

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Heller

Magazine

Leading with Empathy and Equity

Interim
Dean Maria
Madison
establishes
a strategic
vision for
Heller

WINTER 2023



Heller

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ABOUT THE COVER
Interim Dean Maria Madison. PHOTO BY
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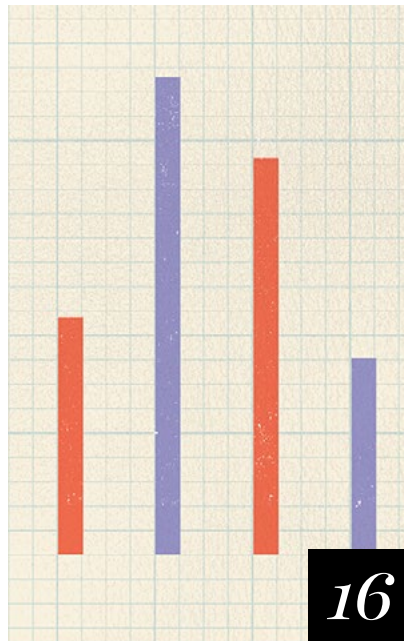
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While working as a social impact intern in the fall of 2018 at the Friends of Hue Foundation (FHF), Violet Nguyen, MA SID'19, played a vital role in helping FHF use sustainable solutions to reduce poverty in Huế, Vietnam. An avid photographer, Nguyen snapped this photo of two community members she worked with in Thừa Thiên.

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“It’s important that we foster a culture of mutual respect, dignity, and authenticity. Centering these values grounds our journey to ‘doing justice’ to social justice together.”

ELENA LEWIS, GSAS MA'11, DIRECTOR OF EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY, PAGE 5

Letter from the Interim Dean

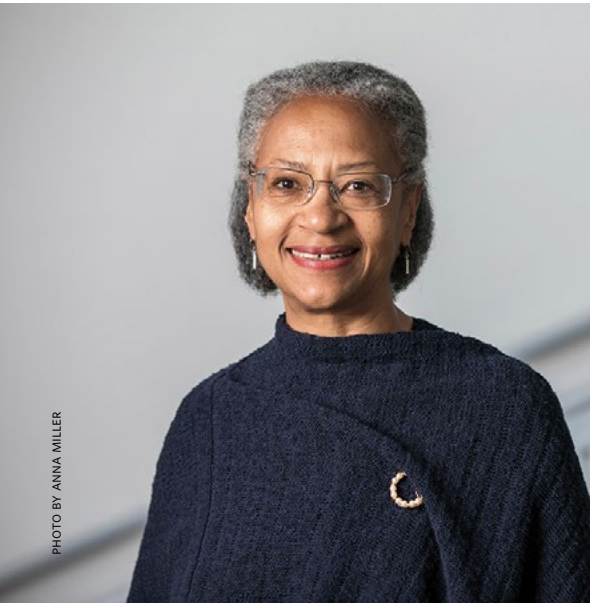


PHOTO BY ANNA MILLER

Dear Heller Community,

It was wonderful to welcome everyone back to in-person learning at Heller this fall after two and a half challenging years. Everyone returned to the rigor of lectures, campus activities, and building new and continuing solid networks, toward phenomenal careers. We look forward to continuing this journey with you, especially as you go on to become alumni around the world.

We have so much to be proud of — including new grants, awards, and gifts; our brilliant student body; and the continued success and global leadership of our alumni. Indeed, we are honored to be by your side at Heller, and energizing our vibrant global community. Your futures are bright, as evidenced by the contributions you have made prior to and during your time here. I am confident our academic programs and research centers and institutes will continue to reach new heights because of you.

As part of my strategic vision for Heller, we will continue to push the boundaries in our academic programs and prioritize high-impact research. We are a community

of extraordinary leaders in social policy research, including investigating topics such as health policy; global health and development; behavioral health and substance use; disabilities; children, youth, families, and communities; environment; economic and racial equity; and workplace and labor.

With your partnership, we connect our work around the world. Our alumni hold key positions in agencies and organizations locally and around the globe. Our community also leads by example, embodying the Heller mission and principles as well as the anti-racism plan to guide us in financial viability, rightsizing, and collaborating to solve some of the world's most concerning issues. With your partnership, we provide award-winning academics and conduct rigorous research of social consequence and engage directly in designing policy solutions.

In order to achieve these goals, we will continue to hold each other in the highest esteem, truly listening to each other in appreciation of our varying experiences and perspectives. We prioritize building dialogues across differences, including within “hot topics.” You all shine in the classrooms, patio, and hallways, and go on to rewarding careers with extraordinary impact.

We have much work to do together. I am encouraged by your dedication and by how you engage with these efforts authentically, especially during a pandemic and all of the competing challenges we face in these times.

I look forward to collaborating with you to work together toward building a stronger Heller and guiding our community through our new global normal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maria Madison". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Maria Madison, ScD, Interim Dean



PHOTO BY ANNA MILLER

Meet Neh Meh

NEH MEH, MA SID/COEX'23, WAS BORN IN THAILAND BUT IS NOT THAI.

As a former refugee, she is part of an ethnic group from Myanmar called the Karenni. She recently completed her practicum at the Karenni refugee camp for individuals from Myanmar on the Thai border in a Peacebuilding Through Education project. She is also president of the Karenni Youth American Association and is focused on creating an education program that helps the Karenni refugees and internally displaced people in Thailand prepare for a GED.



Daw Noe Khu, a recently built refugee camp, is on the border of Thailand in the Kayah State jungle. Meh currently works with the refugee students at camps like Daw Noe Khu to implement economic empowerment for internally displaced people. PHOTO BY THIERRY FALISE/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

► *What motivates you?*

Change and my identity. All of my experiences that brought me here inspire me to create change. Who I am plays an important role in what I want to do to improve the lives of others. I think that as I had the opportunity to learn, I should pay it forward by using my education to help those in need.

► *What did you want to be when you grew up?*

I wanted to be a doctor or nurse! I thought about healing and helping people. However, I realized that was not for me. I wanted social change, so I chose sociology.

► *What is the biggest misconception people have about your work?*

Sometimes people may think I don't care for other minorities apart from Karenni. However, there are others I can help with my work. Many social changes can come from focusing on one ethnic group.

