

**PRESIDENT'S EDITORIAL**

# Moving into the fast lane—AAFS, JFS, and our modern forensic world



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During my involvement with the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS, Academy), I have had the privilege of meeting professionals from disparate forensic backgrounds and from all points around the globe, and of learning what their collective training and experiences offer to the Academy. These interactions, in conjunction with the research results provided by our Journal's many contributors, are among the things I have enjoyed and valued most in my professional career. For those who may not be familiar with my own background, I began my professional forensic life in 1991, obtaining my initial forensic and law enforcement training at the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) forensic science laboratory and the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy. In 1996, I joined the Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) forensic science laboratory in Atlanta, Georgia. That year I also joined the Academy and began my leadership service to the Questioned Documents Section in 2009 as Section Secretary, after having received the Section's Ordway Hilton Award in 2006 for contributions to Forensic Document Examination.

One of my goals as Academy President has been to encourage those in the forensic community, regardless of membership level or experience, to participate more fully by offering contemporary

ways in which they can engage in Academy life. I chose my theme, "A Responsive Academy—Meeting and Surpassing the Challenges of a Modern Forensic World," to impart the continued efforts in meeting the needs of a growing Academy and to encourage the development of streamlined methods of member engagement. My theme can be summarized simply as "expanding our reach," and we as an Academy have taken steps over the past several years to do just that.

## 1 | OUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Meeting our members' needs today is accomplished through discovering and utilizing newer technology and methods with which to communicate and administrate, while refining or reinventing older ones. This includes providing content virtually and making it available over the course of the entire year, rather than primarily at our annual conference. One fundamental goal of our new digital initiative has been to share our content and engage more with our international audience. Developing the Content Digitization Ad Hoc Presidential Committee in 2017 (through which the AAFS Connect digital platform was created) allowed Academy staff, leadership, and me to begin meeting this goal through the provision of on-demand viewing of some of our workshops, while setting the stage for the distribution of other content in the future. The committee is charged with various tasks, including deciding what content is to be made available. You may have seen or heard variations on this specific aspect of outreach in the statements of missions and goals of not only our immediate AAFS Past President Jeri Roper-Miller, but also in those of members of the current AAFS Executive Committee, many of whom are likely future AAFS presidents.

Our necessary shift to an all-virtual annual conference in 2021 provided our staff the expertise to enhance our AAFS Connect on-demand platform through the provision of numerous additions to the previous roster of available workshops from the AAFS 2020 Annual Conference. For the AAFS 2022 Annual Conference, we are planning a hybrid event and will be making many of our scientific sessions available online for those who cannot attend our conference in person. When combined with the addition of even more on-demand workshops, this type of offering will be ground-breaking for the Academy. This content will continue to be refined as we seek to provide a balance of in-person and virtual content for the annual conference. Additionally, we are partnering with other organizations to provide webinars virtually via a project of the International Affairs

Committee, the Global Collaboration of Forensic Scientists. These will then be considered for placement on AAFS Connect. We are united in fostering these and similar changes and additions for our members to increase membership value, as well as to convey that value to non-members worldwide in an effort to continue to grow our ranks.

## 2 | JOURNAL OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

The Journal of Forensic Sciences (JFS, Journal) has been an innovator among forensic science publications since 1956. Over the past 55 years, the Academy's journal has continued to solidify its place among the most respected scientific journals in the world. The Journal was published by Callaghan and Company until 1971, then by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) until 2003, and by Wiley (formerly Blackwell Publishing) [1] from 2003 to the present. During the past 18 years, the JFS editorial staff has significantly streamlined the manuscript submission, review, and publication process. These improvements are the product of a collaboration of thought, time, and effort by all those involved.

The JFS editorial staff has responded to current advances in publishing and the needs of its subscribers, and they have assessed and retooled the Journal's operations to reflect the wants and needs of its readership. In 2017, nine Associate Editors were added to assist with general operations of the JFS and with publishing decisions. The associate positions have a 5-year term with an option for an additional term [1]. With the shift in 2018 to a digital format, the Journal's impact factor (IF) has increased significantly, coupled with circulation growth, a reduction in submission-to-decision time frames, and increases in both advertising revenue and general outreach.

When evaluating a journal's prestige and value to its genre, journal citation reports provide an IF, which is used to assess a publisher's quality and serve as a guide for those seeking to publish their research [2]. The IF provides an average citation number of a journal's articles and is calculated by the number of citations of the two previous years' articles divided by the total number of previous two years' published articles [2]. The JFS IF value for 2020 increased 27% to 1.832 from 1.441 in 2019 [3]. For reference, the factor in 2016 was 1.127, a total realized increase of 62.5%. A similar factor is circulation growth, which, for over the period of 2016 to 2020, has seen an increase of 44.2% [3]. With a digital format being instituted in 2018, internal administrative factors have improved as well. Days from original submission to final editor decision went from an average of 44 for 2017–2018 to 37 in the period from 2020 to 2021 [3], an impressive decrease of 16%.

An advertising program approved by the AAFS Board of Directors in 2019 was initiated during the latter part of that year. Although adjustments to target figures were made for 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Journal met the adjusted target, and the 2021 figures are expected to be on par with those from 2020 [3]. Regarding quality, the Journal's rejection rate for 2020–2021 was

61.8% compared to 38.9% for the 2013–2014 time period [3]. All of these factors have improved the Journal's and the Academy's ability to maximize its outreach and provide content of greater quality in an expedient manner.

