
AP-LS Student Committee

Career Corner

Content Editor: Victoria Pietruszka, 2018-2019 Student Committee Chair-Elect

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 profiles Kevin Douglas, LL.B., Ph.D., Professor in the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University. Dr. Douglas's research focuses on violence risk assessment, violence risk management, dynamic risk factors, and the relationships between mental and personality disorders such as psychopathy and violence. Dr. Douglas is co-author of the Historical-Clinical-Risk Management-20 (HCR-20) measure and was the recipient of the Saleem Shah Award for Early Career Excellence in Psychology and Law in 2005. Dr. Douglas is serving as the 2018-2019 President of the APA Division 41 American Psychology-Law Society. Victoria Pietruszka, a 5th year J.D./Ph.D. student at Drexel University and the 2018-2019 Student Committee Chair-Elect, interviewed Dr. Douglas.

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

Dr. Douglas: I have to go back to my undergraduate and even my high school days. I was interested in law first. Part of this interest was wondering why people choose to commit crimes: What is it that drives people to make those decisions? I took a lot of criminology classes and I felt that the criminological explanation only went so far because it focused on contextual and social influences on human behavior. For example, when considering neighborhood characteristics that influence crime rates, I thought “not everyone in those neighborhoods are committing crimes, so what is it about those who do?” That is when I became interested in the intersection between criminology and psychology and the law and felt that this field could do what criminology and psychology could not do on their own in terms of explaining behavior, violence, and within the criminal justice system. I also happened to live in the part of the world where, coincidentally, there were a lot of serial killers and mass murderers (relatively speaking!). It is the intersection of observing what is going on around me and the natural curiosity about why people would choose to do these sorts of things that first interested me in law and psychology.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you please describe your career trajectory starting with your time as an undergraduate?

Dr. Douglas: I was a typical undergrad student trying to figure out what I was interested in. After discovering my interests in psychology and law, I decided to volunteer in somebody's lab where I worked 4 hours per week for Chris Webster who, at the time, was starting to develop the HCR-20. He got me involved in helping to write the HCR-20, which became a topic of academic interest for me. If you are not familiar, the HCR-20 is a measure used in violence risk assessment. I started being involved in research and presenting that at conferences and writing and publishing articles as an undergraduate student. Then, it became the most widely used violence risk assessment measure and has always been a topic of interest for me. In terms of career trajectories, this trajectory can demonstrate the impact we can have as academics and scholars on the real world.

As an undergraduate I was still interested in both law and psychology. I applied to graduate school first but applied to a program where I could attend law school as well. With these interests, there are surrounding topics such as psychopathy and the intersection of violence which have become areas I focus on. I also have an interest in understanding crime and violence, treatment efforts, and more broadly, violence risk assessment and management.

AP-LS Student Committee: How do PhD programs differ in Canada from the United States?

Dr. Douglas: To be honest there aren't huge differences. For clinical programs they're both modeled after the scientist-practitioner model and are subject to the same type of rules for accreditation (CPA in Canada versus APA in the United States). For other areas, law and psychology programs are quite comparable between Canada and the States. The framework is more localized (provincial and federal Canadian law) but students learn about some of the landmark cases like *Dusky* and *Daubert*. Our field really does cross borders not just between Canada and the States, but there is a lot of interest in Europe as well and a lot of the legal principles are comparable across countries. In violence risk assessment there are dozens of countries with more and more legal requirements to evaluate violence. Civil psychiatric settings are one example. This is true in Asia and Egypt as well, which have recently adapted relevant laws. It has become internationalized and the world is shrinking.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you speak a bit about joint degree programs?

Dr. Douglas: I think because of the work we all do and because the topic takes place in a legal setting, it is an advantage to have legal knowledge. It helps us ask questions that are legally relevant and take legal reality into account. I do not think it is an absolute necessity. If you look within our field there are many people who do not have law degrees but do excellent work relevant to the law, but in my experience those people have taken the time to educate themselves about legal knowledge. It can also just help in terms of talking to legal players. I have done some work with judges, lawyers, and police, and it provides a common language which can help to facilitate projects (e.g., research, implementation) because the people you are working with have a similar background.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you please describe your involvement in AP-LS until now?

