OSCAR
Mentoring Excellence Award
Nominee

Name: Linda Merola

Department: Criminology, Law, & Society

Number of Nominations: 1

1. What characteristics make the nominee an exceptional mentor?
   - Dr. Merola’s passion for criminology is contagious. Whether it is in the classroom or during office hours, she is knowledgeable as well as up-to-date on the most current research and significant Supreme Court cases. However, not only is she passionate about the topics she teaches, but she is also passionate in wanting her students to succeed. Whether it is by giving advice about graduate/ law school or writing internship recommendations, she goes outside her job description in order to be a part of her students’ success. As a mentor, she not only teaches and challenges her mentees but also listens and incorporates our ideas into the project. She values our opinions and makes her mentees feel as if they contribute as much to the project as she does. Ultimately, her enthusiasm about research and criminology is infectious and affects all of her students in a positive way.
   ~Mentee

2. If you personally worked with the nominee, please describe your experience.
   - I first met Dr. Merola as a student in her constitutional law class. She was able to take a difficult and complex topic, and make it enjoyable to learn about. A couple of semesters later, I was interested in taking part on a project with her as an undergraduate research assistant. After emailing her, she responded right away and I got to start working with her within two weeks of my first email to her. The project team involved Dr. Merola, one of her graduate students, and two undergrads. When I first volunteered to work with her, I expected there to be an unequal work dynamic in the sense that because I was an undergrad, I would be given “easier and simpler” work to do and then Dr. Merola and her graduate student would take on the more involved and complex aspects of the project. However, this was not the case. I have gotten to take equal part in every phase of the project we have had so far. From searching for different news articles, to taking
part in figuring out what categories we want for the content analysis, to actually coding the article, we are currently in the process of going through the content analysis and statistical data in order to prepare to write a paper and possibly get published. Throughout this project, Dr. Merola has given me a glimpse into the world of academia. I got to see from up close how a research project is conducted. She has also challenged me by making me articulate my opinions and overall reflections in front of the group as well as entrusting me with tasks I did not think I could take on, let alone succeed at. After getting to work with Dr. Merola for several semesters, I can say that I feel involved, valued and appreciated for my contribution to the project, which has ultimately made me a better student, researcher and person.

~ Mentee
In my experience, the most effective mentors are able to think about and truly “place” themselves in the mindset of their mentees to consider what each student needs to succeed. When I serve as a mentor, I focus my attention on figuring out how to meet students where they are at the present moment. This is the case regardless of whether I am teaching these students advanced research skills or more basic competencies, such as communication or confidence in their abilities. In my view, these are all the responsibilities of a mentor. And, since every student possesses a variety of both strengths and challenges, an empathetic and individualized focus is necessary. My own journey to becoming a faculty member involved many, many years in college, law school, and graduate school, so I identify profoundly with the experiences of a student. I remember with some emotion what it was like to be dependent on teachers and mentors for my growth, for support, and for direction. As a result, I am conscious in all of my interactions of the trust that has been placed in me. Over time, it can be too easy for faculty members to forget what it is truly like to be new to a field – the necessity of making mistakes while learning, the need to be forgiven with patience, and the importance of building confidence. The uncertainty involved in learning translates into the fact that students need a good deal of guidance, patience, and even structure in order to thrive. Never is this more apparent then with the students who embark on the risky (yet exciting) venture of participating in original research. I try to bring these perspectives into my mentoring relationships.

I have worked on a large number of original research projects with students during my nine years at Mason and, for the most part, the planning and conduct of the research projects (mostly empirical surveys and experiments) has progressed smoothly. There were a few instances where students found the work too difficult or were not sufficiently committed to the projects, but these were the exceptions and the beginning stages of the projects normally progressed at a reasonable pace. The constant obstacle that I have encountered comes in the writing stages. This obstacle is not unique to undergraduates – many of my colleagues have recounted similar experiences in teaching academic writing at the graduate level. In thinking about this problem over the course of several years, I realized (at least, in my case) that the obstacle relates both to the students’ substantive writing skills and to mentorship. Faculty often focus on the importance of teaching substantive skills, but perhaps too often forget that students are very new to original research. At a certain point, it occurred to me that -- while I was succeeding in giving focused guidance to students working on things like data analysis -- I was failing to “meet” the students where they are to provide focused lessons in the process and tone of writing these papers. I assumed that writing skills in other areas could translate into writing of academic papers. Yet, for a student, more is needed.