The Journal's outreach has been further enhanced via an increase in its social media presence, a new cover design (effective January 2021), and ad space that is targeted to not only promote JFS, but also the Academy's annual conference [3]. During its July 2021 meeting, the AAFS Board of Directors approved a series of webinars co-sponsored by the Journal and its publisher, Wiley, that will further disseminate forensic research and Academy programs in addition to providing revenue to the Academy.

## 3 | STANDARDS

The American Standards Board (ASB) began in 2015. Its mission was to provide an alternative to existing standards development organizations (SDO). Members from every forensic discipline have a vested interest in a standards development process that involves all stakeholders and utilizes a balanced and reliable method to seek and incorporate public comment. The strengthening of forensic methods through a consensus process is like a rising tide lifting all boats, and the products of the ASB are being widely implemented and becoming well-known. The ASB has an impressive start for an SDO that has only been in existence for 6 years – 50 published documents (46 Standards and Best Practice Recommendations) designated as an American National Standard (ANS), and 4 Technical Reports, as of June 30, 2021. Also as of that date, New Work Proposals (NWP) numbered 178 [4]. NWP are submitted when there is an intent to begin production on a new standard or technical report. With thirteen Consensus Bodies (CB) that comprise over 500 volunteers, the ASB partners with the Organization of Scientific Areas Committees (OSAC) process, which has defined objectives and dedicated volunteers [4]. The OSAC drafting process, guided by its experienced management and organizational structure, provides invaluable material for SDOs.

Our efforts in the development of standards transcend the impact of our own ASB CB and their products. Standards from all sources are utilized in every aspect of forensics, including methods of training, analytical methods, and opinion and general terminologies. Toxicologists, document examiners, anthropologists, explosives and arson chemists, and support specialists (such as those working post-blast scenes and others who train and handle arson and explosives detection canine teams) all utilize standards or guidelines in one form or another. No matter the source, together they weave a fabric of integrity, reliability, and validity within and among specialties that may be called upon to assist the trier of fact.

At the core of any forensic specialty are training and continuing education standards that provide the foundation upon which expertise is built. Properly trained specialists who stay current with advances in their respective fields provide the most accurate and valid

content to programs like our annual conference, AAFS Connect, and the Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center (HHRRRC). Our International Educational Outreach Program (IEOP) participants share our standards and training processes with forensic scientists and administrators worldwide. ASB and ASTM have published such training standards and others are being developed by other organizations, but there is work to do in the area of publishing American National Standards (ANSI) for training in disciplines and sub-disciplines that lack them. These are all examples of the Academy putting forth its best efforts toward a common goal of providing the most reliable forensic science research, education, and testimony to all who benefit from our work from victims and those accused, and their families, to prosecutors and defense attorneys.

## 4 | PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

In 2021, I formed the Committee Nominations Presidential Ad Hoc Committee (Committee) to better identify those in AAFS who have an interest in participation and leadership. There needs to be a better path for interested future leaders and volunteers to express their willingness to serve among the myriad of opportunities available annually in the Academy, JFS, AAFS Connect, Forensic Science Foundation, and other committees and programs we sponsor. For those members who are considering becoming more involved, I ask you to contact the aforementioned groups, including those on the AAFS Executive Committee and Board of Directors. As an alternative, the Committee is developing the means to identify members' interests through a database of those willing to serve. This can be populated via our website. The subsequent selection process will include a focus on better valuing and increasing the representation of our underrepresented groups.

An increase in recognition of diverse communities was a hallmark of AAFS Past President Ropero-Miller's term, and I honor and support the work of the Diversity Outreach Committee (DOC), which is comprised of representatives from all sections of the Academy. An increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in our membership, leadership, and pathways to leadership will continue to bring to the Academy a variety of experiences, ideas, perspectives, approaches, and talent. This makes any community and organization richer and stronger. However, this enrichment is only garnered through recognizing, listening to, and providing opportunities to those in underrepresented groups. Only through these actions and continual awareness can the Academy be considered an inclusive organization.

Our advocacy groups, the ASB CB, the JFS Editorial Board, and so many others can benefit from our member's efforts, and if the past dictates the present, the reward is lasting on both sides. Every form of participation and leadership can become an active conduit for our continued success as an organization and every role will prepare our volunteers for the next one.

## 5 | BUILDING ON OUR PAST SUCCESSES

The advances of the Academy provide not only a path forward for the Academy to maintain its own relevance and resilience, but also a path for the general advancement of forensic science, immeasurably benefitting the public.

Like the JFS, the Academy is at the vanguard of the promotion of science and justice in the United States and around the world. We work in collaboration with other groups with similar missions, like the International Society for Applied Biological Sciences (ISABS) and our other Association Academies in Brazil and Cuba that contribute to our reach. For those who now fill so many roles and share your knowledge with the world (including those who contribute to the JFS), I speak on behalf of the AAFS Board of Directors in thanking you for your service.

To the Academy's leadership and members, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way to further the goals of this highly respected and valued organization. We have made great strides by focusing on technology to make the Academy and its annual conference more efficient, and by harnessing those tools we now can share more broadly our content with the world. As an Academy, we have shifted into the fast lane and, by leaning into the momentum, I predict the next decade will be our best yet.

Onward!

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