
AP-LS Student Committee

Career Corner

Issue Contributor: Amanda Rosinski, 2017-2018 Student Committee Clinical Liaison

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 Kari M. Schlessinger, Psy.D., Ph.D., a forensic psychologist for the Bureau of Prisons at Metropolitan Correctional Center – New York and Lieutenant Commander for the United States Public Health Service. Amanda Rosinski, a 3rd year Ph.D. student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the 2017-2018 Student Committee Clinical Liaison, interviewed Dr. Schlessinger.

AP-LS Student Committee: How did you become interested in the field of law and psychology?

Dr. Schlessinger: When I was young, I wanted to be a circus psychologist. I believed everyone in the circus needed a psychologist as they were away from their families and had a high chance of injuries. As I grew up, I recognized this was an unrealistic goal; however, I went to college for psychology. During a criminology class in college, I had to write a paper on developing a society without crime. This class sparked my interest in combining both psychology and law, so I majored in psychology and minored in criminology. I went to graduate school for forensic psychology, where I had the opportunity work with the public defender's office and the first mental health court, and completed an externship at the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in Miami. I also had the opportunity to work with a local police department and the hostage negotiation unit of the FBI. I completed a semester-long internship at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Behavioral Science Unit. I started my education not knowing what area of psychology I wanted to focus on. Once I realized I was interested in psychology and law, I believe I was very fortunate to have so many different opportunities to learn about the field.



Kari M. Schlessinger, Psy.D., Ph.D.
Forensic Psychologist for the Bureau of Prisons at Metropolitan Correctional Center – New York and Lieutenant Commander for the United States Public Health Service

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

Dr. Schlessinger: I went to University of Florida (Go Gators!) for undergraduate training, majoring in psychology and minoring in criminology. I attended the graduate program at Florida International

University, but the program was not the right fit for me, as I wanted a more clinical-based program. I earned my master's degree in psychology and then transferred to Nova Southeastern University, where the school had just developed a clinical and research-oriented forensic psychology program. While there, I got involved in everything I could. I graduated with a doctorate in psychology and a doctorate in philosophy, both with forensic specialties. I chose both degrees as I wanted to make sure I was suited to do both clinical and research work. I completed my dissertation on correctional officer stress and internship at the BOP in Butner. I had several additional opportunities because of connections I made with faculty. After graduating, I gained my postdoctoral hours at the NYPD, where I conducted pre-employment screening of potential officers. After that, I returned to the BOP as a staff psychologist at Brooklyn. I have been a forensic psychologist for the past 11 years at the BOP in Manhattan.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you speak about how you got involved with the United States Public Health Service (USPHS)?

Dr. Schlessinger: I have always been involved in underserved populations. Additionally, I enjoy participating and helping others through volunteer activities. I have numerous family members in military, including my grandfather, stepfather, stepbrother, and brother-in-law. I did not know about the USPHS until I was employed at the BOP for over five years, but I knew it would be worth it. The USPHS mission is to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of the nation. Its core values are leadership, service, integrity, and excellence. The USPHS works with underserved communities filling critical roles. I commissioned with USPHS in 2003, and I am currently a Lieutenant Commander. Since commissioning, I have been fortunate to remain at the BOP. Additionally, I do several additional service activities a year, including working with cancer and MS patients. Last year, I was also deployed for five weeks during hurricane Maria.

AP-LS Student Committee: What part of your job do you find most satisfying?

Dr. Schlessinger: This is a very difficult question for me because I truly love my job and the department I work with. Everyone works together and helps each other, which makes the day much better. I love doing the forensic evaluations because I enjoy assessing inmates and making an opinion regarding the ultimate question. I enjoy both the clinical aspect as well as the legal part. Additionally, I enjoy the investigative part of the evaluation, such as when I am able to find a discrepancy no one else has found. I find it rewarding explaining to the inmate how the evaluation will help them no matter the outcome. I also find it satisfying when the inmate thanks the evaluator for helping them no matter the outcome. Finally, I find working with the externs very satisfying because I enjoy teaching and watching the externs learn and develop throughout the year. I do not think there is any one part I can say is most satisfying. I think I am very fortunate to say that I love my work.

AP-LS Student Committee: What part of your job is most challenging?

Dr. Schlessinger: There are three different types of challenges facing forensic psychologists working in the BOP: the environment, building rapport during evaluations, and "the unknown." First, in the prison, one never knows what each day will bring. I may have a plan but the institution has its own plan, and there are always emergencies which prevent inmates from coming to psychology. Additionally, psychology is

dependent upon correctional officers to send the inmates and for the inmates to actually come. Second, although this is not a therapeutic relationship, developing a relationship does help improve the evaluation. Some evaluations are easier than others as some inmates cooperate more than others. Finally, my biggest challenge is “the unknown.” After the evaluation is complete, the report is sent to the judge, and I never know what happens next. Since we are neutral evaluators, we have no way of knowing what happens to the inmate. I continue to struggle with this, especially when I testify on a case and get no closure. I constantly have to remind myself that I have done my job.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are the biggest challenges facing the field of forensic psychology today?

Dr. Schlessinger: The challenges facing the field of forensic psychology include that psychology is not a precise science; it is ever-changing and psychologists have different opinions. That said, in the field of forensic psychology, where one testifies, one needs to be up to date not just on their current case, but on the current research. We need to make sure we are using the most recent DSM, the most recent testing materials, and what we are using is appropriate for the population we are interviewing. As the field is ever-changing, we must constantly be prepared to testify on the most current research and have the ability to support our decisions.

AP-LS Student Committee: What can students do to address these challenges?

Dr. Schlessinger: Being prepared is the best way to meet any challenge. Students should take all of the opportunities to get involved in all that they can, which will improve their chances of success as professional psychologists. The more opportunities obtained as a student, the more a student will know how to handle challenges and stress later. Remain open-minded to others. While you may not agree with what others have to say, you can take what they say and use it towards furthering your own research. Finally, remain involved in APA to stay aware of the current challenges in the field and maintain connections.

AP-LS Student Committee: Do you have any advice to give students who are considering pursuing a doctoral degree?

Dr. Schlessinger: First, make sure this is what you want to do. There is a lot of school and training involved if it is not what you want. Once you are sure, go for it, as it is very rewarding. While in school, put your all into it. You get out exactly what you put in to school. Take advantage of the experiences offered to you. This is the time to learn about multiple different areas of psychology. Find a mentor, both a student and psychologist, that you trust. The connections you make in school can last a lifetime and can help with both personal and professional questions throughout your career. I continue to keep in touch with professors, supervisors, and students I have supervised.

AP-LS Student Committee: Do you have any words of wisdom for students a career in psychology in law, particularly in clinical work?

Dr. Schlessinger: For anyone seeking a doctoral degree, make sure you take time for yourself. While school is very busy and there is always so much to do, don't forget that you are most important. You are going to school for your career, not for your life. Find a hobby and stick to it, and make time for your family. All of this applies when you get out of school, too. We get so busy with our careers that we forget who we are. Our professions are psychologists, but we are also spouses, parents, siblings, dancers, runners, chefs, readers, etc. You will actually be a better clinician when you are happy and stress-free.
