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# Faculty Profile: Mitch Librett - Experience Counts in the Criminal Justice Department

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# Faculty Profile: Mitch Librett

## Experience Counts in the Criminal Justice Department

Every faculty member at Bridgewater State College has taken a different path to the college. Some have followed a direct route through undergraduate, then graduate school, sure of their career choice; others have worked in various occupations before returning to graduate school and academia. When Mitch Librett, Assistant Professor in the Criminal Justice Department, arrived here in 2005, it was at the end of a particularly unique journey. For 23 years, Librett

was a member of the New Rochelle, New York police department rising from the position of Uniform Sector Officer to the rank of Lieutenant and Tour Commander. Along the way Librett spent time as an investigator in the Property Theft Unit, a Patrol Sergeant and Commander of a Tactical Patrol Unit (SWAT team), and a Shift Commander. But, after about 15 years, he started to think about what might be next. "When I joined the New Rochelle force," Librett explains, "I chose to sign up for a 20 year tour of service. I always knew that for me it would be 20 years and out. But I certainly don't regret that decision. I don't think it's a bad idea to reinvent yourself every twenty years or so."

When the time came to begin thinking about a second career, Librett was ready for a change. "You have to understand that the day shift can be rather unchallenging," he explained. "Housekeeping duties like paperwork and routine chores, and political concerns usually fall to the day shift; there's not as much excitement." He decided to take some graduate courses at John Jay College in New York to see if he could do the work and if it stimulated him. However, the faculty at John Jay was a little skeptical about admitting someone with no background in social science and only a practitioner's experience in the field. After completing three courses successfully, Librett was accepted into the CUNY Graduate Center PhD Program in Criminal Justice. For the next few years, Librett worked full time in New



Rochelle and took courses at night. Looking back he wonders how he managed. "By that time I was married with two small children. My wife also worked full-time and we divided our time with the kids so I was responsible for child care on certain days. Many times I had to postpone taking a required course until it was offered on an evening when I was available." But, he persevered and after he passed his oral exams, began to teach as an adjunct professor. "That's when I knew what I wanted to do," Librett recalls. "The first time I gave an exam and I saw my students writing confidently, I realized that I had facilitated that knowledge. It was a great feeling."

Meanwhile, Librett had to complete his own doctoral work which included a dissertation titled *The Spoils of War: Divergent Lifeworlds and Identity Formation among Undercover/Vice Cops in the 'Burbs*. "I gained access into an undercover narcotics unit with a department other than New Rochelle's," he explains. "What I was interested in was the process of identity formation—how undercover cops form their identities internally within their own unit as well as externally within the larger department subculture and society in general." In order to do this Librett needed to gain entry as a full participant with the drug unit. He worked with the undercover unit without rank and eventually earned their trust—

“It took about a year.”—participating in drug busts and surveillance operations. He witnessed first hand how the behavior, language, mode of dress, and lifestyles of these officers were altered in order for them to obtain credibility in the underworld. He also observed the hierarchy that developed within the unit itself. Those officers who generally were the back-up team did not have to go into deep cover; for example, they kept their hair trimmed to regulation length and their clothing casual but still professional. In many respects they became the public face of the unit with the larger department and the courts. “Those officers who posed as drug buyers couldn’t risk court appearances or other official duties. They might be seen and their identities discovered.” Still, on occasion, officers were recognized in their “real lives” by those they had come in contact with while undercover. “That happened often enough that it was definitely of concern,” Librett acknowledges.

During these months, Librett was having “identity” problems of his own. “The more educated I became, the more New Rochelle wanted to get rid of me, or at least distance me from the day-to-day culture,” he comments. At the same time the narcotics unit he rode with nicknamed him “LT,” short for Lieutenant, officers in his own department started to call him “professor.” “It was in jest,” Librett recalls, “but it still was an acknowledgment that I had become an outsider to some degree. It was definitely time to move on.” Librett finished his dissertation and earned his PhD in August, 2005. Within a month, he had retired from the New Rochelle force, moved with his family to Massachusetts, and joined the faculty at Bridgewater State College to begin his new life and career.

The distinctiveness of his work and his often critical view of undercover policing and its implications has opened doors for Dr. Librett. He has been a guest lecturer and presented conference papers on the dangers of undercover policing as well as on the methodological challenges he faced while completing his study, and is currently seeking a publisher for his dissertation. Recently, Librett has expanded his research to include the problem of police testimonial deception, often called “testilying.” He has a journal article under review for publication on the practice by which officers stretch the truth on police reports, warrant applications, and in courtroom testimony to make their case. In addition, his background and his own hobby have opened up a new avenue of research which he has tentatively titled “Wild Pigs and Outlaws.” Librett recently acquired a 2000 Harley-Davidson Sportster FX1200 motorcycle and

plans to compare police motorcycle clubs with outlaw motorcycle gangs. He will present his preliminary findings at this year’s *American Society of Criminology* conference. “I want to examine the differences and similarities between the two groups with regard to their dress, rituals, behavior and overall attitudes.” This research will eventually once again be an ethnographic study involving a certain degree of participant observation.

While Librett enjoys Bridgewater and the academic community very much and he hopes his own life experiences and research will benefit his students, the move from police work to academia has not been without its challenges. “I arrived at Bridgewater with virtually no academic socialization,” Librett states, “so this is all still a learning experience for me. I came from a hierarchical culture where when I said ‘jump,’ people asked ‘how high.’ Now, I’m doing the jumping.” When asked to identify some of the differences between his two worlds, he laughs. “It’s a different pace. I’m still adjusting to it. For example, after my shift was over in New Rochelle, I’d often go into an empty cell to write. I’m used to working with radios blaring, cell doors clanging, officers interrupting, and prisoners cursing. I still sometimes find peace and quiet distracting.”

—Patricia J. Fanning.