

ACJS *today*

Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Newsletter



ACJS Doctoral Summit: Overview and Impact

By Deeanna Button, PhD, Heather Pfeifer, PhD, Courtney Porter, PhD, Monica Summers, PhD, and Jared Dmello, PhD

Introduction

Doctoral student attrition has been a consistent and ongoing problem, with only half of PhD students completing their degrees (CGS, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). Often generated by feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction during the PhD process, attrition results in negative consequences for students, their departments and institutions, and the broader academic community. Students face substantial financial and psychological burdens, institutions lose out on their investments, and the larger community misses out on significant contributions to resolving social challenges (Pfeifer et al., 2023). To make matters worse, attrition rates are

continues on page 02

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 13** Interview with Bruce Smith Sr. Award Recipient Dr. Alida V. Merlo
- 17** 2024 ACJS ACADEMY AWARD RECIPIENTS
- 23** RECENT PUBLICATIONS JQ, JCJE, and JEJ
- 24** ACJS EDITOR POSITION OPENING FOR ACJS TODAY
- 25** EXECUTIVE BOARD



highest among the most marginalized students (CGE, 2022; Lovitts, 2001; Sowell et al., 2015; Zhou & Gao, 2021). Although many departmental and institutional efforts to support doctoral students exist, challenges remain. The needs of students are far-reaching and require interventions from the academic community as a whole.

A Model of Professional Development: The ACJS Doctoral Summit

To address some of these challenges, the Academy of Criminal Justice Science (ACJS) developed the Doctoral Student Summit (DSS), a professional development seminar intended to support PhD students in degree completion by providing opportunities to foster academic identities and develop extended academic communities. From its inception, the ACJS DSS has (a) provided comprehensive professional development training across multiple domains (e.g., technical and inter/intrapersonal skills); (b) supplied multiple networking opportunities to develop academic communities and increase professional social support; and (c) promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the academy by providing as many students as possible the opportunity to participate in DSS professional development. The DSS is a unique model of professional development that other academic organizations may benefit from. In this article, we offer a brief overview of the DSS followed by a brief synopsis of its impact and effectiveness.

The Scholarship

Funding through universities and departments is often limited and is rife with gender and racial disparities (Barthelemy et al., 2015; Kim & Otts, 2010). To help address this challenge, ACJS provides financial support for students to attend

¹ As of 2024, lodging is provided for four nights.

DSS for three¹ days during its annual meetings. Eligible students receive a scholarship that covers the conference registration fee, hotel lodging for three nights, and two meals. In exchange, students complete professional development training focused on both technical and inter/intrapersonal skills (IIP), in addition to several networking activities. Students receive a certificate and official recognition as a doctoral fellow of ACJS for successful completion of all requirements.

Eligibility and Selection

Applicants must have a minimum 3.5 GPA and at least one year in their doctoral program completed. Selection preference is given to those who have completed coursework requirements, taken their qualifying exams or the equivalent progress marker, and/or completed their dissertation prospectus. Students are required to submit an online form with demographic information and an application package that includes a cover letter, faculty letter of recommendation, curriculum vitae, and a current transcript. Applications are evaluated, with a rubric, for merit-based criteria by at least two ACJS Doctoral Summit organizers. In addition to merit-based criteria, the larger distribution of awardees is considered. Among qualifying applicants, the committee endeavors to include (a) at least one student from every university, to support programs that may have limited student funding support; (b) students in their last year of study; and (c) equal gender and race distributions. Qualifying students not awarded a scholarship are deferred and prioritized in the next selection cycle.

Professional Development Programming

For the upcoming 2024 DSS, students will participate in six required sessions and choose one additional session for a total of 11 hours and 15

minutes of professional development training. Students are also required to participate in the ACJS DSS Orientation, the Presidential Address, and a debriefing dinner, for an additional 3 hours and 45 minutes of networking activities. Sessions tend to align with the 75 minutes allotted to the larger conference’s panel presentations, although some required sessions span two panel sessions. For each session, students are provided with a brief reading list to complete prior to arrival. Readings include op-ed articles and peer-reviewed manuscripts. All sessions focus on the development of technical and/or IIP skills and include a hands-on or active learning component. Current descriptions for each session are in Table 1.

