

Spring 2017

LEO NEWSLETTER



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WILSON SHEEHAN
LAB FOR ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES

A MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDERS

Bill Evans and Jim Sullivan reflect on recent developments at LEO



With new projects, new partners, new hires, and a new home, spring has been a season of continued growth for LEO. To celebrate, we recently launched our new website! Visit us at leo.nd.edu to explore all that we've been up to.

In November, Bill Evans and LEO undergraduate Research Assistant Danny Fitzgerald traveled to Washington, D.C. to present new research to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Catholic Charities USA (CC USA) on the integration of refugees in the United States. The USCCB is the largest of nine agencies tasked by the State Department with resettling refugees in the U.S. Local Catholic Charities agencies, under subcontracts with the USCCB, re-settle more refugees than any other U.S. organization.

Also in November, Jim Sullivan testified before the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking in Washington, D.C. He presented recommendations developed by LEO regarding non-profit demand for evaluation.

In February, LEO partnered with J-PAL North America, 1st Source Bank, and the United Way of St. Joseph County to host a conference for local service providers on the Importance of Data and Impact. Over thirty leaders from social service and government agencies across St. Joseph County, Indiana, participated in the interactive workshop. We are grateful for these local partners and their commitment to evidence-based decision-making.

Wrapping up the list of conferences and events, Jim Sullivan presented at the National Human Services Data Consortium (NHSDC) in April with Padma Thangaraj, the Director of Informational Services at All Chicago. The pair discussed the key findings and implications of LEO's Homelessness Prevention Call Center study at the Salt Lake City, Utah conference.

We are excited to welcome our summer undergraduate Research Assistants. We have eight new research assistants joining us this summer—seven will be located in LEO's offices on Notre Dame's campus, and one will be working onsite with our partners at Catholic Charities Fort Worth.

In addition to our new undergraduate interns, we are also welcoming two new full-time hires this summer. Sarah Kroeger began as an Assistant Research Professor in June. She attended the College of William and Mary for her Bachelor's Degree, and received her Ph.D. from Boston



Jim Sullivan and Padma Thangaraj present at the National Human Services Data Consortium in Salt Lake City, Utah.

University. She comes to us from her most recent position at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics.

Andrea Ringer will join LEO as a full-time Research Associate in June. Andrea is a 2017 Notre Dame graduate with a degree in International Economics with a concentration in Spanish and a minor in International Development Studies. Andrea spent time conducting field research in Nicaragua as an undergraduate.

We are sad to say goodbye to five graduating Research Assistants this year. They will all be missed in the LEO office, but are off to pursue many exciting professional and academic endeavors. Two of our research assistants, in particular, will continue to pursue their research interests by working towards advanced degrees: Sree Kancherla will be entering a Ph.D. program in economics at the University of California-Berkeley, sponsored by the prestigious National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Another graduating senior, Danny Fitzgerald, will enroll in the Masters in Science and Analytics program at North Carolina State University.

LEO will be changing locations in June. Though we will miss the 9th floor of Flanner Hall, our new home on the 3rd floor of Jenkins-Nanovic Hall is only a short walk across campus and boasts beautiful views of Notre Dame Avenue. Please come visit us when you are on campus!

LEO CO-FOUNDERS

FACULTY AFFILIATE UPDATES

LEO's research network is comprised of faculty affiliates from universities around the country with experience evaluating anti-poverty programs. LEO identifies innovative projects and matches them to academic researchers with appropriate expertise.

WILLIAM EVANS

Professor Evans was recently renewed for a second term as the Chair of the Department of Economics at Notre Dame for another three years. He has been the Chair since 2014.

DAVID PHILLIPS

Professor Phillips recently had two papers accepted for publication: "Why Do Kids Get into Trouble on School Days? Evidence from Teacher Work Days" in *Regional Science and Urban Economics*; and "Landlords Avoid Tenants Who Pay with Vouchers" in *Economics Letters*.

CRAIG GUNDERSEN

Professor Gundersen was interviewed by the *Washington Post* in April about his work on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), including his book "SNAP Matters."

KATHRYN WAGNER

Professor Wagner presented her paper, "Public Health Insurance, Mental Health, and Societal Impacts," at the Midwest Economics Association Annual Meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio on April 1st.

CHLOE GIBBS

Professor Gibbs was recently awarded an Early Career Research Award from the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research for her work on "Full-day Kindergarten Expansions and Maternal Employment." She also received a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation and W.T. Grant Foundation's jointly-funded Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project to study "The Impact of Full-day Kindergarten on Academic Achievement."

RESEARCH PROJECT UPDATE

Partner Agency:
Catholic Charities
Fort Worth

Policy Focus Area:
Education

Investigators:
William Evans
Melissa Kearney
James Sullivan

Evaluating Stay the Course

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Stay the Course is designed to address the non-academic “life barriers” that challenge many economically disadvantaged students. The program aims to increase community college persistence and graduation rates for eligible participants. The main elements of the program include coaching and mentoring services, as well as emergency financial assistance (EFA).