► *What is the best piece of advice you ever received?*

I got married recently, and my husband knows I sometimes doubt myself. He always says, "It doesn't hurt to try." Even if you don't know for sure, maybe you'll discover something great, so it's good to try. You should be optimistic, knowing that you can challenge yourself. That is something that education helped me understand. Education has changed my life, and I believe other refugees should have the opportunity to utilize education as a source of liberation — freedom.

► *If you could enact one law, what would it be?*

Regardless of their status, everybody should be able to access quality education. Unfortunately, there are still many people out there who are not in a position that allows them to achieve their true potential and receive formal instruction. I would enact a law that enables all people to get educated to let them be free. This educative process should provide you with tools and the opportunity to do what you like, so it should also be accessible. 📚

**A closer look
at the history of
surveillance
and racial inequity**

Technology has been used in a negative way to monitor people, says Racial Justice x Tech Policy (RJxTP) associate director Janelle Ridley, but technology can also be used to tell their stories.

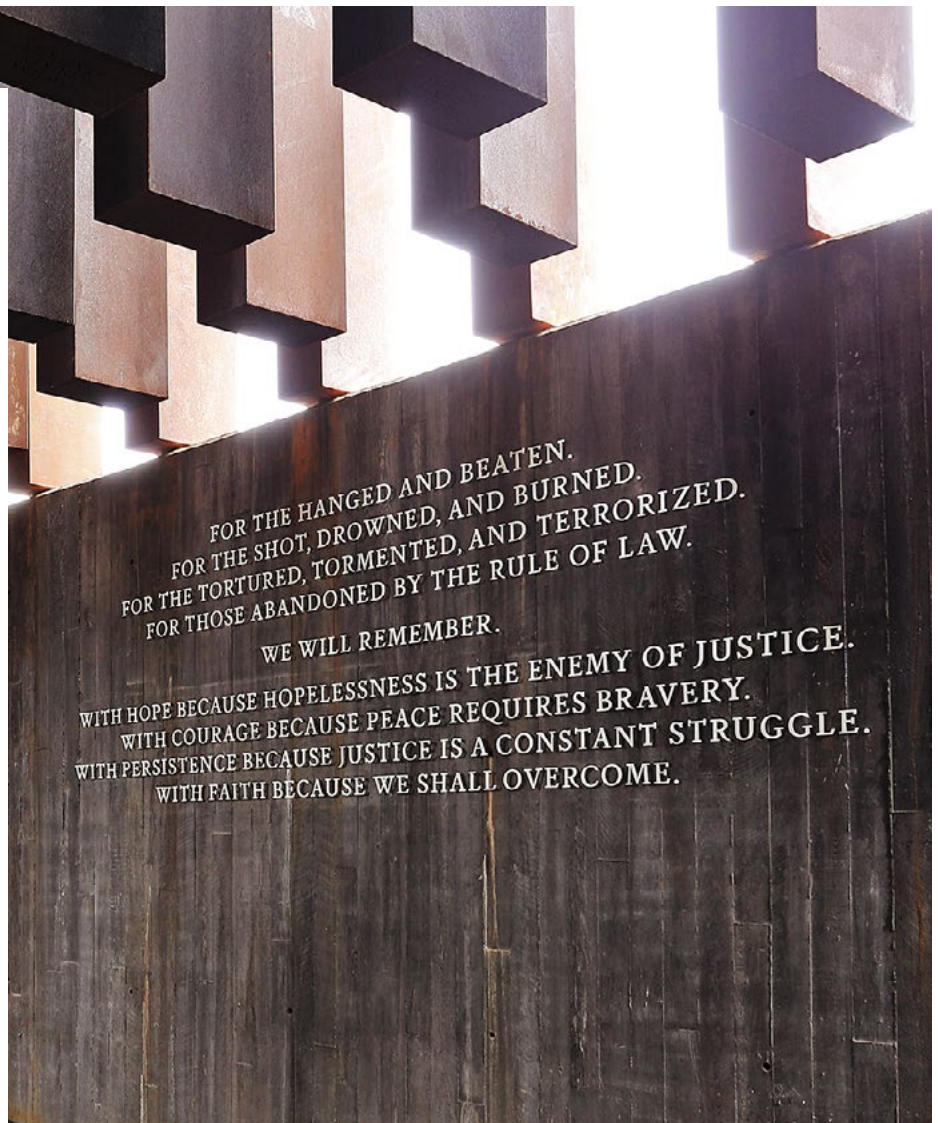
Ridley, who is also a Heller PhD student, recently traveled with SEED Institute (System Educated Expert Disrupters) researchers and game designers to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Alabama to research the history of surveillance of Black and brown people in the United States.

As a SEED Institute co-founder, Ridley is working with youth game designers to develop a computer game that depicts the inequities and injustices they have experienced, with the goal of sparking conversations about systems change.

With Ridley's mentorship, and support from the Kapor Center, the youth are using their experiences with the justice system to design a computer game with iThrive Games that explores how technology is used to monitor people. The research also connects to Ridley's dissertation, which examines how young people can help disrupt and dismantle the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

At EJI, what resonated with Ridley most was the loss of identity that so many BIPOC experienced when assimilating to white American culture, and how they had no way to connect with their ancestry and culture.

"There was good and bad to what I saw," she says. "It just reminded me of the



strength of the Black and brown community for all that we have endured and continue to endure, and that we are still persevering."

Ridley adds that the youth remarked on how similar slavery was to the modern carceral system. "They feel like nothing has changed for them," she says. "For those who have been in the system, seeing the slave quarters is similar to what they have seen [in juvenile detention centers and prisons]."

While there has been much progress since the civil rights movement of the 1960s,

the U.S. still struggles with so many issues of injustice, one anonymous participant shares. At times it can seem overwhelming that there is so much work that still needs to be done, but it's important to remember that a series of small changes can amount to a big impact.

"Even if it might seem sometimes like it's not enough, or we need more, those small victories that come over time — hundreds and hundreds of small victories — those, in time, turn into huger victories," he says. [H](#)

PHOTO FROM WELLESERPRISES VIA ISTOCK EDITORIAL/GETTY IMAGES PLUS



PHOTO BY ANNA MILLER



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANELLE RIDLEY

Opposite page: Inside the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which the Equal Justice Initiative opened in 2018. The memorial was designed to be a sober yet powerful site where people can gather and reflect on America’s history of racial inequality.

This page, top: Janelle Ridley.