With this insight, I got to work. I developed materials for the students to read and consult during each step of the research process, with the goal of breaking these down into structured components. For example, one of these worksheets is as close to a fill-in-the-blank outline of an academic literature review as it is possible for me to create. A literature review is often a difficult task for students, as many write too much or engage in too much summarizing. The worksheet circumvents these issues by asking students to respond to a series of questions about the literature and then to write specific sentences in a directed format. The sheet also contains tips about proper tone and even sample sentences to get the students started. By the time they complete these worksheets, the students have essentially written a literature review. This approach may seem to some to break the process of writing into too simplistic of components; however, in all types of writing, one needs to become proficient in the basics before imprinting the text with his/her own signature. This is what I hope to achieve here – to provide students with a foundation that helps them to succeed in the current project and to sharpen their analytical and writing skills for future work. Now, I routinely work with students to progress through these materials at an individualized pace.

I am continually amazed at the ability of good mentorship to deepen and accelerate learning outcomes. Indeed, the lessons in the documents mentioned above are ones that I did not truly learn until the years preceding tenure when I wrote and revised many articles. It’s gratifying to think that I can modify these lessons for students, many of whom will become interested in research careers. I’m excited to think of the accelerated progress they might make with the advantage of this early foundation. And, I hope that this approach will allow me to mentor many more students than would have been feasible in the past.
A. Group Mentoring

Over the past few years, a main teaching goal of mine has been to engage in significant mentoring of graduate and undergraduate students. In the past, I have mentored particular students through independent studies and on specific research projects at their request (see section B below). Since 2013, however, I have attended several meetings with undergraduate and graduate students at which the topics of community and collegiality were raised. The CLS program is a large one, so I believe that many students are seeking avenues for further involvement and increased interaction with faculty, as well as more intensive academic challenges. In response, in 2014, I began to explore ways to provide organized mentorship to students with interests in law and social science research, as well as a greater sense of community to these students.

I have met with many students in pursuit of these goals. During these meetings, I have provided advice regarding how to become more actively involved in research, reviewed research designs, and encouraged students to take initiatives that would help them to identify their research interests to other faculty. Additionally, I have worked with many of these students to complete more involved projects of independent research (see section B below). I meet weekly or biweekly with these students (both graduates and undergraduates) to discuss research ideas and to check progress. I have encouraged the graduate students to take on a mentoring role with the undergraduates (allowing for the development of mentoring skills). Every few weeks, I also meet separately with the graduate and undergraduate students. In addition to substantive discussions of the research projects underway and methodology, we discuss opportunities, challenges, and needs in the context of these mentoring relationships. I feel that this model has added to the support that these students receive and has greatly increased the number of students that I can mentor.

B. Student Researchers Mentored

Eight of my 25 publications have been co-authored with eleven students. Currently, I am working on seven academic papers with students (five of these papers will be co-authored with advanced undergraduates). Additionally, 23 of the undergraduate students below have presented their research to faculty, practitioners, and invited guests at the Department’s annual Awards Ceremony, which takes place each May. Likewise, four of the students below presented their research at the American Society of Criminology Meeting and five past students have presented at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium.

