

# Communication professors train local police to connect with citizens

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Police officers are trained to protect and serve the public. They are taught to evaluate a dangerous situation in a split second and act in ways that might best keep both the public and themselves safe.

Deaths at the hands of [police](#) in recent years, however, have stirred heated debate across the nation concerning police brutality.

"The trends that have been going on in the last three or four years in the United States, related to excessive force by police officers, as we're all well aware, have been growing," said senior instructor of communication Joann Brown, referencing Ferguson, Missouri, where the fatal shooting of Michael Brown (no relation) by Officer Darren Wilson resulted in a \$6 million lawsuit against the city and the advent of #BlackLivesMatter.

"Any police force can open themselves up for this. It is a situation that goes between the community and the police. The community doesn't understand what the role of the police officers are, and why the police officers do certain actions."

In response to the growing distrust, local police departments proactively reached out to FIU's Department of Communication, in the College of Communication, Architecture + The Arts, to create programs that facilitate more effective communication between officers and the South Florida community. The goal is to decrease any preventable loss of lives at the hands of police.

## Training police in effective communication

Brown is part of a joint initiative between FIU and the City of Miami Police Department to train officers in cultural sensitivity and conflict de-escalation.

The "Policing Through Effective Communication" project kicked off in Fall 2015, after the City of Miami contracted FIU to devise a plan to train officers and incoming cadets in these areas of communication.

"Miami is a multicultural city. It is a city that has a lot of things going on, and they wanted to be proactive, before we ended up as a Ferguson or a Baltimore or a Chicago or a New York," Brown said of cities that have seen highly publicized police shootings in recent years.

The eight-hour training takes place at the City of Miami Police Academy. It teaches active listening techniques, how to speak concisely and the value of showing respect and courtesy—all directly aligned with fundamental policing procedures as outlined in the state's [law enforcement](#) training handbook.

Brown's portion of the training emphasizes cultural awareness. She discusses biases and stereotypes, and she advises officers to keep in mind that different cultures may teach people to respond differently to certain situations, especially in terms of body language.

For example, while Americans may consider it disrespectful for people to look away while someone is speaking to them, some cultures consider it a sign of respect to lower one's eyes while dealing with someone in authority.

Neighborhood resource officer Constant Rosemond said, "Dealing with the different cultures, sometimes you have to adjust [your behavior] just

a bit to make sure that everyone is on common ground. By using the techniques learned in this class, I'm able to work with [civilians] to find common ground and help them to see that we're all here for their good."

Rosemond, who has served for 22 years and been on Miami's force for seven years, said he found the training so effective that he now incorporates the procedures into the curriculum for community classes he teaches to adults and children.

Communication instructor Raquel Perez teaches officers to de-escalate conflict to defuse potentially dangerous situations.

"You're dealing with a very heightened time in our society where people who may never even have had an encounter with law enforcement, on their first encounter are already anticipating a negative reaction," Perez said. "So that's why it's so important with that de-escalation component that police officers are mindful of their verbal and nonverbal reactions, that they're mindful of how that empathetic conversation can change the dynamic of an interaction."

First-year officer Nicania Cange says the skills she learned from Brown and Perez have been so helpful in de-escalating situations in her community that she has not yet needed to use force while on patrol. And she hopes to keep it that way.

Senior advisor to the city manager Milton Vickers, who initially proposed the partnership between FIU and the City of Miami, said there is no question that police-community relations in the United States are in need of repair. But he believes that among the nation's nearly 800,000 [law enforcement officers](#) and 18,000 police departments, it is safe to say many of these departments and officers are committed to the highest degree of professionalism in serving their diverse communities.

"At a local level, we are responsible for making sure that our officers and residents in the City of Miami are working together to maintain a safe living and working environment. Our police officers are a reflection of our community, and it is our priority to provide them with the skills necessary to perform their duties in a professional and respectful manner, taking into consideration Miami's historical and cultural differences," Vickers said. "We believe that this model can be duplicated in other jurisdictions in order to change the conversation and improve police-community relations."

## **Reaching youth through dialogue**

FIU also works with the Miami-Dade County Police Department through a program that brings officers into local high schools to get to know South Florida's youth.

Developed by communication instructor Antoine Hardy, the program facilitates sessions in high schools where [police officers](#) sit in a circle with students and, under Hardy's guidance, discuss topics ranging from police brutality to interacting effectively with each other to general ways to better the community.

"The main goal is for both sides to learn how to communicate better, but also to feel like they were heard and understood and what they have to say can have some impact," Hardy said. "I think overall that's really the main impact of these dialogues."

"Just being able to have that safe space for communication, discussion, that in itself is everything. It's what's missing," said FIU graduate Rodrigo Quirch '16, a student assistant in Hardy's project. "We need a place to talk things out, and that way we can avoid shootings out in the street, or miscommunications that lead to people getting their lives taken."

Students and police engage in role playing, with each taking the position of the other to act out possible encounters. The idea is to show how teens think police would or should act in certain situations, and then teach them how police protocol dictates their actions in real life.

In one such discussion, in a session at Richmond-Perrine Optimist Academy (RPO), students questioned why police are trained to shoot to kill, rather than shooting to disarm.

As one officer explained, sometimes shooting an assailant in the leg or hand to disarm may not actually stop the assailant from harming an officer or an innocent bystander.

The officers said the sessions have helped them understand how the teens think and react, which can help them better serve their community. "I feel good. I feel that it's beginning to rebuild the gap between the police and the community," said Officer Mercy Rodriguez.

Inspired by the dialogues with police, a group of RPO students wrote socially conscious hip-hop music that examines the state of violence in their communities and advocates for change among their generation.

Chauncy Cooper, an eleventh grader at RPO and a member of the music group, said the sessions have shown him that not all police are "bad cops."

"It does make me think differently about both sides of the situation," said Cooper. "I feel like police brutality is wrong, and I feel like people who disrespect police are wrong, too. I feel like we need to all come together and make the world a better place."

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