

## PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE 5.1



### My Life as a Forensic Psychologist

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I have always enjoyed the chance to work on diverse tasks. The Boulder model, emphasizing the importance of the clinical psychologist as a scientist-practitioner, offers an ideal framework for this kind of professional diversity. I have been employed in settings that are mostly applied, such as a forensic hospital, a federal prison, and a specialized treatment unit for juveniles. When I worked in those settings, I always tried to be involved in research and writing on the individuals who were assessed and treated, and ideas that occurred to us as we were providing professional services.

For the last 15 years, I have worked in an academic setting—at MCP Hahnemann University, then Drexel University—in Philadelphia. This job has offered me the chance to work in four domains: *teaching and training* (undergraduates as well as graduate students), *research and scholarship*, *administrative leadership*, and *forensic practice*. These areas often overlap. For example, training graduate students requires teaching courses and seminars, but it also requires research mentorship and clinical supervision.

I constantly look for ways to be as efficient as possible across areas. One of the first goals I set when I arrived at the university in 1995 was to establish a departmentally based forensic

assessment clinic that would provide high-quality psychological evaluations to courts and attorneys at reasonable rates, while involving graduate students on a practicum basis in this clinic. This has been accepted well by judges and attorneys in the Philadelphia area, so we have had enough referrals to stay busy without becoming overwhelmed. Doctoral students who take this practicum must also have taken the two-quarter forensic assessment series I teach. This means I have the chance to work with them in the classroom, earlier in their training, and then in the clinic when they have become more advanced. Some students have developed research ideas from their classroom or clinic experience; they may write theses or dissertations using principles of forensic assessment that are taught in the classroom or using archival data collected through the clinic. Graduate students who plan to make forensic assessment a part of their professional lives enjoy the chance to participate in this practicum.

I have also had the opportunity to chair the psychology department for about a decade. This is a challenging and important job that involves the day-to-day tasks needed to run a department, the occasional intensive attention to a crisis, and the predictable yearly tasks such as faculty evaluations and budget planning. It requires

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a broad perspective within psychology, though. Faculty members and students within the department are often quite specialized, and the department chair must know enough about their areas to be able to describe them to a dean or provost. Promoting the department for purposes of university planning or fund-raising means communicating the department's strengths and needs in language that non-psychologists can understand—and appreciate.

There is some predictability within my professional life, but it is never boring. I have research meetings scheduled weekly on several topics with my graduate student teams and faculty

colleagues. I work on clinic cases and supervision two mornings a week. I am in the classroom weekly or twice weekly. I must build in time to run research projects, write papers and chapters, review submissions to journals, and edit drafts of forensic reports. But sometimes the unexpected intrudes. A crisis in the department, a reporter asking for a comment, a colleague requesting a consultation—each can demand thoughtful attention. Being productive means staying busy doing everything you have committed to do, and much of what you are asked to do beyond that, to contribute to your department, university, and profession—and staying interested yourself!

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Dr. Heilbrun is Professor and Head, Department of Psychology, Drexel University, and coordinator of the forensic concentration within the doctoral program in clinical psychology. His research and practice interests include forensic mental health assessment, violence risk assessment and management, and diversion of mentally disordered offenders. He enjoys travel, reading, and racket sports.