This page, bottom: Ridley and the iThrive Games SEED Institute researchers in Montgomery.

Heller welcomes new director of Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

ELENA LEWIS, GSAS MA’11, JOINED HELLER AS THE DIRECTOR OF EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY IN SEPTEMBER 2022.

A visionary leader who has been part of the Brandeis community for over 18 years, Lewis brings with her extensive expertise in diversity, equity, and inclusion; program management; and student retention. She has a demonstrated track record of program innovation, conflict resolution, and building strategic partnerships to promote student success.

“I am excited to be part of Heller,” says Lewis. “I hope we can cultivate progress when we do the work of equity, inclusion, and diversity in the community. It’s important that we foster a culture of mutual respect, dignity, and authenticity. Centering these values grounds our journey to ‘doing justice’ to social justice together.”

Prior to her role at Heller, Lewis served as the director for the TRIO Student Support Services Program in Academic Services, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education and institutional funds at Brandeis.

Lewis also served as an inaugural ombuds in the Brandeis Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion from 2016 to 2021 in response to student demands in Ford Hall 2015. With training from the



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELENA LEWIS

International Ombuds Association, she has extensive experience in conflict resolution. At Brandeis, she also served on the Student Learning/Living Task Force and co-chaired the Academic Advising Working Group in the Office of the Provost.

Lewis earned a master’s degree in sociology at Brandeis, where she conducted research on the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Traveling across the country, she researched systemic inequity, racism, and racial reconciliation. She has presented at many national conferences on the first-generation college student experience, including the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE). She is active in New England faith-based nonprofit organizations, mentoring and training students on their personal growth and spiritual formation. Lewis received DEI certification training from the Boston Chamber of Commerce. [H](#)

The power of girls' education

“Have you ever had an experience so powerful that you can feel yourself changing in real time? That’s what it’s been like for me here,” says Beatriz Pleités, MA SID’23, of her practicum experience at SEGA Girls’ Secondary School in Morogoro, Tanzania.

Last fall, Pleités worked as a development and communications intern at SEGA, which is home to approximately 300 girls. The school’s mission is to support quality education, life skills, and entrepreneurship to help vulnerable girls in Tanzania become leaders in their communities.

Pleités, who is from El Salvador, learned Swahili during her internship,

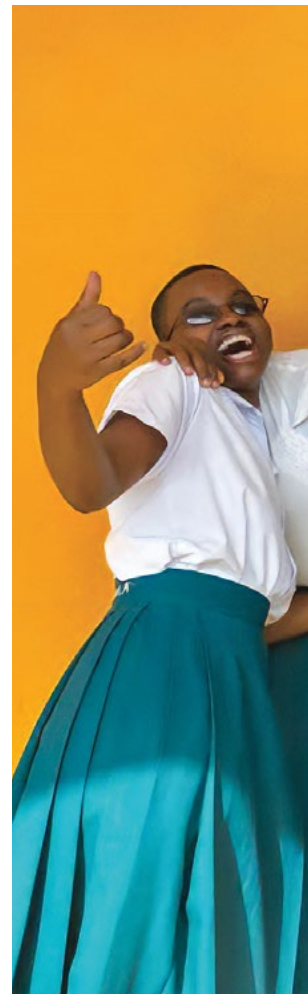
and in turn she taught the students English and Spanish after their classes. Connecting with the students and telling their stories was enlightening because, while she enjoys celebrating the cultural differences, she says it’s also important to recognize that not everyone has the same opportunities in life. Pleités says some of the students are pressured by their families to marry before they are ready, which interrupts their education and career goals.

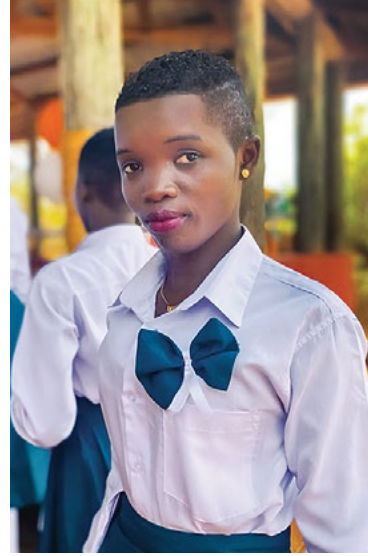
“I come from a developing country myself, but when one of the students sought my advice after her parents asked her to get married, I realized how different my adolescence was from theirs,” she says.


Pleités adds that, despite the challenges the girls face, their positive spirits and acts of kindness inspire her every day and give her hope for the future.

Before saying goodbye, one of the girls told her, “Milima haikutani lakini binadamu hukutana,” which translates to “mountains don’t meet, but humans do.”

All photos by Beatriz Pleités







IS THE END OF CHILD POVERTY IN SIGHT?

THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILD,
YOUTH, AND FAMILY POLICY
IS TACKLING CHILD POVERTY
BY FOCUSING ON RACIAL
AND ETHNIC EQUITY

by LEAH SHAFER, MPP/MBA'20

You may have seen the headlines — the United States experienced a sharp drop in child poverty rates over the past three decades, due in large part to expansions in the social safety net.

But for the millions of children still living in poverty, we haven't gone far enough. The U.S. has higher child poverty rates than most other industrialized nations, despite being one of the richest countries in the world.

And for researchers at the Institute for Child, Youth, and Family Policy (ICYFP), this challenge is inextricably linked to racial and ethnic equity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2020, our child poverty rate was 9.7%, or 7.2 million children growing up without the basic resources needed for healthy child development and future success — and more than 60% are Hispanic or Black.

That injustice drives the work of ICYFP. “Racial and ethnic inequities in children’s opportunities and well-being are our focus,” says Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, ICYFP’s director and the Samuel F. and Rose B. Gingold Professor of Human Development and Social Policy. “We ask: How can we reduce poverty, and how can we reduce poverty for the most vulnerable children?”

A REMARKABLE OPPORTUNITY

Five years ago, Acevedo-Garcia brought ICYFP’s expertise and perspective to a unique and historic gathering. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) called together a committee of experts to explore the effects of child poverty in the United States, and evaluate and recommend solutions to cut

◀ The Medrano family sits outside their RV on October 7, 2020, in Phoenix, Arizona. Inconsistent work, a string of tragedies, and even family separation due to the sealed U.S.-Mexico border during the COVID-19 pandemic combined to push them to the brink of homelessness. In the U.S., more than 60% of children in poverty are Hispanic or Black, so researchers at ICYFP focus on reducing child poverty by advancing racial and ethnic equity.