Undergraduate Researchers

OSCAR research assistanceships:
- Sarah Pineda (academic paper co-author; will apply to present at CHSS Research Symposium, 2016)
- Karamjot Dillon (graduated from GMU)
- Anthony Lineberry (currently in law school)

Additional Current Student Co-Authors (4 papers in progress with the following groups):
- Chelsea Edwards
- Ellen Cattle
- Mark Flint
- Jemily Hayek
- Sarah Pineda
- Elizabeth Gillett
- Daniel Gassel
- Joel Jenkins
- Sofia Schersei
- Ashley Markson
- Zachary Smith
- Sarah Solano
- Ana Gloribel Pereira Mejia
- Jacob Simkovitz

Research-Based Independent Studies (goal of course is to complete an original empirical research project):
- Megan Day (graduated from law school, student co-authored an academic paper under review)
- Christina Lauderdale (graduated from law school, co-authored an academic paper under review)
- Jerad Tomac (graduated from law school)
- Ryan Davis (currently enrolled in law school)
Additional volunteer research assistanceships/mentees for research projects:

- Christine Fletcher (mentored project to completion for Bachelor of Individualized Study)
- James Green
- David Davis (graduated from law school)
- Megan Davis (presented research at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium, 2009)
- Andrew Dysart (graduated from law school)
- Amanda Hubert (graduated from law school)
- Andrew Michel (graduated from law school)
- Kevin Pettrey (graduated from law school; applied to Ph.D. program in criminology)
- Brandon Thompson (graduated with MA in criminology)
- Anna Vlasova (graduated from law school)
- Carolyn Watson (graduated with MA in criminology)
- Sarah Wright (graduated with MA in social work)
- Jessica Bonometti (enrolled in MA program; also presented at CHSS research symposium, 2011)
- Tabitha Ellis (graduated from law school; also presented at CHSS research symposium, 2011, and at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology)
- Langley Hawkins (presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology)
- Komal Khan (graduated from law school; presented at the CHSS research symposium, 2011)
- Marilia Tellez Nava (presented at annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology)

Graduate Student Researchers Mentored:

- Amanda Penrod (co-author of two academic papers in progress; chair of Ph.D. dissertation committee)
- Lucinda Hatton (member of Ph.D. dissertation committee; completed independent study)
- Jennifer Bailey (co-author of academic paper in progress; completed independent study)
- Emily Smedley (co-author of academic paper in progress)
- Jennifer Kamorowski (co-author of academic paper in progress; chair of MA committee)
- Julie Hibdon (co-author of two published academic papers)
- Breanne Cave (co-author of two published academic papers)
- Heather Vovak (co-author of published academic paper)
- Jaspreet Chahal (co-author of published academic report)
- Julie Gall (Ph.D. awarded; member of Ph.D. committee)
- David McClure (research assistant; Ph.D. awarded; member of Ph.D. committee)
- Holly Stevens (Ph.D. awarded; member of Ph.D. committee; completed independent study)
- Ingrid Lara (MA awarded; member of MA committee)
- Michael T. Davis (MA awarded; member of MA committee)
- Robyn Rosenthal (Ph.D. awarded; member of Ph.D. committee)
- Sarah Ohlsen (MA awarded; member of MA committee)
- Colleen Sheppard (research assistant; Ph.D. awarded; member of Ph.D. committee)

C. Integration of Research Mentorship into Undergraduate Classes

Since the adoption of the QEP, I have revised the curriculum of my CRIM 424 (Constitutional Law) class to more closely model my graduate-level classes in their level of research emersion. I created a series of research units targeting specific constitutional doctrines that were previously covered solely from a legal reasoning perspective. For each, I developed active class exercises to encourage traditional legal reasoning and then to tie this to results from empirical research. For example, in the area of eyewitness identifications, the class participated in an experiment involving jury deliberation in a case
where eyewitness evidence is present. These activities provide a platform for the students to experience and understand academic research in this area.

- **CLS Honor Seminar (RS Course Designation)** - I have volunteered to teach the CRIM 491 and 492 year-long course sequence three times. This purpose of this course is to allow a group of undergraduates to work with one faculty member on a project of original research. Data is collected and analyzed during the year. Many of my mentees have begun as students in the honors seminar and other courses, but then have continued to work with me to prepare portions of this research for publication.