The inclusion of technical and IIP instruction is important for three reasons. First, doctoral students have expressed a need for more technical skills, including pedagogical, presentation, grant writing, and data analysis skills (Heflinger & Doykos, 2016) and want to learn about the transferability of their skills in both academic and non-academic settings (Bernstein et al., 2014; Nerad, 2015). Second, the acquisition of IIP skills is largely missing from academic professional development, despite the fact that these skills are rated as the number one characteristic for on-the-job success (Wilhelm, 2004). Interpersonal skills are tactics used to effectively navigate interactions with others. Intrapersonal skills refer to the ability to manage emotions and cope with stressors and include socioemotional and critical thinking abilities, adaptability, self-confidence, persistence and resilience, and time management (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2005; Kechagias, 2011). Finally, the acquisition of technical and IIP skills supports the development of academic identities. Academic identity refers to how students perceive themselves within their professional community (Sverdlik et al., 2021). It is formulated through various technical and IIP skills, including writing and research expertise, pedagogical competencies, and socialization with other academics and professionals in the broader field. Strong academic identities may buffer early academic career attrition (Cidlinska et al., 2023; McAlpine, 2012; McLeod & Badenhorst, 2014).

Table 1. Professional Development Sessions		
#	Title and Skill Focus	Session Abstract
Required Sessions (11 hours and 15 minutes)		
1	Networking in the Digital Age TECHNICAL; PERSONAL	Networking matters, but what does that mean? How does one network in an increasing digital age? This session reviews the types of networking available and helps identify what works best for our strengths and weaknesses. Participants explore approaches to networking, how to balance mental health with networking, and best practices for engaging in professional opportunities for connectivity.
2	Managing Stress and Maintaining Sanity PERSONAL	Academia is overwhelming with the demands placed on both personal and professional lives. The demand takes a serious toll on physical and emotional well-being. In this session, specific time-management and self-care strategies easily incorporated into a daily routine to help reduce stress levels are provided.

3	Navigating the Job Market (Part 1 and 2) TECHNICAL; PERSONAL	This seminar provides useful tips on how to seek out and obtain employment. Topics discussed include identifying open positions, using job ads to draft cover letters and teaching/research statements, recommendation letter etiquette, completing job talks and responding to job offers. Questions from students are also addressed in an open format.
4	Juggling Work-Life Balance PERSONAL	Academia is overwhelming with the demands placed on both personal and professional lives. The demand takes a serious toll on physical and emotional well-being. In this session, students think about how to handle these challenges before problems arise, and develop a set of strategies that help maintain a healthy work-life balance.
5	Opportunities with Federal Agencies TECHNICAL	National Institute of Justice representatives discuss career opportunities within the Federal Government.
6	Identity-Based Barriers in Academia (Part 1 and 2) PERSONAL	Students engage in break-out discussions with seasoned academics who share their own identity-based experiences. The impact of personal identities is examined through consideration of current discriminatory practices across the field. Potential strategies to address individual and structural barriers are discussed.
Additional Optional Sessions (1 hours and 15 minutes)		
1	Tips for Completing the Dissertation TECHNICAL; PERSONAL	Strategies on how to successfully develop and complete a doctoral dissertation are discussed. Topics include developing an idea, selecting a committee, creating and maintaining organization of sources, data, and a writing schedule, preparing for the defense, and publishing. Questions from students are addressed in an open format.
2	Instructional Technology as a Pedagogical Tool TECHNICAL	The rapid and monumental shifts in education in the wake of COVID-19 resulted in new and innovative ways to engage students. This session explores implementing various instructional technologies into the classroom and tips and tricks to transform "traditional" materials into a tech-driven approach to engage students in an increasingly digital world.
3	Academia Beyond Borders TECHNICAL	This session demystifies the process of (a) gaining employment in the United States as a citizen of another country and (b) Americans seeking to migrate to faculty positions in other countries. Strategies for seeking employment, things to consider, and practical advice for approaching applications, negotiations, and beyond are covered. Opportunities and strategies for engaging in international or comparative research are also discussed.
4	Audience-Driven Research Communication TECHNICAL	This seminar provides an overview of strategies and techniques to present data and research in consumable ways to nonacademics including practitioners, government officials, and lay persons. Students identify relevant key data points and discuss ways to convey this information to target audiences.