PHOTO BY JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

child poverty in half within 10 years. The committee was congressionally mandated, with federal funding and sponsorship from Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-Calif.). NASEM asked Acevedo-Garcia to be a member of the group.

“We were intent on bringing a focus on equity to that work,” says Acevedo-Garcia, noting that the basic story of child poverty in the U.S. is one of racial and ethnic inequity. According to the U.S. Census, Black and Hispanic children are about three times as likely to grow up in poverty as white children, a gap that has actually widened over the past decade, even as overall child poverty has declined. But too often, a racial/ethnic outlook gets lost in such a large and thorny issue.

“A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty,” the committee’s conclusive report, published in 2019, made clear that for anti-poverty policy to be fully effective, it must include the highest-need children. And while NASEM has a long history of connecting research to policy, this report has been particularly consequential. In her 2021 presidential address, NASEM President Marcia McNutt said, “The [‘Roadmap’] report provided the evidence foundation for the \$3,000 child allowance in the American Rescue Plan of 2021.”

GETTING THE WORD OUT

For ICYFP, the publication of “A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty” was only the beginning. In the months that followed, Acevedo-Garcia and Pamela Joshi, PhD’01, senior scientist and policy research director at ICYFP’s project diversitydatakids.org, helped ensure that researchers and policymakers continued the conversation. In November 2019, Acevedo-Garcia and Joshi, in partnership with NASEM, led a meeting among policy experts on the racial/ethnic equity aspects of the report. Meeting inside the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, panelists from think tanks and universities across the country discussed persistent inequities in anti-poverty policy and how to ensure that eligibility and implementation did not disproportionately harm Black, Hispanic, and immigrant families.

ICYFP continued to push for policy changes that would target racial gaps. In 2020, Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) led a hearing for the House Appropriations Committee on the “Roadmap” findings and asked Acevedo-Garcia to testify. “Child poverty is not an intractable problem,” Acevedo-Garcia explained then. But, she continued, “An important policy and research question is whether we can design and implement effective social policy if we ignore these wide racial and ethnic inequities in child poverty. My opinion is that we will achieve the goal of poverty reduction faster if we are more intentional about policy design so that the benefits of anti-poverty programs include all children, and programs help us reduce inequities in poverty.”

THE EQUITY ANALYSIS WORK CONTINUES

Beyond public engagement, ICYFP scholars are committed to continuing the equity analyses that informed the “Roadmap” report. An opportunity came their way in early 2020, when UnidosUS, the nation’s largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, reached out. They proposed partnering with the ICYFP team to investigate how restrictions in the social safety net had affected children in immigrant families.

A number of policy and economic changes in the past several decades have made children in immigrant families one of the nation’s most vulnerable groups. These children, 72% of whom are Hispanic, are twice as likely to live in poverty as those with U.S.-born parents. Citizen children with undocumented family members — who make up 18% of children in poverty — are largely excluded from the social safety net. In 2020, they were ineligible for the first round of stimulus payments, even though their parents were disproportionately frontline workers experiencing the worst of the economic and health impacts from the pandemic.

Together with UnidosUS, Acevedo-Garcia, Joshi, and research associate Abigail Walters began a series of projects researching the inequities immigrant families face and what reforms would help. They commissioned

“NO ONE DESERVES TO LIVE IN POVERTY, BUT THE STRUCTURAL RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION THAT CONTINUE TO PLAGUE OUR NATION GIVE IT A DISTINCT COLOR: EVEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, POVERTY AFFECTED 1 IN 5 BLACK CHILDREN, MORE THAN 1 IN 5 LATINO CHILDREN, AND 1 IN 5 CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, COMPARED WITH 1 IN 12 WHITE CHILDREN.”

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, *What the Child Tax Credit fight says about America*, The Hill, January 22, 2022

the Urban Institute to use TRIM3 — the poverty simulation model employed for the NASEM report — to produce new poverty-rate estimates for children in immigrant families and the effects of including these children in safety net programs. With those estimates in hand, ICYFP and UnidosUS published two papers in the journals *Health Affairs* and *Academic Pediatrics*. These papers analyzed how policies like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) restrict access to children in immigrant families, the long-term health effects of those exclusions — and how to revise the safety net to be more inclusive.

To continue engaging policymakers, the groups hosted a workshop with NASEM on how to promote the health and well-being of children in immigrant families in pandemic recovery efforts. They also co-hosted a briefing for Capitol Hill lawmakers to share how the American Rescue Plan had made progress in supporting Hispanic children, and discuss what policy change was still needed.

“Our work with UnidosUS and the Urban Institute has allowed us to deepen our policy equity analyses and connect that research to changemakers,” says Joshi.

She continues, “UnidosUS has helped us identify moments of opportunity for advocates and legislators, and we have been able to provide them with data and analysis that show where policies have fallen short and which racially equitable solutions could fix them.”

FIGHTING CHILD POVERTY BY BOOSTING FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

Throughout this time, ICYFP has continued its long-standing work on a second, fundamental part of the child poverty puzzle. “The poverty line is such a low benchmark, so we are trying to broaden the conversation from child poverty to child opportunity and family economic security,” says Joshi. “The next step in the conversation is: What do children and families really need to have an economically secure childhood and thrive?”

The answer goes beyond anti-poverty programs. ICYFP has researched differences in family job quality for over a decade. This past summer, the institute’s paper in *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* reported that, in the years leading up to the pandemic, one-third of families — and more than half of Black and Hispanic families — working full time did not earn enough to cover basic expenses.

The researchers found inequitable access to policies that are meant to support working families, too. For example, using the peer-reviewed Policy Equity Assessment framework — a method to analyze whether social policies reduce or exacerbate racial inequities — ICYFP has shown that the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is largely only accessible to higher-income working parents, who are more likely to be white. Many working families cannot afford to take the unpaid leave that FMLA grants. Those who do are more likely to fall into financial hardship, which exacerbates racial and ethnic inequities; one in four (26%) of Black and Hispanic families who take six

weeks of unpaid leave would fall into the category of “low-income,” as opposed to only 15% of white families.