**D. Director, Breaking It Down (Student Publication) (2007-11)**

From 2007 through 2011, Prof. James Willis and I mentored students to create, edit, and publish “Breaking It Down” for GMU’s Center for Justice, Law and Society. In this capacity, we recruited graduate and undergraduate students and guided them to select academic articles of importance to the field for translation to practitioners. The students then wrote two-page abstracts of these articles for distribution to the legal, corrections, and policing fields. In addition to directing the project, I mentored eleven students individually who published abstract. Additionally, each semester, we conducted training sessions in abstract writing and coordinated/readied the final abstracts for publication. Unfortunately, in 2011, the Center for Justice, Law and Society’s director (Prof. Jon Gould) left GMU and the Center ceased to exist.

**E. Teaching and Mentoring Award Nominations**

- Nominee, Career Connections Teaching Award, 2015 – Award given to faculty who have “gone above and beyond the expectations” of their campus role and “devoted extra time and energy to helping students prepare for life after Mason” by giving career advice/graduate school preparation.
- Nominee, 2014 Teaching Excellence Award, George Mason University
- Finalist, 2011 Teaching Excellence Award, George Mason University

**F. Mentoring Events and Workshops Organized**

- Organizer, “Interested in Graduate or Law School?” event (2015) – Organized (with Dr. Cynthia Lum) and attended an event for current GMU students with graduate interests in the study of law. The purpose of the event was to allow interested undergraduates to meet with faculty members informally to discuss the differences between law school and other types of graduate legal study.
- Organizer, U.S. Ambassadors Panel (2009) – Organized (with Dr. Cynthia Lum) and attended a panel and reception at GMU for former U.S. State Department ambassadors and employees. The purpose of the panel was to discuss their experiences serving abroad, as well as potential careers in foreign service. This opportunity arose out of mentoring relationship with a student intern at the State Department.
- Organizer, Effective Public Speaking and Presentations Workshop (2008) - Worked with Department Advisory Board Member Harold Wooten to bring his course on effective public speaking and professional presentations in workshop form (5 meetings of 2 hours) to interested undergraduates.
- Judicial Candidate Mentoring Programs (2013-present) (community outreach) – Consulted with community organizations to create ongoing judicial candidate mentoring and training programs in five states. Programs are focused on mentoring prospective female and minority judicial candidates and attorneys receive mandatory continuing legal education (CLE) credit for their participation. These programs are evidence-based and incorporate findings from my published research.

**G. Other activities involving research and mentorship:**

- Presented twice at GMU’s Innovations in Teaching & Learning Conference – Titles of presentations: “The Pedagogy of Praxis: Teaching Undergraduates to be Scholars” and “Using Audience Response Technologies to Promote Active Learning.”
- Member, Council on Undergraduate Research
March 15, 2016

Dear Students as Scholars QEP Leadership Council:

Linda Merola has asked me to provide a reference letter in support of her nomination for the OSCAR Mentoring Excellence Award. I am her colleague in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society. Before earning my doctorate in Criminal Justice, I practiced law for over 10 years, both in private practice and with the government, primarily in the federal courts. I enthusiastically write this letter and recommend Dr. Merola without reservation.

On a personal level, I can attest to Dr. Merola’s mentoring excellence. I have known Dr. Merola since 2013 when I joined the CLS Department. Though she was just newly tenured at that time, she not only made herself available to answer my many questions about the department, university, and academia, but she also checked in with me on a regular basis. She continues to offer research collaborations and to share teaching techniques and materials. Dr. Merola was assigned to my third year renewal committee along with more senior colleagues; however, she was the most prepared to guide me through the process. With honesty and diplomacy, she clearly communicated the department’s expectations and concerns for renewal, and for tenure going forward. Perhaps more importantly, she showed compassion during what was a stressful time in a competitive, high-performing department, while maintaining objectivity as her committee assignment required.

Dr. Merola’s ability and willingness to mentor junior colleagues is no surprise considering her long history of mentoring activities and the manner in which she mentors her students. CLS undergraduates are required to take Dr. Merola’s Constitutional Law course (CRIM 424), which focuses on the constitutional questions governing police interactions. The course culminates in a moot court appellate argument about a timely Fourth Amendment issue. The students in the course play the roles of attorneys and U.S. Supreme Court justices, who decide the case. Students rave about her course. As such, Dr. Merola has become the department’s de facto pre-law advisor. Students often comment on how she motivated them to consider a legal career, how approachable she is, and how she helped them prepare for the LSAT and to write their personal statements for law school applications. CLS does not formally track these statistics, but we know that a great many of Dr. Merola’s students have gone on to succeed in law school.

