
AP-LS Student Committee Career Corner

Issue Contributor: Keisha April, 2017-2018 Student Committee Secretary

The Career Corner is intended to highlight the individuals who work at the intersection of law and psychology, where they come from, how they got there, and how their experiences influence their research, teaching, and/or practice. This edition of Career Corner features Naomi Goldstein, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Co-Director of the JD/PhD Program in Law and Psychology, and Director of the Juvenile Justice Research and Reform Lab at Drexel University. She is also a Stoneleigh Foundation Fellow. Dr. Goldstein collaborates with community stakeholders to use social science research to improve juvenile justice policy and practice. For nearly 20 years, her work has focused on the role of adolescent development in legal decision making and legal outcomes. She currently focuses on cross-systems work to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, reform juvenile probation systems, protect youths' rights during police questioning, and reduce racial and ethnic disparities within the justice system. Keisha April, a 3rd year Ph.D. student at Drexel University and the 2017-2018 Student Committee Secretary, interviewed Dr. Goldstein.

AP-LS Student Committee: Could you describe for us your academic and clinical training, starting with your time as an undergraduate?

Dr. Goldstein: My interest in forensic psychology began in 5th grade. My father was the CE chair of the American Academy of Forensic Psychology—which was run out of our kitchen—and I functioned as the first secretary. I grew up going to conferences and sat in on workshops at an early age. Starting in high school, I learned how much I loved forensic psychology. As an undergrad at Wesleyan University, I conducted research on American Sign Language and was interested in working with adolescents with serious behavioral issues. As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to work on the unit for Deaf individuals at the state hospital in Connecticut and was able to do more advanced clinical work because of my near-fluency in sign language. For example, I provided competency restoration programming to two Deaf individuals deemed incompetent to stand trial.



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When I went to graduate school, my lab worked on projects implementing and evaluating academic and behavioral interventions with preschoolers in Head Start classrooms. I was fascinated by the methodological approach to evaluation and eager to continue doing applied research that could have system-level impacts. At the same time, I was doing my clinical training in forensic psychology and realized I wanted to merge my forensic work with clinically-oriented research with child populations, and that led to my focus on juvenile justice.

AP-LS Student Committee: Could you speak a bit about your clinical training?

Dr. Goldstein: My internship experience at UMASS Medical School was wonderful. By internship, I had long since realized I was far more interested in clinically-oriented forensic research than I was in a clinical forensic career. Nevertheless, the clinical training I received on internship was valuable for so many reasons and afforded me the opportunity to get in-depth training that I would apply to my research throughout my career. I was a forensic corrections intern at UMass and spent time doing clinical work in a prison, forensic psychiatric hospital, juvenile justice placement, and juvenile court clinic. Some of those experiences, like working in a prison-based residential treatment unit and assessing youth in placement, have been invaluable in my ability to conduct research effectively in juvenile and criminal justice settings and gives me credibility when working with justice system stakeholders. For students, if you're interested in applied work, getting direct experience in applied settings is critical. It really helps you understand the populations with which you want to work.

AP-LS Student Committee: What drew you to an academic/research career?

Dr. Goldstein: The biggest thing that drew me to an academic research career was that I was really interested in doing work that could impact systems, or many individuals, at once. As I was doing clinical work in graduate school and on internship, I felt like I kept seeing the same issues come up over and over again. I realized that if I wanted to make real change, there were big system issues that needed to be addressed. For example, early on in my career, I felt that the girls I encountered in the juvenile justice system were being ignored, and there weren't many treatment options for them. There needed to be well-researched treatment approaches aligned to their needs and interests. These days, my focus has transformed from treatment development and evaluation into even higher level system reform around how the juvenile justice system is structured to align with what we know from research about adolescents' developmental capacities.

As a professor in an academic setting, part of what I find most rewarding and exciting about my job is mentoring and teaching students. I love that I am able to impact systems through research and policy work, but I'm just one person. What I love more than anything is seeing students come in and get excited about this work and develop their own questions and priorities, and I can help them develop the skillset to be able to tackle these issues throughout their careers and advise their own students. It's about generations of people who are able to tackle these issues from lots of different perspectives and try to improve outcomes for those involved in the justice system. And I feel like I learn something new from each student who comes through, so my skills are continuously developing, and my ability to ask questions changes with each experience.