A LARGER NETWORK IS TAKING UP THE CAUSE

These issues are gaining traction. “We are part of a network of foundations, programs, researchers, and advocates supporting this work,” says Acevedo-Garcia. As proposals to establish a national paid family-leave program entered the mainstream, ICYFP’s equity-focused FMLA analyses found a foothold. The work has been cited several times by advocates that include the National Partnership for Women and Families and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

ICYFP’s work on children in immigrant families has begun reaching new policy audiences, too. After releasing a report in April 2022 on inequities in EITC eligibility, Acevedo-Garcia and Joshi spoke to a series of coalitions on how to make the policy more inclusive of children in immigrant families. These audiences included advocates focused on expanding state-level tax credits — policy changes that are incremental but feasible in the short-term, and still impactful.

Funders have also become explicit champions of this work. Last winter, as the expanded Child Tax Credit was expiring, Acevedo-Garcia co-authored an op-ed in *The Hill* with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) President and CEO Richard Besser on the importance of making the policy permanent and even more expansive in order to strengthen child outcomes. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which helped fund the original NASEM report, is now supporting two new NASEM committees focused on reducing intergenerational poverty and on understanding child opportunity gaps (Joshi is a member of the latter).

Over the past year, Acevedo-Garcia and Joshi have had the chance to bring their expertise in racial equity analysis to a new level. Serving as senior advisers in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), they are building staff capacity to analyze racial/


ethnic inequities and identify policy levers to improve equity within human services programs and practices. Says Joshi, “This has been an incredible opportunity to share frameworks with top decision-makers, and we’ve gained important insights into how federal-level conversations around racial equity actually take shape.”

SOME GOOD NEWS FOR THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

This past fall, the fight against child poverty received some good news. A report from the research organization Child Trends found that the child poverty rate declined by more than half from 1993 to 2019, and statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that, in 2021, child poverty fell to 5.2% — its lowest rate on record. Both reports made clear that the social safety net — namely, tax credits and SNAP over the past 30 years, and the expanded Child Tax Credit in 2021 — played a significant role in keeping children out of poverty.

Acevedo-Garcia, who reviewed the Child Trends report before publication and was interviewed by The New York Times at its release, has remarked on the significance of these findings. Large racial/ethnic inequities remain in child poverty, and the failure to make the expanded Child Tax Credit permanent in 2022 have left many discouraged. But these data show that they know what works.

“As an academic, you always fear that rigorous evidence won’t lead to the kind of changes we need,” says Acevedo-Garcia. “But we showed in the pandemic that being more inclusive of the children who are usually excluded from safety-net policy is possible.”

Now, she says, “We are focused on continuing to assemble the evidence that expanding these safety net policies to include more children would have an enormously beneficial effect. We have been working on improving racial and ethnic equity for decades, and we believe this lens is essential in the fight against child poverty.” For ICYFP, “We are in this for the long haul.” 



Pamela Joshi (left) and Dolores Acevedo-Garcia work together in Heller's Zinner Forum.
PHOTO BY TOM KATES



**AS INTERIM
DEAN OF
THE HELLER
SCHOOL,
MARIA
MADISON
ADVANCES
STRATEGIC
PRIORITIES
ROOTED IN
EQUITY AND
WELL-BEING
FOR ALL**

by ALIX HACKETT

CHAMPIONING

M

Maria Madison's impressive career has spanned continents and contexts — she's worked for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, conducted research for biotech firms in Europe, and taught health equity in Rwanda — but in every role, including five years as the Heller School's associate dean for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, her focus has been the same: using evidence to create sustainable change that improves people's health and lives, particularly those from marginalized populations.

That mission, combined with Madison's intimate knowledge of the Heller community, has prepared her exceptionally well for her latest position: interim dean of the Heller School. Her official start date was July 1, 2022, but if you ask Madison how she's adjusting, it's clear that very little adjustment was needed.

"I was always doing work that prepared me for this role," she said recently. "It makes it really exciting to be at Heller because I've been in every pocket, whether it's international research or domestic programs, so it feels like a culmination of everything coming together."

As she begins to chart Heller's post-pandemic path, Madison is building off the priorities set by her predecessor, David Weil, which have guided the school to an

enviable position, including consistent top-10 rankings from U.S. News & World Report and a flood of applications for the most recent cohort, resulting in a 9% acceptance rate. Madison's interim strategic business plan (informed by her ongoing listening tour) lists a continued focus on research, donor partnerships, and career outcomes for graduates, with a new emphasis on addressing community well-being. She describes her overall strategic vision as "equity-focused" while also acknowledging the new challenges introduced by COVID-19.

"I feel exhilarated by this new normal," she said. "We've all experienced something, and we need to respect that and find a way forward. That's what this strategic plan is all about — it's revisiting the mission, revisiting our principles, and building on our successes as we redefine ourselves in this new era."

SUPPORTING MISSION-DRIVEN RESEARCH

With her training as a global public-health researcher and two decades of experience, Madison believes strongly in the power of evidence-based research to uplift communities and promote social justice. She enthusiastically promotes the wide range of projects underway at Heller, including a study on opioids and the nationwide shortage of naloxone (used to treat overdoses), and another that looks at the disproportionate impact of the GI Bill on Black veterans.

As interim dean, Madison plans to tout Heller's research even more widely: "I need to highlight our impact, highlight the fact that we're being innovative and bold, and make sure people know we're meeting the challenges and demands of not just the

next generation of students coming in but the changing face of the workforce and of society," she says.

There is no shortage of successes to share. This fiscal year, more than 100 Heller staff and faculty submitted proposals for over 200 funded research projects, more than 60% of which received federal grants. In September alone, major grants totaling \$15 million were awarded to the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy and the Schneider Institutes for Health Policy and Research.

"The research staff and faculty at Heller are quite well positioned in their own fields and have a great record of success," says Cindy Thomas, PhD'00, Heller's associate dean for research. "We are all committed to the Heller mission, and we are lucky to do research in an environment that brings creative, brilliant students to contribute to our work."

Madison sees research at Heller as serving two parallel purposes: producing solid evidence to contribute to topics of social consequence, like improving the quality of health care delivered to pregnant people with disabilities, and serving as a pipeline to train the next generation of ethical researchers. In the latter area, Madison has identified room for continued growth when it comes to addressing the economic and racial inequities that persist in higher education.