Although many of Dr. Merola’s students are interested in law, many more are interested in law-and-society research. Students often seek out Dr. Merola’s mentoring because they are aware that she excels at this and devotes a great deal of time to working with them. She has served as the mentor for a BIS student’s law-and-society research project and as the adviser on seven research-based independent study courses. She has worked with three OSCAR research assistants and numerous other undergraduate researchers on a voluntary basis. Dr. Merola’s undergraduate students have presented their research at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium and at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology. This meeting is
normally attended only by faculty members and some advanced graduate students. Dr. Merola has also published eight articles with student co-authors and has several more in progress at the current time. She has been active in organizing and sponsoring events which mentor students and also student research.

Equally importantly, Dr. Merola fosters a culture of student scholarship within the classroom. Her approach to seminars is unique in that she regularly collaborates with the students on research projects. After these are initiated in the classroom, many of these students opt to continue to work with Dr. Merola in an individualized capacity. These experiences empower the students to begin independent research studies. One student told me how much she appreciated her work with Dr. Merola; Dr. Merola inspired her to approach research projects with less fear and to brainstorm different approaches.

For all of these reasons, I provide Dr. Merola my highest recommendation. Her steady involvement in all aspects of student mentoring, especially the hands-on research collaborations, demonstrates a firm and unwavering commitment to enhanced student learning and scholarship. I can think of no other faculty member more deserving of the Mentoring Excellence Award.

Sincerely yours,

Angela K. Reitler, JD, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Criminology, Law and Society
George Mason University
To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Elizabeth Gillett and I am a senior here at George Mason University. I am a Criminology student with minors in Intelligence Analysis and Legal Studies. I have had Professor Merola for two classes: my CRIM 424 class on constitutional law and my Crim 491/492 Honors Seminar, which is a full year. Professor Merola has been my favorite professor here at George Mason and I would not be where I am now without her support.

When I first met Professor Merola, I was a sophomore who was finally getting into more in-depth criminology classes. I was not looking forward to my constitutional law class, mostly because I thought it sounded incredibly boring. I was wrong. Professor Merola’s class ended up being my favorite that semester. She made the cases interesting and really took the time to explain to us the legal reasoning behind every decision. No question was too dumb and no hypothetical situation too ridiculous. That class ended up fueling my love for constitutional law, which led me to take on a second minor in Legal Studies.

The next year, I decided to apply to study abroad at Oxford University in the spring. Professor Merola was kind enough to write me a recommendation for the program, where I was eventually accepted. While in England, I started researching my classes for the following semester. Multiple professors and my advisor had recommended the Criminology honors seminar to me. I did some preliminary research and realized that this would be a year-long undertaking with original surveys, months of research, and a lot of time. I was hesitant, but as soon as I found out Professor Merola would be teaching the course, I sent her an email. I have not regretted taking this course for a second.

The honors seminar has been a huge help to me, both professionally and academically. I have learned an incredible amount about police technology through this course and I cannot wait to see where it takes me in the next couple of months. Professor Merola treats us all like peers and adults, while still taking the time to explain the difficulties and nuances of literature reviews, surveys, and academic publishing. She encourages us and pushes us to go beyond the basic requirements and truly flourish.

Since becoming interested in constitutional law, I have applied to multiple research positions with groups focused on constitutional issues. I applied for a police officer position with the Supreme Court and hope to work there some time in the future. Without that initial spark of enthusiasm from Professor Merola, I would not be on the career path I am today. She has continuously encouraged my constitutional law interests, written recommendations, and listened to my rants about French middle schoolers. I can say, without a doubt, that Professor Merola has been the best professor I have had at George Mason and I do not know where I would be in my academic career without her influence. If you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at lizg746@gmail.com.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth M. Gillett