For over 30 years forensic psychology has been established as a distinct specialty within the field of psychology. Though applying psychological research to the legal system goes back as far as 1885, it was officially recognized by the American Psychological Association in 2001 and has since experienced rapid growth. As the field of forensic psychology continues to advance, it is imperative training and educational curricula adequately prepares future practitioners and researchers alike. Implementing competency-based training to students and early career professionals provides the necessary foundational knowledge and skills, which become the building blocks to a successful career (Dematto, Krauss, Marczyk, & Burl, 2009). Even more importantly, it will serve as the basis for one’s professional identity.

According to the American Board of Professional Psychology (2015), training and educational curricula should include two categories of core competencies: foundational and functional. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on three foundational and three functional competencies we believe graduate students and early career psychologists should master and routinely return to while practicing forensic psychology. That said, even those who have been practicing for years would benefit from a review of such competencies and subsequent evaluation as to whether they are being effectively implemented. Specifically, we will review Professionalism, Scientific Knowledge and Methods, and Relationships as important foundational competencies that forensic psychology programs must highlight within their specific curricula experiences. In addition, we believe Assessment, Intervention, and Research Evaluation are imperative foundational competencies, which provides supervisors and mentors a means of evaluating the learning outcomes and skills students should attain during forensic psychology doctoral-level training programs and utilize throughout their careers.

**Foundational Competencies**

In forensic psychology training, foundational competencies provide the groundwork for graduate students, early career psychologists, and practicing clinicians to assume a variety of roles. These domains include: (1) Relationships, (2) Individual and Cultural Diversity, (3) Ethical Legal Standards Policy, (4) Professionalism, (5) Reflective Practice and Self Care, (6) Interdisciplinary Systems, and Evidence-Based Practice (Rodolfa et al., 2005). Building training modalities and curricula with foundational competencies help develop skills related to the identification of important information in a forensic setting and the application of research driven interventions and assessments to clinical cases (Dematto et al., 2009).

The Professionalism competency domain addresses the obligation of the graduate student, early career psychologist, or licensed clinician to gather and preserve knowledge and skills related to the intersection of law, psychology, and professional ethics. Furthermore, this competency requires that everyone is familiar with the distinct differences of practicing in forensic psychology roles versus clinical psychology roles (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). Graduate students are expected to understand the unique professional challenges related to functioning in forensic contexts, and recognize the intersection of law and psychology, in order to meet this competency domain. Early career forensic psychologists should continue demonstrating the Professionalism competency by engaging with the legal system, articulating specific case law applicable to different forensic contexts, and offer strategies that reduce barriers for clients when necessary. Moreover, all psychologists should continue implementing these foundational knowledge and skills by offering clients opinions and recommendations supported by legal precedents, facts, and scientific theories.
The Scientific Knowledge and Methods competency provides the scientific foundation for clinical practice and outlines the expectation that, regardless of career path, we are all consistently knowledgeable of current empirical research findings in the field of forensic psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). Graduate (and even undergraduate) students must familiarize themselves with the social, historical, and cultural contexts within which forensic psychology is experienced. Mastery of this competency requires each forensic psychologist be scientifically grounded (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). In order to meet this competency, graduate students should learn how to evaluate and then choose such assessments, including gaining knowledge around statutes and case law that may impact different forensic assessments, developing skills to incorporate such knowledge when selecting assessment tools, and becoming aware of certain limitations and biases (Varela & Conroy, 2012). Early career psychologists can continue demonstrating the Assessment competency throughout their career by using this acquired knowledge to appropriately select the most effective assessment tools to address the psycholegal question, implement their skills to communicate clinical and psycholegal opinions to non-psychologists based on such assessments, and by illustrating awareness of non-psychologists’ challenges and scrutiny to assessment results.

The Intervention competency supports the expectation that forensic psychologists be knowledgeable and appreciative of intervention limitations, specifically those used in forensic settings. Furthermore, this competency focuses on the intersection of therapeutic interventions, mental health, and law (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). Graduate students should have the knowledge to choose evidence-based interventions based on different forensic contexts, the skills to apply rapport-building and therapeutic intervention skills to address forensic relevant goals, and the awareness to seek further consultation when implementing appropriate interventions for specified forensic settings. As early career psychologists enter the workforce, they should continue demonstrating the knowledge to apply clinical experience to forensic populations, the skills to modify expertise to fit specific forensic practice settings, and the awareness to maintain a professional identity when providing mental health treatment in forensic, nonclinical settings (Varela & Conroy, 2012).

Functional Competencies

Although foundational competency domains lay the ground work for knowledge and skills within the field of forensic psychology, the functional competency domains capture the breadth of day-to-day activities conducted by forensic psychologists (Rodolfà et al., 2005). These domains include: (1) Assessment, (2) Intervention, (3) Consultation, (4) Research and Evaluation, (5) Teaching, Management/Administration, and (6) Advocacy functions assumed by forensic psychologists (Rodolfà et al., 2005). Each competency is defined by the specific knowledge, skills, and awareness required to perform effectively.

These competencies also provide supervisors with alternative ways to gauge trainee readiness and preparedness in forensic psychology training programs.

The Assessment competency is characterized by the obligation to use forensic assessments that are comprehensive, reliable, valid, and culturally unbiased. This competency requires each forensic assessment be scientifically grounded (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). In order to meet this competency, graduate students should learn how to evaluate and then choose such assessments, including gaining knowledge around statutes and case law that may impact different forensic assessments, developing skills to incorporate such knowledge when selecting assessment tools, and becoming aware of certain limitations and biases (Varela & Conroy, 2012). Early career psychologists can continue demonstrating the Assessment competency throughout their career by using this acquired knowledge to appropriately select the most effective assessment tools to address the psycholegal question, implement their skills to communicate clinical and psycholegal opinions to non-psychologists based on such assessments, and by illustrating awareness of non-psychologists’ challenges and scrutiny to assessment results.

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The Research and Evaluation competency focuses on whether research studies relevant to forensic practice are used effectively. This competency requires the clinician employ appropriate research methods to the forensic question being examined (American Board of Professional Psychology, 2015). While in graduate school, students should obtain knowledge of controversies or gaps in research specific to forensic populations, acquire skills to develop research questions that assist in better understanding forensic issues, and have the awareness of how research results may affect different forensic contexts (Varela & Conroy, 2012). As early career psychologists continue to master this competency, they should use their knowledge to conduct research specifically related to the justice system, the skills to do so ethically, and the awareness of the sensitivity required when conducting research in vulnerable forensic populations (Varela & Conroy, 2012).

In sum, not only has our field attracted more students who want to study forensic psychology, its recent evolution has captured the attention of other professionals and, arguably, society as a whole. It is therefore increasingly important that training programs structure curricula on established core competencies. We understand careers will change and shift over the years, and as they do, this competency-based approach will provide students and early career professionals the ongoing ability to apply their knowledge, skills, and awareness to forensic contexts that may go beyond their initial expertise (Falender & Shafranske, 2007). Moreover, its implementation will assist researchers scientifically evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and training techniques—an identified gap in the literature (Najdowski, Bottoms, Stevenson, & Veilleux, 2015). Last, the performance and evaluation of students and early career professionals should be assessed based on the achievement of scaffolded competencies, as these foundational and functional competencies help shape our professional identities.
References