5	Understanding and Developing Emotional Intelligence PERSONAL	Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and understand emotions and use this ability and awareness to manage your behaviors and relationships to increase the quality and effectiveness of social and work relationships. This session offers self-management and social awareness strategies to increase more effective leadership.
6	Careers Outside of Academia TECHNICAL	Many Ph.D. students fail to consider other types of careers. This panel exposes students to the various career paths outside traditional academia. Speakers discuss their personal experience working with a Ph.D. in a non-academic environment. Benefits and challenges of their work will be highlighted.
7	Transitioning to the Junior Faculty Role TECHNICAL; PERSONAL	Many newly hired junior faculty struggle with the transition from the doctoral student role to the role of a full-time faculty member. This session addresses common concerns and challenges that new faculty may face at the start of their academic careers. Topics include managing imposter syndrome, learning the political ins and outs of the university, knowing how to advocate for oneself, developing time management strategies, and understanding how to network with other new faculty members.

Session Facilitators

All sessions are facilitated by DSS committee members and a network of ACJS members who regularly attend the annual meetings. The DSS committee actively recruits a diverse array of facilitators from various institutions at different points in their careers, with both traditional and alternative career paths. Facilitators are intentionally recruited to ensure representation of international scholars, working parents, and gender and racial diversity so that students can develop academic communities that reflect their own lived identities and experiences (see Table 2). Students with robust networks are provided with “resources that are more extensive than their own, [and] the collective force of the community makes people function better—academically, socially, and emotionally” (Lovitts, 2001, p. 44).

Characteristic	N	%	M	Min.	Max
Number of institutions	19				
Age (in years)			40.3	29	60
Gender					
Female	19	67.9			
Male	8	28.6			
Non-binary	1	35.7			
Self-identify as LGBTQ	7	25.0			
Race					
White	17	63.0			
Black or African American	5	18.5			
Asian	3	11.1			
Other	2	7.4			

² Data are for only 2022 and 2023 facilitators. Data for previous facilitator cohorts are not currently available.

Hispanic	3	10.7			
International Status	2	7.1			
Relationship status					
Married	17	60.7			
Single	8	28.6			
Divorced	3	10.7			
Parent of child < 18 years	10	35.7			
Caregiver for others	6	7.1			
Career Experience					
Academic	24	85.7			
Non-Academic	17	60.7			
Years in current position					
Less than a year	3	10.7			
1 to 4 years	11	39.3			
5 to 9 years	8	28.6			
10 or more years	6	21.4			

Participants

Since its inaugural year of 2014, ACJS has invited 30–60 advanced doctoral students annually from accredited PhD programs. As of April 2023, 337 doctoral students have participated in the ACJS DSS. Participants have come from a diverse selection of doctoral programs, in both size and region as well as background (e.g., race and ethnicity, first generation, international status; see Table 3). More than one-third of participants reflect underrepresented categories of students, and just over 20% of participants in the most recent 2023 cohort came from minority-serving institutions. Diverse cohorts help ensure the development of academic communities that reflect students’ own identities and experiences. This helps foster a greater sense of belonging (Gardner, 2009; Lin, 2012; Walsh, 2010) and reduces feelings of isolation during doctoral studies, which thereby increases the likelihood of degree completion (Galdino et al., 2016; Lovitts, 2001).

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics for ACJS DSS Applicants and Participants 2017–2023³

	Applied		Accepted		
	Range	Average	Range	Average	Average %
Total	44–79	63	42–61	49	78
Race					
Asian	3–9	6	1–8	5	86
Black	5–20	11	5–20	9	92
Hispanic	1–9	5	1–7	4	76
Middle Eastern	0–2	1	0–2	1	100
Multiracial	0–3	1	0–3	1	83

³ 2020 cohort was selected, but unable to participate due to COVID-19. There are no data from 2021 due to COVID-19 cancellation of DSS.

