
AP-LS Student Committee May, 2022

Career Corner

Content Editor: Sarah Fishel, 6th year JD/PhD student at Drexel University and 2020-2022 Student Committee Law 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 profiles Sarah L. Desmarais, PhD, Senior Vice President and incoming President at Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA). Dr. Desmarais' work focuses on issues related to public health, community safety, and social justice and encompasses research, evaluation, and consultation. She has also held professorships at North Carolina State University and the University of South Florida.

Sarah Fishel, 6th year JD/PhD student at Drexel University and 2020-2022 Student Committee Law Liaison, interviewed Dr. Desmarais.

APLS Student Committee: *How did you first become interested in Psychology and Law?*

Dr. Desmarais: As an undergrad, I knew I wanted a career that involved applying psychology to real world issues and I also knew that I wasn't interested in going into clinical practice, but I had no idea what that would look like. In my third year of undergrad, I took a course in Psychology and Law and loved it.

APLS Student Committee: *Can you briefly describe your career trajectory, starting with your time as an undergraduate?*

Dr. Desmarais: I never had a specific career in mind and, frankly, I still don't, so it is interesting to think about my career trajectory. I completed my undergrad in Psychology at the University of Guelph where I completed my honours thesis on earwitness testimony. My honours thesis advisor (Dan Yarmey) was the one who turned me onto the field of Psychology and Law (it was his class I referenced in the above questions) and when I was looking into graduate schools, he told me about Simon Fraser University's programs. I applied to several schools but did ultimately go on to complete my MA and PhD in the Forensic Psychology and Law program at SFU. During my PhD, I worked as a research assistant at a forensic psychiatric hospital and as a mental health intake screener at a local detention center. During those two experiences, I started to get interested in looking at policy and system-level issues, in addition to individual- and social-level factors. This led me to pursue a postdoc research fellowship in Population and Public Health at UBC [the University of British Columbia], while also working at the BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services as a junior research scientist. From there I went on to my first faculty position at the University of South Florida where I was jointly appointed between the Dept. of Mental Health Law and Policy and the Dept. of Community and Family Health. I moved to North Carolina State University in 2012, where I was on faculty in the Dept. of Psychology, ultimately achieving rank of full professor in 2018. For several years, I ran the graduate program in Applied Social and Community Psychology and later I served as the Director of the Center for Family and Community Engagement. I resigned from NC State in 2021 to join Policy Research Associates as the Senior Vice President and in May (2022) I will be taking over as President.

APLS Student Committee: What do you think are the similarities and differences working in academia previously and now with Policy Research Associates?

Dr. Desmarais: Overall, I really think there are more similarities than differences, especially because I was in an administrative role, running a center the last several years I was in academia. The real difference, obviously, is that I'm no longer teaching, but otherwise I actually think there are a lot of similarities, at least for me personally. I'm still:

- Conducting research on issues at the intersection of the criminal legal system and behavioral health issues
- Supervising and mentoring more junior research staff/students
- Giving presentations at conferences
- Writing up papers for peer-review
- Writing grants to fund research and staff/students
- Writing reports for funders

There are some tradeoffs in terms of resources and infrastructure. For example, we don't have the extensive library collections or the software licenses maintained by a university, but on the other hand, we have more staff and resources to support grant development and management, as well as colleagues who focus on translating our research findings into training and technical assistance to practitioners and administrators in the field. Another notable difference is that my firm is soft funded, meaning that we need to have grants and contracts to support the work and staff (as opposed to having money allocated by the state or university). The other, a very practical one, is that we need to complete time cards to keep track of the time we are working across our grants and contracts for billing purposes. I'm sure there are others, but those are the issues that come to mind.

APLS Student Committee: Can you tell us a bit about the research you are working on right now?

Dr. Desmarais: Broadly, my current research is focused on identifying effective strategies for reducing unnecessary detention, especially among people with behavioral health needs. We have several different ongoing projects, too many to list, but I'll highlight a few. We're conducting to separate projects funded by the MacArthur Foundation. One of them is examining whether and how information regarding individual needs, the availability of community-based services, and mitigating or protective factors may help reduce pretrial detention, especially for people of color and people with behavioral health problems. This is a multi-phase, mixed-methods project that builds on some prior work we completed that was focused on pretrial risk communication. In the second MacArthur-funded project, we are seeking to develop a better understanding of people with behavioral health needs who cycle in and out of local jails, the strategies that are being used to try to stop that cycle, and whether or not they are effective. We're collaborating with three different counties on this project, which is also mixed-method and multi-phase in nature. The third project I'll highlight is an effort to understand the scope, mechanism, and effectiveness of strategies and approaches that civil and criminal courts are using to provide support to help people with unmet behavioral health needs better navigate the court system and processes, as well as to have their needs identified and addressed.

