



*Cortney Cunningham is the Director of Operations for the Research and Innovation Department at Catholic Charities Fort Worth. As the former Program Director for the Workforce Solutions of Greater Dallas, she managed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, a grant-funded program designed to expose young adults to educational and/or career pathways. She transitioned to Catholic Charities Fort Worth to manage the Stay the Course program which also focuses on academic completion for at-risk students. Cortney holds a B.S. in Consumer Sciences and a Master's Degree in Social Work Policy, Planning and Administration from Western Michigan University.*

## CORTNEY CUNNINGHAM

### How did you become interested in serving low-income community college students?

As a native of the city of Detroit, Michigan, I witnessed the effects of the lack of educational planning and guidance that led so many young people away from the opportunity to access post-secondary education. For those students who did make it to community college and/or university, many of them dropped out without re-enrolling in courses past the first or second semester, never making it to the second year. Students need the guidance, support and resources to tackle non-academic barriers—the things that life throws at us. Students not understanding the value of education for their futures is the disconnect that makes a student put education and achievement on the back burner while they prioritize how to survive and handle those day-to-day disruptions. My passion for education and ending generational poverty runs deep and I will always serve in this area and advocate for solutions to these problems.

### What are your responsibilities with LEO research studies?

I began at Catholic Charities Fort Worth in June of 2015 and functioned as the Stay the Course Program Manager. I took a vested interest in the initiative to invest in piloting a program where the world of academia meets innovative case management. My primary responsibilities include the execution of program expansion and enrollment initiatives, managing partnerships between multiple campus site locations within the Tarrant Community College District, and most rewardingly leading a team that provides a multitude of services, support and mentorship to community college students. After one year and six months of managing the Stay the Course program, I was promoted to the Director of Operations for the Research and Innovation Department at Catholic Charities where my role expanded to all things operational for internal and external collaborative pilot projects while maintaining oversight of the Stay the Course program.

### Last summer, a LEO undergraduate research assistant worked alongside you in Fort Worth. What did she work on and how did she contribute to the ongoing research projects?

Our LEO summer intern, Holly Evans, was fantastic! She was able to bring a fresh perspective to the Stay the Course program, offering an evaluative eye to help us understand the progress that the program was making. Holly played a vital role in our day-to-day data collection and reporting. Holly helped us to gain insight on how the students within the Stay the Course program were utilizing their emergency financial assistance to eliminate those non-academic barriers that could potentially result in a student dropping out of school. Our Research and Innovation Department looks forward to hosting another LEO intern this summer.

### What role does research play in reducing poverty?

I believe that research allows us to test our theories before we commit to implementing solutions to what we may perceive to be solutions for those in need. Research allows us to improve on our poverty prevention and intervention strategies. These concepts are a culture shift from the one size fits all in service delivery models. I am honored to participate in such efforts that move social service agencies away from practices that millions of dollars are invested in with no proof of effectiveness on a long-term scale.

### What have you gained from working on a LEO research project?

I have gained a broader understanding of the importance of data, tackling outcomes, and testing program initiatives to evaluate and determine the true impact of our work. This is ground breaking for someone like me who has operated in the social services sector for over five years. LEO has brought new perspectives that force agencies to improve on service delivery models if we truly want to make real impact on the lives we serve.