"I want to build an equity-centered academic institution where the diversity isn't just within the student body as a whole, but it's also in the faculty, in the staff, and in the researchers whom we're preparing to meet the challenges of tomorrow," she says. For student researchers in particular, "we need to figure out how to advance these scholars of color without saddling them with debt."

SOCIAL JUSTICE



◀ Jasmine Waddell, PhD, Maria Madison, ScD, and Cindy Thomas, PhD'00, have an animated conversation with students Nijimbere Lahayiloyi, MA SID/COEX'23, and Fabiola Mejia Rodriguez, MA SID/COEX'24. PHOTOS BY TOM KATES

EXPANDING IMPACT THROUGH DONOR PARTNERSHIPS

During her two years as director of the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity (IERE) at Heller, Madison experienced firsthand the power of donor partnerships to establish new programs and fuel meaningful research. Under her leadership, the institute received a \$1 million gift from the Kapor Center, an Oakland, California-based foundation co-chaired by Heller alumna Freada Kapor Klein, PhD'84, to establish the Racial Justice x Tech Policy project designed to combat systemic racial bias in technology through education, research, and policy.

“Equipping Heller students to bring a racial justice lens to tech policy work and to establish Heller as the preeminent institution conducting and amplifying activist research on bias in tech is a humbling, joyful, and full-circle moment of paying it forward,” Kapor Klein said when the gift was announced in January 2022.

Already, the initiative is producing exciting results. A team of youth led by the project’s associate director, Janelle Ridley, has created an award-winning computer game that illustrates how youth of color are treated differently by the criminal justice system. (See related story on page 4.) Going forward, the initiative will provide ample opportunities for student researchers to gain hands-on training in racial justice and tech policy.

The collaboration fulfills both the Heller School’s mission of advancing social justice and the Kapor Center’s goal of making entrepreneurship and the tech ecosystem more diverse, inclusive, and impactful. As interim dean, Madison plans to continue cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with donors like Kapor Klein in order to expand Heller’s impact, both on and off campus.

“We have an array of ways in which our donors have contributed to our ability to support students and our research,” she explains. “So many of our programs have been built through major gifts: everything from research programs to vulnerability funds that help students struggling with living situations or even food insecurity.”

EMPOWERING GRADUATES' CAREER SUCCESS

Another area where Heller continues to shine is career placements for graduates. Among members of this year's graduating class, an impressive 98% were employed, pursuing graduate studies, or had received competitive fellowships within six months of collecting their Heller diplomas.

Interim Assistant Dean of Career Development Jasmine Waddell attributes a portion of this success to the caliber and career experience of Heller students — two-thirds of incoming students have two or more years of professional experience under their belts before they set foot on campus — but the rest can be chalked up to the “all hands on deck” approach taken by the Heller community when it comes to career development.

“The entire community is dedicated to advancing the professional development and employment outcomes for our extraordinary students,” Waddell says. “It’s not just our office — faculty in all seven programs bring in employers as guest speakers to connect the academic content to career opportunities.”

Waddell's team runs a wealth of programs, both virtual and in person, designed to connect students with potential employers. There's an annual career fair, now offered virtually, and a Career Trek to Washington, D.C., among other initiatives. Through the MBA Board Fellows Program, MBA students are invited to serve as nonvoting members of nonprofit boards, giving them hands-on experience and a rare window into the inner workings of organizations.

During her listening tour, Madison has spoken to many alumni who can attest to the career applicability of their Heller degrees. The 98% employment rate reflects this success, she says, but there are still areas where Heller can continue to improve, including by taking an equity-centered approach to its career services.

“We're training our population to go into diverse placements in the workforce, but we also need to be setting all our students up for success in their careers, and that includes arming them with the ability to interview while representing their fullest

“The beauty of Heller is its multicultural environment, and empathy is what allows us to grow from that and to learn from people with different backgrounds than our own. It's what will continue to carry us forward to meet the headwinds of tomorrow.”



identity and their authentic selves,” she says. “That’s an increasing challenge.”

PROMOTING WELL-BEING FOR ALL

This fall, Heller students, faculty, and staff returned to campus for in-person classes, meetings and events, some masked, others not. Madison believes strongly in the academic and social benefits of resuming in-person interactions, but she's also keenly aware of the stress and anxiety many are facing at the prospect of a return to pre-pandemic operations.

“Some members of our population are asking if it's really safe to come back to the classroom or go to that faculty meeting. ‘If I attend by Zoom, will I be judged as not a true community member?’” she relates. “We have to recognize these concerns and also begin to reestablish social norms and relearn how to interact with each other in person.”

Madison's focus on well-being isn't limited to the pandemic. She wants to lift up and remind the community of the resources available to them, whether it's counseling for students or retreats and workshops for faculty and researchers. And in keeping with her equity-centered approach, she also wants to expand opportunities for individuals in the community to get to know one another and “dialogue across differences.”

One of her favorite resources is a website developed in collaboration with Brandeis librarians that encourages faculty to learn more about their peers and also engage in self-guided reflection on their own biases and inclinations, and how those may affect


their classroom approach. The website has received moderate traffic since its launch a few years ago, but Madison plans to push for more engagement in the months ahead.

“To me, well-being is providing these resources so faculty can authentically connect to these topics before thinking about how it impacts their syllabus,” Madison explains. “We're going to adapt it for researchers as well.”