Preferred Not to Answer	0–2	1	0–2	1	75
White	27–49	38	23–43	30	78
Other	0–3	1	0–3	1	100
Alaskan Native/Native American	0–1	0	0–1	0	0
Gender					
Female	29–56	44	26–56	34	78
Male	12–27	19	12–24	17	92
ACJS Region					
Northeastern	11–26	16	8–19	12	75
Southern	12–23	16	11–23	15	91
Midwestern	7–20	13	6–15	10	81
Southwestern	4–18	9	4–10	7	79
Western	1–11	5	0–8	4	87
International	1–4	2	1–4	2	92
Online	0–3	1	0–2	0	40
Minority-Serving Institution					
Yes	15–23	19	9–23	16	83
No	24–59	43	22–54	35	82

A Model of Impact and Effectiveness: The ACJS Doctoral Summit

Over the years, feedback provided by both students and facilitators has remained overwhelmingly positive. One student shared, “I started the summit with the hopes of gaining knowledge about the process of completing my program and entering the workforce. I did not expect to enjoy myself so much, gain as much knowledge and confidence as I did, or make the kind of connections that could last throughout my career. It really was a great opportunity and gave me the passion to push to complete my degree (there have been so many times I have thought about dropping out; I am happy we covered imposter syndrome and I got to hear that I am not the only one). Overall, I think the facilitators did such a great job and I would highly recommend the summit to anyone and everyone.”

Systematic observations of pre and post quantitative data show that students report significantly higher confidence levels in multiple professional domains after participating in the DSS. Among the sessions that were analyzed,⁴ the greatest gains in confidence were made in navigating work-life balance and identity-based barriers, followed by building a professional network and securing an academic job (see Table 4). Qualitative assessment data suggest that students’ increased confidence is likely related to the development of new skills and/or perspectives across multiple professional domains. Skills include concrete abilities and/or the adoption of new strategies and/or technologies. New perspectives include novel or additional ways to consider common challenges.

Students highlight the acquisition of both technical skills and IIP skills. For example, one student said, “I learned

⁴ Data used in these analyses come from the 2023 cohort. The professional development sessions with the most robust attendance (Dissertation, Networking, Job Market, Work-Life Balance, Identity-Based Barriers) were analyzed.



important [technical] information on how to apply and organize my materials when I am on the job market. I learned about the hiring process, how to use the job description to tailor your application materials, and how to organize your CV.” Others emphasize development of IIP skills. For example, one student noted a change in perspective on prioritizing mental and emotional well-being by stating that the Work-Life Balance session “reinforced the idea that if I don’t take care of me, I can’t be as effective with students or family as I need to be.” Finally, students indicate that creating connections at the Summit or recognizing the need to create connections at home and abroad was impactful. For example, one student in the Dissertation session said that participating helped with recognizing that “I am not alone” and that “expanding my supportive network” is beneficial. When asked about the impact of the Networking session, students indicated that “Meeting people has helped expand my network” and “I have actively made myself go up to people and network more.”

Table 4. Pre (N = 41) and Post (N = 38) Confidence Levels in Navigating Professional Domains⁵

Professional Domain/Session	Pre	Post	t
Dissertation	4.10 (0.89)	4.31 (0.97)	-0.91
Networking	3.27 (1.14)	4.03 (0.80)	*-3.39
ACA Job Market	3.29 (1.38)	3.89 (0.98)	*-2.25
ALT Job Market	3.27 (1.21)	3.39 (0.97)	-0.51
Work-Life Balance	3.17 (1.16)	4.03 (0.75)	*-3.89
Identity-Based Barriers	3.18 (0.81)	3.95 (0.79)	*-4.27

Conclusion

Now moving into its ninth year,⁶ the ACJS DSS has established a national reputation among criminal justice and criminology doctoral programs for facilitating professional development and networking opportunities among doctoral students. Given that the DSS is a unique model of professional development, we share our approach as we work toward documenting its effectiveness and impact so that other disciplines can implement these developing best practices. Our current research efforts include data-intensive evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of the DSS through a mixed methods approach that comprehensively reviews the experiences of participants and impact of these opportunities on their long-term growth. These evaluations will expand on the extant organizational evaluation scholarship and current literature on professional development best practices, retention in higher education more broadly and in advanced degree programs specifically, and provide a potential model to diversify academic fields of study. ■

