

Staff Spotlight: *Rachel Fulcher Dawson*

Rachel Fulcher Dawson joined the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities in March 2014 as an Associate Director after consulting for LEO part time during the previous year. She holds a PhD in Education Policy from Michigan State University and also teaches a class at Notre Dame on Early Childhood Education Policy in the United States. She lives in South Bend with her husband Scott and four daughters Grace, Ellie, Caroline, and Rose.



What is your role at the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities?

LEO is so new, it's like a start up company, really. Since I've started, my role has changed and evolved in a short amount of time. A big part of my job is finding funding for our projects: writing grants and meeting with foundations and donors. I also work with existing and new partner agencies developing projects in the early stages. My expertise as a researcher is early childhood education, so I am heavily involved with growing and supporting projects in that area.

Why did you join the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities?

My background and training are in education, evaluation and public policy. I taught middle school, worked on Capitol Hill, worked with preschool policymakers in Michigan and in Indiana and now teach here at Notre Dame. Personally, I feel very lucky to find myself in a career where my faith-based commitments to social justice, my professional commitment to doing research that is helpful and my passion for early childhood education are all a part of the job. My dad was a plumber for 35 years; he worked so hard and we had little money, but we always, always were raised to focus on education and on helping others. My parents are also fundamental to why I chose my professional path and ultimately joined LEO!

In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

The type of impact evaluation research that LEO does involves three things: Looking at what's been studied and how, working with agencies to design a way to measure outcomes and doing analyses. Most agencies are simply not equipped to do these things on their own, but desperately want to run programs that help people living in poverty. Researchers bring a fresh perspective and resources to agencies who often are collecting a lot of valuable information, but don't have time or energy or training to do impact evaluation.

How does LEO's work improve the ability of agency partners to serve those living in poverty?

Social service agencies are staffed with people who are passionate about helping others and daily face the effects of poverty and suffering in the people they serve. I have such admiration for social workers, case managers, teachers, and others who are talented, hardworking individuals who feel called to do this work. They do the heavy lifting, for sure. What LEO does is help them think differently about the impact of their work on the people they serve. We help them think about how to measure what they are doing and to rethink how they can improve their programs by focusing on efforts that permanently move people out of poverty.