economics, finance, mathematics, science, and a wide range of other disciplines.

Step 3: Gain Experience and Consider Becoming a Certified Public Accountant

Forensic accountant positions typically require general accounting experience. Early in their careers, professionals often work as accounting clerks and assistants at organizations of all kinds. However, future forensic professionals can gain more specialized experience by taking on similar roles at law enforcement agencies, courts, government agencies, and consulting firms that offer forensic services.

At this stage, it can also be helpful to obtain Certified Public Accountant (CPA) certification. While the certification is not required to become a forensic accountant, many organizations prefer to hire CPAs because of the rigorous training they undergo.

Requirements vary slightly between states, but CPAs in Louisiana must satisfy these requirements:

- Have a bachelor’s degree at minimum
- Complete 150 hours of classes including 24 hours of accounting classes and 24 hours of business classes
- Have at least a year or 2,000 hours of qualifying accounting experience
- Pass the Uniform CPA Examination

Because bachelor’s degree programs typically only include about 120 credit hours of classes, CPA candidates often pursue master’s degrees, so they can develop a deeper knowledge of the field and meet the minimum education hours requirements.

Step 4: Pursue Forensic Accounting Positions and Professional Certification

With a master’s degree and a few years of general accounting experience, professionals can pursue forensic accounting positions. After gaining experience, professionals may also seek professional certification. While not a required step to become a forensic accountant, certification can help accountants stand out in the hiring process for high-level roles at a wide range of private and public sector organizations.

For example, one option is to obtain Certified Forensic Accountant certification through the American Board of Forensic Accountants. To qualify, applicants must have a bachelor’s or master’s degree, two years of experience, and CPA certification, as well as pass a final examination. Other certification organizations have similar criteria.

Forensic Accountant Salary and Job Outlook

Forensic accountants earned a median annual salary of about $80,100 as of April 2025, according to the compensation website Payscale. The highest-earning professionals made around $121,000 or more. Salary can vary based on location, agency, and whether an accountant works in the public or private sector.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects positive growth for the accounting workforce. By 2033, it projects employment of accountants and auditors in general to grow by 6 percent, with around 130,800 job openings each year during the period.

In the same period, the BLS projects employment for financial examiners to increase by an astounding 21 percent, with an average of 6,500 jobs each year. Together, these projections indicate that accountants — especially those with strong investigative skills — will be in demand in the coming years.

Launch Your Career in Forensic Accounting

Forensic accountants do not just need to be experts in financial law and accounting procedures. They must also be able to apply that knowledge to uncovering crimes and recovering funds. The Master of Accounting program at the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University is dedicated to helping students build that adaptable skill set.

While Tulane's Master of Accounting program offers specializations in Analytics, Structured Finance, and Taxation, the Risk Management specialization includes classes on forensic accounting and accounting management systems. However, with enough room in their schedules to take 12 hours of electives, students can customize their schedules to fit the unique needs of their career aspirations.

To find out more about Tulane's Master of Accounting program, class options, and other important information, contact the admissions department today.

Sources:

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- Society of Louisiana CPAs, Becoming a CPA
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