

Postdoctoral fellowship program offers freedom, support

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THE NEW postdoctoral fellows at the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University are finding the first months of their fellowships a time of freedom, opportunity, exploration, and growth. They say it is a time away from the demands of teaching and dissertation deadline

s to contribute to the work in progress at CSOS—which includes the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR)—and consider what they’ll do next in their careers.

“I have a lot of freedom to work on things that interest me,” said Christopher Swanson, one of the first three Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellows who began their appointments in September. Joining Swanson are Karla Lewis and Deborah Land.

They have the distinction of being the first Spencer Postdoctoral Fellows at Hopkins, chosen for the two-year appointments from more than 80 applicants. The fellowship is a joint project of Hopkins’ Sociology Department and CSOS. Three more postdoctoral researchers will join the program in September.

Lewis, Land, and Swanson have different backgrounds and research interests and bring different perspectives to the many projects in progress at the center:

Karla Lewis earned her doctorate in education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign last May. She wrote her dissertation on the role and development of instructional aides in schools and how aides, as well as teachers and administrators, are important to successful school reform. Lewis interviewed instructional aides at five schools in three different Illinois school districts, and began helping some aides continue their educations to become teachers. She is working with Joyce Epstein and Beth Simon in CRESPAR’s School, Family, and Community Partnerships program.

Deborah Land was working at CSOS when she applied for the Spencer fellowship. She came to Hopkins after receiving a doctorate in community and developmental psychology at the University of Virginia. Land’s dissertation on adolescent behavior—teasing, bullying, and harassment—took her into schools in Virginia, Maryland, and California and prompted a greater interest in education.

Christopher Swanson received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago. His dissertation looks at standards-based reform and its effect on state-level education policy. He has also studied the transition from high school to college and the effects of extracurricular activities on college admission.

All three researchers are continuing the work they began for their dissertations. Practically, they are attempting to break out parts of those larger works for publishable articles for journals, something the fellowship gives them time to pursue.

“It’s very difficult to start a new job as a professor and think about what your research is,” said Lewis, who intends to teach in a college or department of education. “This gives me the opportunity . . . to get on solid ground with research” before adding classroom responsibilities.

Lewis is already trying her hand at a couple of things “outside my comfort zone”—quantitative analysis and a focus on high schools. She is more familiar with qualitative analysis, as in her dissertation, and with elementary schools.

Swanson, too, is venturing into new territory—working with Stephen Plank and Gina Hewes on the implementation of standards on science curricula. Swanson’s previous work looked at mathematics achievement, as he explored the effects of standards-based reform on state-level policy and eventually on classroom instruction.

Swanson said one thing that drew him to apply for the Spencer Fellowship at Hopkins was the variety of projects being done by CRESPAR and CSOS researchers.

Deborah Land also liked the possible links between CRESPAR projects and her research into adolescent behavior. “I wanted to know more about education,” she said of her initial decision to take a position with the Systemic Supports for School Reform program after finishing her work at Virginia. “I felt that the school setting was what I was most interested in. Adolescent behaviors spill over into home and neighborhoods, but so much peer behavior goes on in schools,” she said.

For her dissertation, Land interviewed students in a private school in Charlottesville, in a suburban public school in California, and in urban public schools in Maryland and Virginia. One interesting finding, she said, is that there were more incidents of bullying, teasing, and harassment reported in the private school than in either the urban or suburban public schools. “Urban students have a different threshold” for such behaviors, she said, discovering, perhaps another avenue for study.

The Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowships are funded by the Spencer Foundation, established by the late Lyle M. Spencer, the founder of Science Research Associates Inc., an educational publishing firm. The foundation’s mission is to investigate ways in which education can be improved around the world. The fellowships aim to ensure another generation of well-trained education researchers.