MODERNIZING HELLER'S MISSION

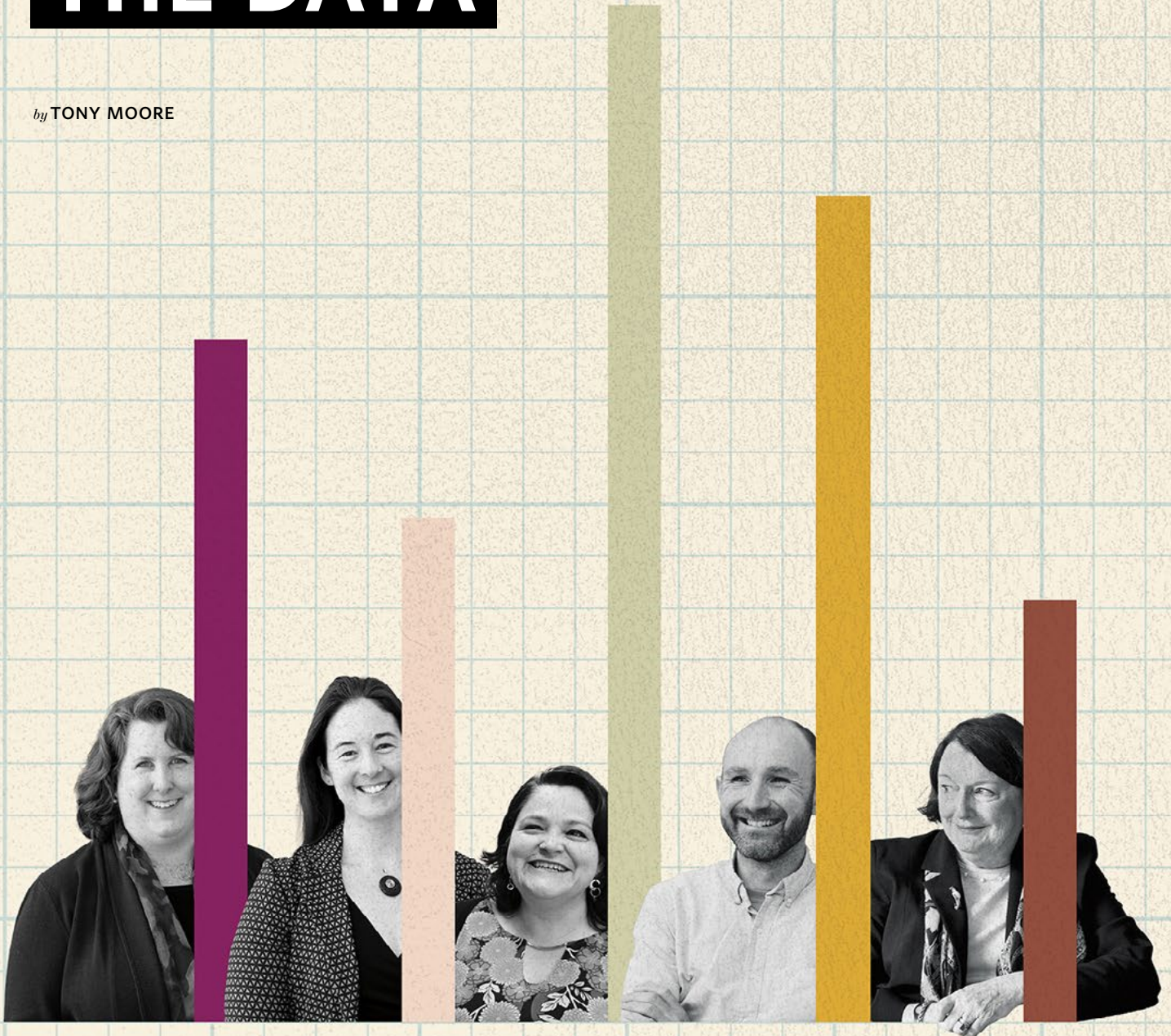
Data from the last five years have shown a steady increase in diversity at Heller, including among international students, and more students are pursuing dual degrees than ever before, says Madison. Interdisciplinary research and cross-institute collaborations have also increased, a reflection, she says, of a world that is increasingly connected across cultures and populations despite the persistent backdrop of racial and economic inequity.

In the midst of this shift, Madison notes that the Heller School's oft-quoted motto, “knowledge advancing social justice,” could actually be amended to reflect another of the school's key strengths: empathy.

“I think we all know it has to be ‘knowledge and empathy advancing social justice,’” she says. “The beauty of Heller is its multicultural environment, and empathy is what allows us to grow from that and to learn from people with different backgrounds than our own. It's what will continue to carry us forward to meet the headwinds of tomorrow.” 

DRINKING IN THE DATA

by TONY MOORE



HELLER'S NIAAA PROGRAM TRAINS FUTURE RESEARCHERS TO STUDY ALCOHOL USE, MISUSE, AND TREATMENT SERVICES

“LET’S GRAB A DRINK AFTER WORK.”

“IT’S 5 O’CLOCK SOMEWHERE.”

“LET’S GRAB A DRINK AFTER WORK.”

“IT’S 5 O’CLOCK SOMEWHERE.”

“ANOTHER ROUND?”

“LET’S GRAB A DRINK AFTER WORK.”

“ANOTHER ROUND?”

“ANOTHER ROUND?”

“IT’S 5 O’CLOCK SOMEWHERE.”

“LET’S GRAB A DRINK AFTER WORK.”

Most people reading this article have likely heard at least one of these phrases before. Alcohol is consumed in many cultures across the globe in different ways, in different settings, for different reasons. It is used socially around sports, concerts, and weddings.

In the United States, in fact, according to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 86% of adults reported that they drank alcohol at some point in their lifetime.

Also in 2019, 26% of adults reported that they binge drank in the previous month, which rounds out to a woman consuming four or more drinks or a man consuming five or more drinks in about two hours.

And you’re probably thinking — that’s not very surprising.

Maybe none of these findings will be either: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, around 95,000 people die from alcohol-related causes annually, making it the third-leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. Alcohol contributes to about 18.5% of emergency department visits, and a decade ago, alcohol misuse cost the U.S. \$249 billion per year. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) website detailing the detrimental effects of alcohol

misuse on people, families, society, and U.S. and global health care is exhaustive (and exhausting). The site also includes The Healthcare Professional’s Core Resource on Alcohol, which provides guidance on evidence-based care for patients who drink alcohol.

All of this evidence is why the Heller School’s Institute for Behavioral Health (IBH) of the Schneider Institutes for Health Policy and Research launched its NIAAA training program in 1994, preparing doctoral students for research careers in universities, governmental agencies, and other settings devoted to alcohol-related services research. The strength of the program has been the quality and breadth of its faculty and researchers and its home in IBH, with its active research portfolio that provides opportunities for trainees to serve as graduate research assistants, participating as part of the research team and contributing to analyses, presentations, and publications.

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

According to Constance Horgan, professor and director of IBH and co-director of the Schneider Institutes for Health Policy and Research, “Alcohol is the most commonly

used substance in the United States, with approximately 69.5% of adults consuming alcohol in a given year, and about 15 million persons age 12 and over estimated to need treatment for alcohol-use disorder.” She also notes that around 65 million people in the U.S. engage in risky alcohol use, while only 10% of those with substance-use problems seek help.

