

RUNNING HEAD: IAFMHS Award Reflection

IAFMHS Second Travel Award: Reflection Essay

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The International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services Student Board embodied the 2018 IAFMHS Conference theme, “Service development is the laboratory of forensic mental health,” through the development of their Student Awards initiative. Receiving the Second Student Travel Award afforded me the opportunity to create my own laboratory of personal and professional growth. I was prompted to intentionally consider how I integrated my prior experiences and knowledge with the conversations, content, and context of the conference. Now that the jet lag has worn off and my coffee intake has dwindled, I am able to reflect with clarity and gratitude on my experiences both at the International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services Conference and with subsequent travels throughout Belgium.

Before diving into deep reflection, I would like to introduce myself: My name is Courtney Wade, and I am a Counseling M.Ed. student in my final year at North Carolina State University. I currently serve as a Graduate Research Assistant in the NC State Forensic Psychology in the Public Interest Laboratory under the supervision and mentorship of Dr. Sarah Desmarais; a Master’s Intern at the NC State Counseling Center; and a Graduate Assistant for Residential Education, Leadership, and Assessment within NC State University Housing. Prior to attending graduate school, I served on an Assertive Community Outreach Team for two years in Providence, Rhode Island.

I joined Dr. Desmarais’ lab at the end of my first year at NC State, thanks to a desire both to return to a forensic setting and gain exposure to the science behind treatment implementation. Dr. Desmarais has taught me two fundamental ideas: (1) how applied psychology serves as the merger of research and practice, and (2) that data truly does have the potential to be “fun.” Whether the motivation behind the latter was to promote personal growth or develop my ability to sit in front of Excel for long periods of time while still remaining sane is unclear. What I do know, however, is this knowledge energized me to enter the academic world of forensic mental health.

As a first-generation student, institutional knowledge and comfort in academia can, at times, be elusive. However, my experiences with IAFMHS members such as Dr. Desmarais and Dr. Joel Cartwright, the collective IAFMHS organization, and the recent conference have given me the tools and permission to experiment within the forensic mental health field. One particularly salient conference session, the Student Session, discussed the “Unspoken Rules of Academia” and provided a wealth of institutional knowledge and contextually-relevant professional advice often left untouched during academic dialogue. The session covered everything from navigating authorship and how to set yourself up for success in graduate school, to conversations regarding power differentials and the #MeToo movement. The number of students in attendance at this program visibly demonstrated the positive outcomes stemming from the work of the Student Board, an eagerness of the student contingent to become versed in areas usually left to discuss laterally instead of vertically, and the overwhelmingly apparent support from the organization as a whole to provide inclusive and informative programming.

The Student Session made evident similar lived experiences among those present, as well as common goals of working towards positive future outcomes in areas such as supporting each other as graduate students and furthering inclusive practices in both academia and practical settings. As a woman, first-generation student, and member of the LGBT community, I cannot explain how meaningful the shared experience of participating in these conversations was both personally and professionally. I greatly appreciated the words and advice of Dr. Jodi Viljoen, Dr. Michael Martin, and Dr. Michele Galietta, as well as all session attendees. Similarly, I resonated with a statement made by Dr. Lorraine Johnstone in her Keynote Address: “Sometimes those who are hardest to love, need it the most.” Not only is this a sentiment I value clinically, but I also believe it to be applicable in a broader professional context: Sometimes those topics that are the hardest to discuss, are the topics that need to be discussed the most. The Student Board developed a space for these topics to be discussed; a service that benefits IAFMHS members, the individuals we treat, and the broader contexts we return to upon the conclusion of the conference. By working to integrate science and respectful, collaborative, and supportive treatment of peers and students, we are able to support and grow the up-and-coming “cohort” of the forensic mental health field.

After the conference, I was able to tour the Parliamentarian Visitor Center in Brussels with a fellow IAFMHS student member, Samantha Zottola. The exhibits within the Visitor Center further emphasized the incredible power and privilege of being a part of “an international, interdisciplinary organization comprised of mental health and health care professionals dedicated to improving forensic services, improving the lives of forensic patients, and improving the safety of our society” (Rosenfeld, n.d.). Dr. Stephen Morse posed the question, “Who is responsible?” I believe that we are all responsible, individually and as a field, for improving and creating spaces, research, and practices that promote inclusive and inventive dialogue and response. I was humbled and inspired to witness this responsibility in action at the 2018 International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services Conference. I am grateful to have been introduced into this community of dedicated forensic mental health and health care professionals, to have had the opportunity to meet and converse with so many wonderful individuals, and to take advantage of recognizing familiar faces from the 2018 American Psychology-Law Society Conference by conjuring the nerve to talk to them on my own personal “Conference Round Two” in Antwerp!

My time after the conference consisted of adventures through Antwerp, Brugge, and Brussels eating as many waffles as possible; consuming great quantities of chocolate; and exploring Belgian canals, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and the world-renowned beer scene. My favorite place, however, was the intersection of research and practice that came alive during the conference. This location transcended geography and connected all members of the International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services. I have Dr. Sarah Desmarais, Dr. Joel Cartwright, and the IAFMHS Student Board to thank for showing me the way.