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⁵ Confidence levels, measured both pre and post Summit, were assessed by asking students “How confident do you feel in your ability to...” (a) complete your dissertation, (b) build and/or enhance your professional network, (c) secure a junior faculty (academic) job [ACA] (d) secure a nonacademic (government or private) [ALT] job, (d) navigate work-life balance, and (e) navigating issues related to race/ethnicity and racism, gender and/or sexism, sexual identity and/or heterosexism, and parenting and/or family responsibilities. An average score for all identity-barrier-related questions was computed for each student (Identity-Based Barriers). All response options ranged from 1 = not confident to 5 = very confident.

* Paired t-test significant at the .05 alpha level.

⁶ As of Spring 2023. The DSS did not take place in 2020 or 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Deeanna M. Button, PhD, is an associate professor of Criminal Justice and Victimology and Victim Services at Stockton University. Her research focuses on how experiences of violence and victimization are shaped by systems of inequality. Her area of interest is on LGBTQ youth victimization and social support, sexual assault, and family violence.



Heather L. Pfeifer, PhD, is a professor in the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Baltimore. Her research interests focus on childhood victimization, its relationship to offending, and implementing trauma-informed policy and practices. She is nationally recognized for facilitating trauma-informed trainings with criminal justice professionals to improve communication skills, effective responses in assisting victims of crime, and managing stress-related responses attributed to secondary and vicarious trauma.



Courtney M. Porter, PhD, is an assistant professor of Forensic and Legal Psychology at Marymount University. Her research focuses on juvenile justice organizations' decisions and the impact of those decisions on racial and ethnic disparities. She is known for innovative methods in translating data-driven recommendations for policymakers and agency administrators. Her areas of interest are racial and ethnic disparities, juvenile justice, and coercive control.



Monica E. Summers, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology at California State University, Fresno. Her research interests include women's pathways to criminality, the experiences of incarcerated populations during and after incarceration, and domestic violence/sexual assault. Dr. Summers focuses on humanizing justice-impacted populations through providing higher education and other restorative practices in California prisons.



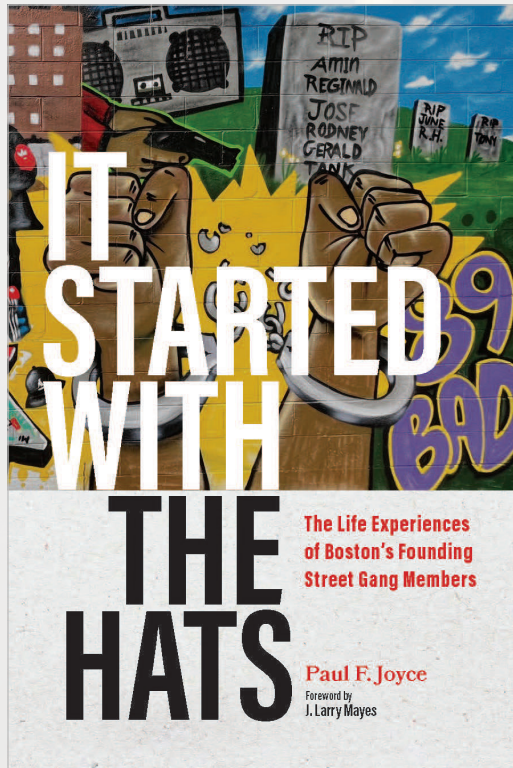
Jared R. Dmello, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer of Criminology at the University of Adelaide, a research associate at the Rutgers University Center on Public Security, and a research member of the Global Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network. He is an internationally recognized expert on illicit organizations, focusing on criminal street gangs and extremist organizations, with methodological expertise in network science and advanced quantitative methods.

