A Message from Our Founders

Jim Sullivan and Bill Evans share their thoughts on LEO

As with any start-up, launching LEO has been a very exciting, and at times frenetic, experience. Over the past 18 months, we have met with service providers all across the country learning about the passion and commitment that goes into programs that aim to help those in need. During this what we like to call “proof of concept” phase, we are actively seeking out innovative programs to evaluate to demonstrate that the unique pairing of social service providers and academics can provide important insights into the fight against poverty. The more we talk with service providers and other academics about LEO and what we are trying to accomplish, the more convinced we become that LEO will be a transformative force in the fight against poverty in America.

During this initial phase, where we are forming new partnerships and launching new initiatives, what has been transformed most has really been ourselves. Although our prior academic research focused on topics such as measuring poverty or the impact of various government programs, the nature of this work kept us somewhat distant from the people we studied. What LEO has allowed us to do is put some names, faces, and stories to our work and in essence make this a more personal endeavor. Our drive and desire to make LEO succeed has been bolstered by the many people we have encountered working at local Catholic Charities and the love and commitment they bring to their job.

One story that has galvanized the staff at LEO and helped us focus on why this effort is so important comes from our Stay the Course program in Fort Worth, Texas. This intervention, launched in August of 2013, is designed to increase community college completion rates by providing comprehensive case management services to help low-income students address the many obstacles that prevent them from completing their degree. At launch, we randomly selected a group of students from the local community college to be part of the program. Soon afterward, the staff at Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) relayed the story of a young woman who was curious why she was invited to participate. The case manager explained to her that it was simply the luck of the draw—there were not enough resources to enroll everyone, so eligible students were selected at random. From the student’s perspective, however, there was nothing random about it. She had recently become homeless and she felt that this program was a blessing that had come to her in a time of great need. The case manager was quickly able to find the student housing, and at last report she is still on track to complete a degree. We have expansive goals and a tremendous amount of work to do, but in the meantime stories such as this provide the energy we need to make LEO a success.
What is your role at Catholic Charities Fort Worth?
I run two programs aimed at assisting low income individuals gain the skills and training they need to be successful in the workforce: the *Vocation Program* and *Stay the Course*. The *Vocation Program* is designed to be a comprehensive education and employment program that assists clients in entering, remaining in, and advancing through the workplace. From offering skill building workshops, to connecting individuals to computer literacy courses, to helping individuals earn a certificate or associate’s degree through local community colleges, our goal is to see our clients become more skilled and self-sufficient. The *Stay the Course* program is primarily designed to increase community college persistence and completion. Using wrap around services and providing nonacademic support, our goal is to help low-income students navigate any potential barriers that threaten their ability to stay in school. We want to see our clients persist, complete, and succeed.

What was your experience prior to CCFW?
After college, I joined the Peace Corps to work as a teacher in Namibia. That experience taught me a lot about the dignity of education: that learning is a powerful agent of change. After my term in the Peace Corps ended, I found my way back to Texas and landed a job at Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) working in Refugee Services as an Employment Case Manager. There I helped newly arrived refugees adapt to American work norms and find stable employment.

Can you describe your partnership with LEO and how it came to be? We presented our Vocation Program to the LEO team in 2012 with the hope of finding a way to demonstrate the impact we have on clients’ lives. We wanted to conduct a rigorous evaluation in order to see what was working and what wasn’t. We worked with LEO over the course of a year to design and implement a randomized experiment that would allow us to demonstrate the impact of our services.

In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty? I think that research plays an incredibly vital role in reducing poverty. We have to be able to show impact- and not just on the surface- but deep, lasting and true impact. Better knowledge means better programs; and better programs mean more opportunities for success. I believe that there is always a way to improve, and research provides a systematic and rational way of breaking down a program into meaningful and critical elements that have the potential to influence outcomes. Finding out where we can improve and where we are making a real difference helps us provide a better product to those we serve.