APLS Student Committee: What is most rewarding about your line of research and what do you find the most challenging about this work?

Dr. Desmarais: I find the real-world impact of the work incredibly rewarding and talking to people who can use the findings of my research has always been the best part of my job. My work has always been very

community-engaged, but even more so now that I'm at PRA because so many of our staff are in the field providing technical assistance and training.

There is a lot that is challenging, but two key issues come to mind. We are working in a pretty politically charged space and on issues that have become quite polarized, like bail reform. I find it really challenging to be working on the research while listening to narratives in the news that are completely disconnected from and inconsistent with the empirical evidence. But, while this is a challenge, it is also incredibly motivating. The second key challenge is the data itself. When we are doing secondary data analyses, we draw data from diverse sources (e.g., mental health agencies, courts, jails, etc.) that typically don't speak to each other and that were not set up for research purposes. We end up being limited in a lot of our analyses by what we have available to us and the quality of that data (or lack thereof). But, again, this is a challenge but also the reality of these systems and in this way, I think the findings are still very meaningful and important.

APLS Student Committee: How did you get involved in the "alternatives to academia" movement?

Dr. Desmarais: I think I've always been involved in some way... I've had research positions in applied settings since I was a graduate student. I've also had students, colleagues, friends, and even family – my husband – who were working in "alternative to academia" settings throughout my career. I never intended or aimed to pursue a career in academia, I always was more focused on what opportunities were available and interested me at the time, rather than thinking long-term about career goals or trajectory. For me, the work, and more specifically the impact of the work, was primary and the setting or position in which I would be doing the work wasn't something I actually thought about much, if at all.

I was very happy in academia for a very long time. I have been very lucky to have been in several departments that really valued applied and community-engaged work and to have supportive and collaborative colleagues along the way. It wasn't until I achieved the rank of full professor, that I started to question whether I wanted to be a professor for the rest of my career, and, ultimately, the answer was no. It was around that time that I was first approached about the opportunity at PRA.

APLS Student Committee: How do you create work-life balance?

Dr. Desmarais: My honest and initial reaction to the question is that I don't. I think the term work-life balance is misleading and unrealistic. Not because I work all the time, but because my work is part of my life and not separate from it. To me, work-life balance suggests that they're completely distinct from each other. That's a term that my organization and others are starting to move away from. We're using the term "life-work integration" to better reflect that, especially now, there are no real barriers between work and life anymore for many of us and that instead, we need to emphasize flexibility in how and when we work. I tend to be a bit of a workaholic, so, for me life-work integration means making a conscious effort to prioritize the life side of things, my own needs and that of my family, and really take advantage of the flexibility that my job affords me to do that. For example, if I have to go to an appointment during the day or I want to go to an event at my daughter's school, I will make sure it is in my calendar and flex work time later in the day or week. That said, I also very (very!) rarely work evenings or weekends. I'm more likely to work early in the morning than I am to work late into the evening. All that to say, I don't think that work-life balance is really an end goal that can be achieved and I prefer the idea that we need to proactively integrate life and work in an ongoing and intentional way.

APLS Student Committee: If you could go back in time to that moment and give yourself one piece of advice about graduate school what would it be and why?

Dr. Desmarais: I really would do it all pretty much the same, honestly. I really had a wonderful training experience, overall, and very supportive mentors and peers. I also had a lot of fun. So, I don't think there's anything I would have done differently. I think the advice I would give myself, then, would be less about graduate school itself and more generally to worry less about life *after* graduate school.

APLS Student Committee: What advice do you have for students who are seeking a career in academia or research?

Dr. Desmarais: Take advantage of opportunities to work with different people, in different settings, and on different issues. I've always believed that it is less important to specialize narrowly in one substantive area of research and more important to gain skills and knowledge that can be applied to diverse research contexts. I also think this will help students figure out what work settings might be a better fit for them in the long run.

APLS Student Committee: Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked about?

Dr. Desmarais: I never felt pressured to go into a certain career, academia or otherwise. I hope that my story might help students feel less pressure to have it all figured out and reduce any sense of urgency that they have to pick one path.