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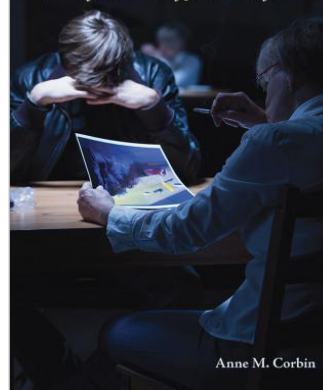
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Interview with 2024 Bruce Smith Sr. Award Recipient Dr. Alida V. Merlo

ACJS Today had the pleasure of interviewing the 2024 Bruce Smith Sr. Award Recipient, Dr. Alida V. Merlo. The Bruce Smith Sr. Award is ACJS' most prestigious award, recognizing outstanding contributions to criminal justice as an academic or professional endeavor. A quick review of Dr. Merlo's accomplishments shows how she embodies the essence of the Bruce Smith Sr. Award. Below, Dr. Merlo discusses her motivations for becoming involved in her career, her defining experiences, reflections on the current state of the field, and advice for the next generation of scholars and practitioners.

Q: Thinking back to the start of your career, what motivated you to pursue a career in criminology?

AM: Initially, I was inspired by Dr. Jack Foster who taught an undergraduate course in juvenile delinquency at Youngstown State University. Dr. Foster's lectures and the discussions on criminological theories influenced me to take more courses in criminal justice/criminology. That culminated in an internship and later a probation officer position in the Mahoning County Juvenile Court in Ohio. After a couple of years, I was promoted to the intake supervisor position. Eventually, I left the court to attend graduate school.

Q: Can you share a defining moment or experience that significantly influenced your professional journey?

AM: While in graduate school at Northeastern University, I decided to try to obtain an academic

position. It was an interesting time. I was surrounded by emerging scholars and practitioners, and our field was rapidly growing. It was an amazing experience. I realized that I wanted to learn more, earn a doctorate, conduct research, and teach. A criminal justice faculty position was advertised in the NY Times, and I applied for it. When I interviewed for that position, I knew that was what I wanted to do.

Q: Reflecting on where we are now as a field, what are some of the things you are most excited about?

AM: First and foremost, criminology/criminal justice has survived and "arrived" as a legitimate academic discipline. The lament that this discipline will not last can be laid to rest. Our field has expanded, our educational institutions have added new undergraduate and graduate programs, and there are more than 40 doctoral degree-granting institutions in criminology and criminal justice.

Second, colleagues in our field conduct important research, and the level of scholarship is impressive. The studies contribute to our knowledge and represent diverse approaches. The number of journals, the quality of the publications, and the various methodologies attest to the field's prominence.

Third, the field has become more global. The number of international criminology/criminal justice organizations, ease of access to data, collaborative research partnerships, and technological advances have facilitated projects and research across continents. Furthermore, international graduate students are prominent



and successful in our undergraduate and graduate programs.

Fourth, the representation of women and minorities in the field has increased dramatically. This is a significant change from when I first entered the field. I applaud the diversity and inclusivity of our discipline.

Fifth, our field has positively affected crime prevention and crime policy. From Supreme Court decisions to federal and state government agencies and local organizations, research has been cited, partnerships have been forged, studies have been conducted, and policies have been drafted.

Q: What are the biggest challenges we face now as a field?

AM: The field confronts four major challenges. The first one is the use of technology, and the accompanying ethical dilemmas. Artificial Intelligence is exciting, and it can lead to new avenues for research, policy, and programs. However, there are challenges. There are ethical dilemmas, implicit bias, and a lack of expertise that can affect how it is utilized.

The second challenge involves sharing our knowledge and research with the public. This is critical. We are trying to move the needle to get more research into the mainstream media. From evidence-based policies to crime prevention and treatment, our field can contribute, but we must reach the larger public audience.

The third is the politicization of crime policy. In my work with Pete Benekos, we have assessed the influence of three dimensions on crime policy:

ideology, media, and politics. Currently, gun violence is heavily featured in the media, and the political response is reactive. The demand for tougher sanctions and longer prison sentences does not fit the research evidence. Unfortunately, the “get tough” rhetoric suggests that a return to the punitive response of the 1980s and 1990s is possible.

The fourth is addressing disproportionate minority representation in the juvenile and adult systems. From prevention and early intervention programs to adopting a harm reduction approach with respect to drugs, there are effective strategies that can be utilized. However, we must do more for child welfare and families and strengthen community prevention efforts.