What have you gained from working on a LEO research project? Partnering with LEO has been a tremendous opportunity. Being part of a research project has allowed vocation services to expand, which increases our opportunity to improve the lives of clients. In terms of personal development, I have learned how to use research to inform decisions about our programs. I feel truly blessed to be a part of an organization and partnership that is committed to strengthening its programs in order to do more good.
Staff Showcase

Luke Horvath

LEO relies on a pool of Notre Dame students, passionate about making a difference in the fight against poverty, to support its research efforts. Current undergraduates with advanced quantitative coursework have the opportunity to work as Research Assistants (RAs) for LEO during summers or throughout the school year. The Lab also employs recent graduates as full-time Research Associates. Their most important roles are serving as project managers for research projects, helping to design and implement evaluations, analyzing data, writing reports and policy briefs, and serving as liaisons between the research team and service providers. One of our Research Associates is Luke Horvath, a 2013 Notre Dame alumnus from Poughkeepsie, New York.

On a personal level, Luke describes his work as incredibly rewarding:

“I came to Notre Dame because I wanted a place that would challenge me to direct my talents outwards, towards the common good. Working for LEO has afforded me the opportunity to use my interests in math and economics within a social service context. I’m learning about how impact evaluation, an important but underutilized tool in the war on poverty, can identify scalable solutions that really help people. I’m fortunate to be at LEO, and I want to continue working in program evaluation throughout my career.”

He also feels that the responsibilities entrusted to LEO Research Associates make this a unique post-graduate job opportunity:

“A lot is asked of us here; few post-graduate jobs challenge new hires to engage in all facets of the research process. From helping write grant proposals, to analyzing program impact, to forging relationships with partner agencies, to even designing newsletters, I have been involved in every level of project development. I’m gaining practical research and project management skills, learning to take initiative and ownership over projects, and also learning, firsthand, how social service agencies attack persistent poverty. I enjoy this work, and I think the broad range of skills it fosters is excellent preparation for graduate school and a career in public policy or research.”

Engaging Undergraduates in Research

One of LEO’s top priorities is creating opportunities for undergraduates to actively participate in research. Each summer, LEO hires a team of talented undergraduate students. Many students continue to work for LEO throughout the academic year. Pictured at right are two former research assistants, Stephen Fox and Melissa Maggart, from the summer of 2012.
Research Project Update

Measuring the Impact of Women, Infant, Child (WIC) Food & Nutrition Centers in the City of Chicago

Partner Agency: Catholic Charities Chicago

Policy Focus Area: Food and Nutrition Services

Project Investigators: William Evans, James Sullivan

Research Questions: LEO seeks to evaluate the effect of the WIC Food and Nutrition Centers on WIC coupon redemption rates and health outcomes. The study will determine the impact of the WIC Centers by comparing outcomes for families who live close to the Centers to otherwise similar families who live further from the Centers. The evaluation addresses important questions, including whether nutrition centers decrease the distance mothers have to travel to redeem coupons, whether the program encourages more coupon redemptions, and whether this translates into better health for newborns and their mothers.

Design of the Study: This study takes advantage of administrative data maintained by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). The project is the most data intensive effort in which LEO staff is conducting. The state of Illinois has provided de-identified information on mothers and children in Chicago that entered the WIC program over a two year period. Our analysis tracks data on 340,000 participants who redeemed over 13 million coupons at 2000 different retail locations in the Chicago area.

The results of this study will be of considerable interest to providers who offer nutrition services to the poor as well as to policy makers at both the national and state level. A final report will be available at the end of summer 2014.
Since launch in 2012, LEO has established agency and academic partnerships throughout the United States

Jameel Poverty Action Lab
University of Chicago
University of Maryland
Michigan State University
United States Military Academy
Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago
Catholic Charities USA
St. Joseph County Juvenile Justice Center
Catholic Charities Fort Worth
Catholic Charities Chicago
Catholic Charities Santa Rosa
Catholic Charities Brooklyn Queens
Catholic Charities Western Washington
Catholic Charities Santa Clara County
Catholic Charities West Tennessee
Catholic Charities Milwaukee
Scholarship America