Dr. Douglas: I started going to conferences as a first-year Master's student. My first presentation was in my second year. Then, I was applying to grants-in-aid and through this you get to know some of the members in the field. When I was done with my training and during my first academic job I was elected to be a member of the executive committee and I became a voting member. As part of that, I chaired the interdisciplinary grant subcommittee and was on the Minority Affairs Committee. After this, I was on the Committee of Legal Issues which was more of an APA position, but my experience with AP-LS was certainly a benefit. All throughout this time I have been encouraging my students to go and bringing my students to AP-LS. Recently, I was involved with an international association as treasurer and came back to this executive position with AP-LS.

AP-LS Student Committee: What do you hope to bring to AP-LS during your term as President?

Dr. Douglas: A couple of things. I have always seen AP-LS as such a valuable spring board for students and early career professionals. I would like to continue that focus and, as part of my initiative, I want to have a product such as a special issue or an edited book that involves students and faculty members canvassing important areas in law and psychology but with a diversity lens that asks whether it works for everyone. Those are the two areas I want to emphasize. There have been important legal happenings that will force us to really dig in and consider diversity issues, cultural issues, and ethnicity issues. Not that we have not been doing that, but I think the law sometimes makes decisions that leaves others scrambling. If we can get ahead of that in a

proactive way, that will be healthy for our organization and for addressing the applied topics we address. The end goal is promoting evidence-based and fair decision-making within the legal system.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are some of the challenges facing AP-LS today?

Dr. Douglas: Some of these are age-old challenges the field has had for years: How do we influence law? This has gone back to the very first days of AP-LS. Another challenge internally is how do we try to have as many people involved in AP-LS as want to be involved? A lot of members are interested in volunteering and sometimes there are more than we have the capacity to have involved. Past presidents have thought about that and I will continue to think about how to ensure those who want to play a role can.

AP-LS Student Committee: What can student members do to help address these challenges?

Dr. Douglas: Student members should really learn the history of AP-LS and why it was formed to begin with. A lot of the passion that the founding members had was driven by concern about fairness in the legal system and how people were treated in the legal system. Having a sound understanding of the original guiding principles of AP-LS and being proactive in how they can shape their work to have a meaningful influence on the legal system is important. Student members should also have an attitude toward their work that embraces the law and the psychology part of the discipline. If you go back to the 1970s and 80s, the field has really broadened. There are a lot of people doing great work, some of which is highly specialized (e.g., focusing on the psychometric properties of a given measure of psychopathy). This is important but is one step removed from how those measures work within the legal system. So, have an eye on what is the impact of our work on the ground, how it is being used, and whether it is being used in a way that is productive and useful in practice. In other words, student members can address the external validity of our work versus how it does in our labs at our universities.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are the most satisfying aspects of your career?

Dr. Douglas: I still really enjoy the writing and research, but I love mentoring graduate and undergraduate students to become involved. A lot of my projects have heavy involvement from students and my writings and publications almost always involve students. I try to facilitate their passion and goals. I have also really enjoyed seeing how some of my work has—I hope—had a positive influence in applied settings like forensic, correctional, and psychiatric settings. The HCR-20 has received quite a bit of independent validation and been adopted elsewhere, so it is feeling like you have hopefully made a positive impact in this area that you have cared about since you were an undergraduate.

AP-LS Student Committee: What advice do you have for AP-LS student members?

Dr. Douglas: My general advice is to follow your passions. It's really hard to be in your 5th year of 7 years of graduate school/law school without really loving what you are doing because you are probably spending 15 hours per day doing it. Picking a topic, pursuit, or passion that you care about is fundamental because you will not mind spending that much time on it. I think when people work on things they care about is when things can happen.

For some students who are a bit newer to AP-LS, just knowing that AP-LS is a very student-friendly organization is helpful. One of my goals is to get students and early career professionals into AP-LS. Students should hopefully feel comfortable reaching out to members of AP-LS who have been around for a while. Not just going to the poster session, having a poster, but taking the time to try to meet people is key. I try to introduce my students to people whose work they are following and is relevant to their own interests. I advise students to be proactive in that regard and ask their advisors to introduce them to people. The conference is the beginning of networking and being professionally integrated into the system. It is fair to say that members of

AP-LS who have been around for some time want to foster and mentor students. We want a lot of good people doing good work in this field. I would also suggest that if you are going to talk to a professor at AP-LS that you have done your homework. That is, you have read their work and ask why they have done things a certain way. It shows you are prepared and willing to do your background work before shaking hands.