Q: Thinking about our next generation of scholars and practitioners, what are some valuable lessons you’ve learned throughout your career that you wish you knew when you started?

AM: There are six valuable lessons that I have learned. First, find an area or specialization in the discipline that intrigues you and focus on it. Find a mentor. You can make significant contributions to the field, and you can inform and guide new scholars with your work. In brief, pursue an area of research that you can commit to long-term.

Second, focus on your research. It is important. Master new statistical techniques and apply them. Keep current with developments in the field. Be ready. Think of research questions you would like to ask. Then, make it happen.

Third, identify colleagues who share your



Interview with Dr. Alida V. Merlo

value system and collaborate with them on research. Do not be limited by geography. With technology, it is possible to establish partnerships with colleagues internationally and locally.

Fourth, promptly publish the research based on your dissertation. Rather than wait for the “best time”, do it now.

Fifth, be kind. Support and mentor colleagues and students. When you encounter obstacles, remember to treat everyone with dignity and respect.

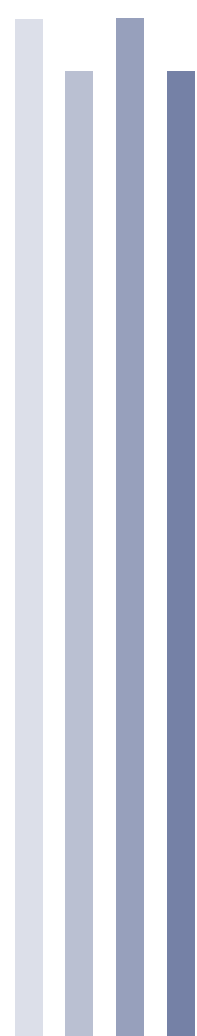
Sixth, volunteer to participate in a professional organization, like ACJS (especially ACJS), a charity, a local school, or a community organization. It will have a tremendous positive impact on your life. The benefits cannot be quantified. ■

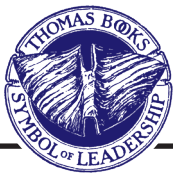


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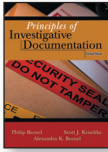
is Distinguished University Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Indiana University of Pennsylvania where she joined the faculty in 1995. Previously, she taught at Westfield State University

in Massachusetts. Recent co-authored publications can be found in *Journal of Family Violence*, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, and *Journal of Drug Issues*. Most of her research is in the areas of juvenile justice and criminal justice policy. She is a past-president of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. She also is a previous recipient of the ACJS Founder’s Award and the Fellow Award. Prior to her career in academia, she was a Juvenile Probation Officer and Intake Supervisor in Youngstown, Ohio.



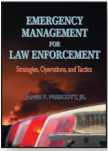


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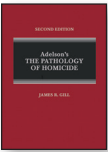
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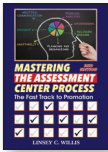
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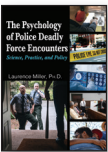
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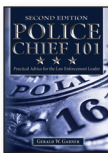
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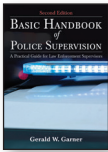
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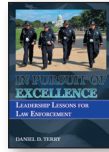
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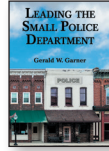
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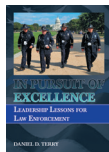
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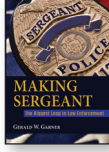
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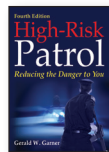
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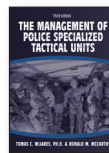
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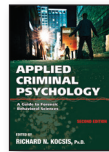
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The Editor of ACJS Today will be responsible for producing a high quality professional online newsletter for the membership of the Academy. The Editor will set editorial policy, solicit materials, consider unsolicited submissions for publication, develop features of interest to the membership, and manage the newsletter. ACJS Today is published five times a year, with issues in January, March, May, September, and November.

The Executive Board of the Academy will appoint the Editor for a three-year term. The new Editor's first issue will be in September and determined by the date of appointment and in consultation with the current editor. There is a \$4,000 yearly stipend for the Editor. Co-editorship may be considered; however, if selected, the yearly stipend will be split equally between the co-editors.

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