AP-LS Student Committee: How did you become interested in juvenile justice research?

Dr. Goldstein: I always had an interest in adolescents; it's an age group I really like. I used to teach, and the challenging 8-9th graders were my favorite kids. Being able to understand them and their perspectives has always been critical. Beyond that, working in adult prisons reinforced for me the importance of working with this age group. If only someone—whether it was a parent, a teacher, or a system—had intervened when these individuals were younger, their outcomes could have been much different. For me, I really became committed to juvenile justice when I realized how important it was to intervene at a much earlier stage. I wanted to learn what we could do to prevent youths' first contact with the justice system or, when unavoidable, make it their last one—to put youth on a better track and afford them more opportunities for long-term positive outcomes.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you speak about how you got involved with working on juvenile justice reform in Philadelphia, specifically?

Dr. Goldstein: I have been based in Philadelphia for 18 years, since I got my first job, at Drexel. A large part of my involvement comes down to relationships over time. When I first started out, I thought I could just jump in and start doing research, but I quickly realized how much I needed to understand about the broader landscape of juvenile justice in Philadelphia and needed to become a trusted member of the city's juvenile justice community. Over several years, I connected with agencies and organizations whose leaders were really helpful in helping me to get things going. As I established these relationships, people would reach out for help with projects. I was eager to help. I wanted to understand more about the issues I cared about and work with colleagues to find solutions. In the early days, there was rarely funding for this work, but I saw my role—then and now—as doing things to help the area in which I live and the communities around me. I owe it to these agencies and kids to help them; if I'm asking them to participate in my studies, they should be able to benefit from them, too. Part of that is taking what I've learned and trying to improve systems. There have been lots of great reforms going on in Philadelphia. When people ask me to serve on committees, my answer is usually yes. I've felt very lucky to have the opportunity to collaborate with a wide variety of agencies and individuals who care about similar issues and work hard to improve outcomes for youth.

AP-LS Student Committee: What has your experience been, as a social science researcher, working directly with communities and larger social systems?

Dr. Goldstein: I have learned a lot over the years. I learned early on that a lot of community agencies and stakeholders are often very skeptical about researchers, for a lot of reasons. Many have had really negative experiences when academics come in and try to tell them what to do. Or researchers come in, collect data, and then disappear. Or data is interpreted without going over with agency leadership or community stakeholders what the research really means. I've learned that it has to be a genuine partnership. We are doing this together. I may go in as an expert on adolescent development and what implications of that are in juvenile justice contexts, but by no means am I the expert on how their system operates. They know their systems, counties, kids. It's about bringing what I know and trying to merge it with their expertise. That's a really important piece. It's important to be able to help them apply the information in practice, using their language and experience, and not get caught up in academic psych jargon. And more importantly, it's important to ask them for their input and their examples of how to apply research findings to policy practice—and to really listen to what they have to say. And when we're dealing with data, it's important to make it clear up front that part of my role is to generate results, but I don't present anything or write it up until I've spoken with them about what it all means. We always share with our partners what we're presenting or writing. They may not always love the results we're finding, but they do always have input on how their data should be interpreted and responsibly presented.

AP-LS Student Committee: What do you find most interesting or gratifying about the work you have done in your career so far?

Dr. Goldstein: As a professor and mentor, seeing my students graduate and go on to their own careers and seeing their accomplishments has been the most gratifying and exciting piece. Also, recently, with the types of system-level reform work I'm doing with my community partners, seeing real, meaningful change has been incredible. It's been amazing to see a 71% reduction in the annual number of school-based arrests city-wide and to realize that means we have over 1,000 fewer kids arrested each year in Philadelphia schools—1,000 students who can continue to lead normal lives

outside the justice system. Seeing juvenile probation transform what it's doing so that kids are reinforced for positive behavior, instead of just sanctioned for negative behaviors, and seeing success with this new approach—instead of just having kids stuck in a cycle within the system. Research findings are generating real, powerful, direct positive impacts. They're not just ending up in a journal somewhere. They're not just more publication lines on a CV. They're actually impacting the lives of the kids and professionals in the system.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are some of the biggest challenges to working on juvenile justice reform?