SIGNIFICANCE:

Community college offers a low-cost education with potentially high rates of return for students who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford college. However, community college dropout rates are remarkably high, with less than half of first-time enrollees making it to graduation. Dropout rates are particularly high among economically disadvantaged students. While policy has historically focused on solutions to the financial and academic challenges community college students face, relatively little has been done to address the personal, non-academic, social, or institutional obstacles that may be contributing to high drop-out rates.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

LEO is evaluating the impact of providing comprehensive case management and emergency financial assistance to low-income community college students. Outcomes of interest include credits earned, semester re-enrollment, and whether the student earns a degree or certificate. The evaluation aims to answer the question: Does non-academic case management and emergency financial assistance for students increase the chance that students will persist and complete college?

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN:

This study is conducted as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation. All students at two of the six Tarrant County College (TCC) campuses are screened for eligibility based on financial and academic requirements. LEO uses the list of eligible students to create a pool of degree-seeking students who have completed less than half their degree, and sends letters and emails inviting students to learn more about Stay the Course. Students are invited to express their interest in the program online. Once a student has expressed interest, they are entered into a random lottery. Students are offered a spot in the program if they are selected by the lottery. Those who accept a spot in the program complete an intake appointment, begin meeting with a navigator on a regular basis, and have access to up to \$500 per semester in emergency financial assistance (capped at \$1,500 total over the course of the program). Data is collected each semester from TCC as well as the National Student Clearinghouse to observe outcomes such as GPA, credits earned, student enrollment, and graduation rates.

PROJECT STATUS:

LEO is currently wrapping up Phase 1 of the Stay the Course evaluation that examines results six semesters after enrollment for a cohort of students enrolled in fall 2013. A final report is forthcoming. In addition, LEO continues to track outcomes for a second cohort that was enrolled in fall 2016.



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.



Wendy P. Barreno is an Associate Director at LEO. In this role, she works with nonprofit organizations, governments, researchers, and other stakeholders across the country to identify the policies and programs that reduce poverty and improve lives in the U.S. Wendy brings cross-sector experience to LEO through past roles in government, social services, and philanthropy. Wendy has a Bachelor's degree from Harvard University and a Master in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School, where she was the Scott & Isabelle Black Fellow and awarded the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy Paper Prize. Born in Ecuador, Wendy has traveled to over 35 countries and also worked on human rights projects in Africa and Southeast Asia.

WENDY BARRENO

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

I oversee project development and work with senior staff on strategic planning and organizational advancement. Part of my role is to spread the word about rigorous evidence and how it can be used to reduce poverty and improve lives (it's not just for medical trials!). I also help organizations understand the research requirements for this type of evidence and prepare for their own evaluation projects. A key component of this work is understanding policymaker and practitioner priorities: where can new evidence influence decisions and move the needle on poverty and injustice? Finally, once evidence has been generated, I help get the information into the hands of decision-makers (no binders collecting dust on shelves here!). In the big picture, knowledge is power. We are living in the Information Age. My work at LEO helps to ensure that civic institutions have every resource available, including cause-and-effect level information, to support equality of opportunity.

Why did you join LEO?

I was excited about LEO's approach to reducing poverty and improving lives. LEO helps partners leverage data and technology to identify the precise impact of a program or policy. Our focus is on measurable improvements in real people's lives. With the increasing availability of administrative data, LEO can now generate this type of evidence faster and more affordably than ever before. Service providers use this information to redesign programs, make scale-up decisions, and attract new funding for proven solutions. I was also excited by LEO's focus on going the extra mile for partners, working side-by-side to tackle any challenges and barriers. This could mean creating a data sharing agreement, consulting on program setup, and training program staff. Finally, I was excited about LEO's work in bringing civic institutions – nonprofits, governments, universities, data warehouses, foundations, and others – together to collaborate on improving lives.

What role do partners and agency relationships play in project development at LEO?

Partner and agency relationships play a huge role in project development. In fact, LEO is looking to build ongoing relationships with individual providers, governments, networks, and other stakeholders that share our vision of reducing poverty and improving lives through evidence-based programs and policies. Specifically, ongoing relationships help us identify multiple, interdisciplinary projects that address the complexity of poverty. Ongoing relationships also help us accelerate the pace of evidence-building. For example, together with partners, we can leverage the groundwork from an initial set of "demonstration" projects to launch the next wave of projects at the 50-yard-line instead of the 10. Finally, these relationships enable us to take a dual approach to evidence-building: a short-term approach that recognizes the urgent need for credible information and a long-term approach that enables us to keep testing innovative "big bets." One thing we can't overstate is how much we learn from our partners, including what evidence matters most and how we can best support their work on the front lines of social justice.

BY THE NUMBERS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION

