

# Eat Your Heart Out, Sam Spade

Even the best sleuth wouldn't be able to recognize today's breed of private investigator.

Julie Triessl feels rejuvenated. The middle-aged former librarian and museum cataloger is happier, is more extroverted, and has even lost 50 pounds. What is the subject of her inspiring new romance? Private investigation. Sitting in her dining room next to a two-foot stack of class materials and personal notes from a seven-course program at [Boston University](#), Triessl is clearly elated to be an investigator and research specialist. "My life hasn't been the same since," she says, beaming. "It's the ultimate research project!"

The term private investigator usually conjures up images of hard-drinking, trench-coat-clad individuals skulking in the shadows and tackling heavies, à la Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, or of the dashing, smooth-talking professional armed with charm, à la Magnum, P.I. But that's not reality, as Triessl proves. Private investigation is a legitimate, organized business that's also not easy to crack.

"Most companies won't even hire you unless you're ex-law enforcement, ex-Secret Service, or ex-FBI," reveals Jim Pero, owner of the [New England](#) firm A Tech Investigation Services. "It's a very difficult field to break into. There's an overwhelming supply of police officers or military police officers who are retiring every single year, so we're able to obtain them."

Boston University, though, is helping wannabe gumshoes channel their inner Sam Spade.

The students attending BU's PI program hail from a variety of backgrounds -- including [insurance](#), [finance](#), engineering, prison security, human resources, social work, and journalism -- and have gone on to numerous jobs at federal and state agencies and respected PI firms.

"We attract an awful lot of women into the program; [women] do not currently make up a huge part of the PI population," notes Ruth Ann Murray, [director](#) of the Center for Professional Education at BU. She was inspired to start the PI course in 2005 after learning that the [University of Tennessee](#) had a small but successful program. "I felt that the large number of law practices and insurance companies in Boston would make

this a likely city for such a program.”

Murray then connected with noted PI Tom Shamshak. The duo, along with a team of subject-matter experts and instructional designers, assembled a six-month, 170-hour curriculum that includes courses like Surveillance 101 and Practice Management for Professional Investigators. The teachers are professional, practicing PIs and attorneys. Approximately 86 students have graduated since 2006. An online program also launched in July.

A former police chief of two [Massachusetts](#) towns, 59-year-old Shamshak runs Shamshak Investigative Services and specializes in criminal-defense investigations. He has appeared on [CNN](#), Fox News, Court TV, and 20/20. A passionate, sharply dressed man, Shamshak oozes drama and loves telling stories. He invokes terms like dragon slayer and truth seeker when discussing his travails cutting through others' sloppy investigative work on criminal defense, missing persons, and unsolved murder cases.

Shamshak says people who get into private investigation are puzzle solvers who tend to shun the nine-to-five lifestyle. These ego-driven, individualistic, and detail-oriented individuals are drawn to a PI career, which sports a variety of facets. “There are people who do surveillance for workers' comp investigations [of] fraud and are into the disguises but don't have the ability to sit in a van for extended periods of time to just do nothing but watch and be patient,” he says.

The BU curriculum Shamshak helped design mixes classroom applications with field exercises. It delves into the building blocks of PI work (researching records, interviewing, and conducting surveillance) and the different types of investigations (criminal defense, marital infidelity, missing persons, and fraud). The surveillance exercises conducted at local malls -- with paid targets in on the cat-and-mouse game -- provide good initial exposure to the difficulties in surreptitiously tracking people.

Some BU grads have shown a propensity for field work, including 27-year-old Kim Pivrotto, who previously studied film at Fitchburg State College and criminal justice at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. The daughter and granddaughter of police officers, she did video investigative work for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service in Washington, D.C., before returning to [Boston](#). She now freelances for Shamshak and other [Massachusetts](#) PIs; runs her grandfather's PI company, Northeast Inquiries, with her father; and also works for the United States Investigative Service as an associate investigator.

“[PI work] is very methodically planned out,” she says. “It’s not just hitting the streets and demanding evidence. It [requires] a lot of research and using your instincts and trying to get sources in different ways.”

“Truth is the bottom line,” stresses Triessl, who conducts records research for Shamshak. “Nothing I had been asked to do during the course or since has been unethical. It’s been very aboveboard.”

Ultimately, Murray says, a PI must get to the truth, whether it helps or hurts a client.

“You let the chips fall where they may.”

## **Tools of the Trade**

According to John LeClair, PI and polygraphist for Northeast Polygraph Services in Pawtucket, [Rhode Island](#), every field investigator should have the following:

- Cell phone
- Still and video camera
- Tripod
- Digital or audiotape recorder
- Extra film, videotapes, and/or audiotapes
- Binoculars
- Flashlight
- Fresh batteries for your camera, flashlight, and cell phone
- Food and water
- Change of clothes
- Full tank of gas
- Pretext scenarios
- Target and client information
- Paper, pen, and pencil
- Cash and credit cards

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## **How Not to Be Seen**

Want to stay unnoticed? Follow these basic surveillance tips:

- Drive a van, minivan, or SUV; they are best and offer more room inside.
- Always have a cover story or pretext. You could be an appraiser looking around for a [bank](#), a Realtor waiting on a client, someone who's just waiting on a friend, or a motorist waiting for AAA to come look at your car.
- Don't make eye contact with the locals. Keep any unexpected conversation polite but brief.
- If possible, change your parked position regularly.
- Use common sense and know when a situation might be getting dangerous -- e.g., the target speeds away or attempts to confront you – and if it becomes dangerous, leave the area.