Dr. Goldstein: There are both emotional and practical challenges. One of the toughest things is that change can be slow. It's really wonderful when it's fast and powerful, but much of the time, change is slow. Even when everyone is in agreement about what needs to change, it takes time to get there and you see the numbers of kids missing out on these changes in the short term. That can be hard. The other part is the practical. Data systems for counties and states were not created with research in mind. Most people in the system—probation officers, police officers, attorneys, etc.—don't have the time to collect data for research. So the question is, how do you tackle the real world challenge of using case management and system data for research purposes, especially when it may not be coded in ways that allow you to do that easily? Similar problems arise when you're trying to look at state or national juvenile justice data, but jurisdictions differ in the format and content of the information they collect. There are a lot of practical challenges when you're trying to look at system reform and have to rely on different systems for that data.

AP-LS Student Committee: What advice do you have for students who may be interested in justice, policy reform, or working with systems?

Dr. Goldstein: Part of the approach is to just throw yourself into it. Be open to what kind of projects or reforms or system-type work you're willing to do. Be generous with your time. Volunteer for committees, projects, and collaborations. Often you will be surprised where it will take you. As a student, getting into settings to do exactly what you want to do may be tough. Ask your mentor for opportunities, ask community partners for ways you may be helpful. These systems are often so strapped and people are spread so thin that if you are willing to volunteer your time, you will often be welcomed with open arms. Embedding yourself in systems in a variety of ways can open up all sorts of opportunities for policy work, research, and other experiences.

AP-LS Student Committee: You have had a unique opportunity to work closely with many key stakeholders in the juvenile justice system throughout your career. What are some areas of juvenile justice reform you think are ripe for exploration by social science researchers? What type of research or interventions do you think we need more of?

Dr. Goldstein: There is so much change happening now in juvenile justice, and social science researchers can help guide and evaluate this change to maximize its positive impacts. More specifically, in the past several years, there has been tremendous momentum toward reforming juvenile probation systems. A vast majority of kids in the juvenile justice system are on probation, and a huge percentage of youth in detention are there for probation violations. The question is, how do we change this? A lot of places are working to change their approaches to juvenile probation. Some of this involves policy change, such as permissible reasons kids can be held or reasons to extend probation. But a lot of this comes down to practice, to what probation officers are doing with youth—are they serving a coaching role or a monitoring role? I think there will be a lot of change around what happens in the context of probation. This country is at also a point where there's a lot

of discussion about policing. I think we will see opportunities for a lot of research informing police policy and practice. Now is a critical time for some focus on that.

I think there will also be continued research into juvenile justice broadly. As we learn more about adolescent decision making and what we know about brain development, we get into questions about the ways the juvenile justice system mirrors the adult system and legal expectations of youth that may not align well with what we know about adolescent development. This opens tons of opportunities in term of law and legal policy, assessment tools, interventions in detention and placement, and after-care and reentry. There will be a lot of focus on how we can better align policy and practice with what we know about adolescents.

AP-LS Student Committee: Do you have any words of wisdom for students seeking a research career in forensic psychology? What are some important things they should consider?

Dr. Goldstein: One question to think through is the setting in which students want to work. Out of grad school, students interested in research careers often think of working in a traditional academic setting, in a traditional psychology department in a university. However, students should realize that there are many settings in which they can have a research career in forensic psychology or psychology and law more broadly. At a university, they could work at a medical school, in a criminal justice department, or in a school of public health. They could also work at an institute or center that focuses on issues related to their area of interest. We have quite a few in the juvenile justice world, and there are even more at the adult level.

There also are some less academically-oriented places where people do research. For example, district attorney's offices, court systems in large urban areas, and departments of behavioral health hire researchers to help them improve practices. There are more opportunities to do this than people often think. It makes sense to think about what you really want to do when choosing your path. And if students are looking for ideas about how to embark on a multidisciplinary career in psychology and law, it's good to take a look around at the AP-LS conference. That's a great time to get ideas for career paths you're interested in and meet professionals in your area of interest. If you think you know what you're interested in, talk to senior people in the field and get a better idea of what they do and how they got there. One of the wonderful things about AP-LS is how encouraging and supportive senior members are of graduate students and emerging professionals.