“Alcohol-related services research is vital to changing this situation through improved systems for prevention, treatment, and recovery services,” Horgan says. “Training the next generation of alcohol-services researchers is crucial because of the continued magnitude of alcohol problems in the U.S., the complexity of delivery systems, and the rapid changes in the overall health environment.”

Funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Heller’s NIAAA Training Program in Alcohol-Related Health Services Research was recently renewed for another five years. Led by inaugural director Horgan since 1994, the program remains a full-time PhD fellowship that includes full tuition support for three years and an annual stipend, with a fourth year of funding available through the Heller School. And it continues to lead its graduates to successful careers in the field.

“I think it would be fair to say I wouldn’t have been aware of this opportunity or qualified for it without the mentorship, training, and exposure to national behavioral health policy I received in the NIAAA program at Heller,” says Timothy Creedon, PhD’14, of his current position as a behavioral health services researcher and policy analyst with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

He explains, “The program provided the quantitative research methods expertise I need for this job, as well as the subject-matter expertise required with respect to alcohol-use disorder treatment policy — and policy regarding other substance-use disorders and mental illness.”

REIF SAYS THE PROGRAM BRINGS AN ENHANCED FOCUS ON RACE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER.

WHERE ALCOHOL AND SOCIETY MEET

The program focuses on studying the many facets and inherent intersectionality of alcohol prevention and treatment services, from organization, financing, and management to the quality, cost, access to, and outcomes of care. Graduates go on to research careers in universities, governmental agencies, or other research settings devoted to alcohol-related services research.

“The multidisciplinary approach of the program is critical because alcohol-use issues in the U.S. are complex and multifaceted,” says Creedon. “The NIAAA program trains new researchers to build a full-spectrum view of the numerous, multilevel challenges that need to be addressed in order to implement effective policies for preventing and treating alcohol-use disorders and their consequences with accessible, quality interventions.”

Sharon Reif, PhD’02, a professor and division director in IBH who also was trained in the NIAAA program, emphasizes the importance of conducting research across the full breadth of alcohol prevention, treatment, and recovery services, learning what works and for what populations while stressing that research on its own isn’t enough to address society’s needs — needs that often exist outside a clinical setting at the far side of the “research to practice” continuum.

“We must understand how to address alcohol problems in the real world, within systems of care that intersect — for example, health, social services, criminal-legal — and with an understanding of the workforce, payment/financing, and policy issues that determine how services are implemented,” Reif says, emphasizing that

certain treatment approaches may not be available in the “real world” because of existing insurance or policy issues. She also says that learning where the application of research falls short is not only eye-opening but instructive, allowing health services researchers a chance to identify how these practices could be expanded and sustained across systems and populations.

Trainees learn to examine these types of questions: How do people get access to alcohol-related prevention and treatment services and determine if they are of high quality? How much do these services cost? What is the outcome as a result of this care? Trainees study the most effective ways to organize, manage, and finance high-quality care based on evidence, and they gain the research skills to address the financing, delivery, policy, workforce, and other mechanisms to more fully support people with alcohol problems.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Before enrolling at Heller, Brooke Evans, PhD’17, was a clinician and supervisor in behavioral health settings. Now, she’s a senior research associate at Comagine Health, where she leads research and evaluation projects centered on implementing, improving, and evaluating behavioral health services — particularly substance-use prevention, treatment, and recovery programs. Evans says the NIAAA program can prepare students to succeed “in just about any advanced career in research and policy you might hope to pursue,” a point her trajectory proves well.

“My career path has been shaped by the research skills, mentorship, and other opportunities that I received through the NIAAA program at the Heller School,” Evans says, adding that the program provides all of the financial support, research opportunities, and expertise that scholars interested in advancing the knowledge base in alcohol and other substance use and misuse require. “The NIAAA program provided me with the chance to deepen my knowledge surrounding alcohol and other substance use and integrate my clinical background

and understanding. It also offered new knowledge as well as research skills and methods to inform and effect policy and system-level change/transformation.”

To prepare for a life in the field, students in the program participate in ongoing projects with experienced researchers who are engaged in a wide variety of studies that address alcohol-related services and policy concerns, working either at Brandeis or at a research setting outside the university.

In the classroom, the NIAAA program offers its doctoral students a core curriculum that stresses conceptual models and research methods and competencies, emphasizing the societal context for alcohol treatment and prevention services and the intersection of these services with behavioral health, general health care delivery, and other service systems.

SERVING AT-RISK POPULATIONS

Also residing at that intersection are issues of how alcohol use and abuse affect certain populations that are more at-risk than others.

“Many people with addiction problems have other experiences that can also contribute to their vulnerability, and social determinants of health — such as insufficient housing, income, food supports, insurance, social supports — that may create conditions for which alcohol use is a coping mechanism or that interfere with the ability to seek help for alcohol problems,” says Horgan.

She adds that many people with alcohol or drug problems also have mental illness or psychological distress which, in turn, increases vulnerability. “Experience of trauma is quite common among people with alcohol, drug, or mental health problems. Each of these types of co-occurring disorders or experiences contributes to increased likelihood of unhealthy alcohol use and reduced likelihood of seeking treatment or having access to care.”

Reif says the program brings an enhanced focus on race, ethnicity, and gender. “These groups may differ in rates of alcohol use and problems but generally have had less

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) and treatment in the United States


access to treatment,” she continues. “In part, this reflects interventions that were not developed specifically for these groups, but it may also reflect systemic inequities in systems to address and pay for substance use problems.”

For Andrea Acevedo, PhD’08, associate professor in the Department of Community Health at Tufts University, these issues are at the forefront of her work as her research focuses on racial/ethnic equity issues in substance use and substance-use treatment services.

“I use a multilevel approach to understand the multiple factors – for example, individual, facility, community, and policy factors – that might contribute to inequities in services and outcomes, and factors and policies that might help reduce them,” says Acevedo, who spends her time both in and out of the classroom conducting research and teaching courses on substance use, policy, and quantitative methods, all at the heart of the NIAAA program.

“As a fellow in the program, I had the opportunity to learn from and work with some of the top addiction health services researchers in the country, right at Heller,” she continues. “I received excellent mentorship and had opportunities to publish, attend, and present at conferences and meet other top addiction researchers who were invited to speak at IBH or through the conferences. If you are interested in addressing alcohol- or substance-use problems through research, as a fellow in the NIAAA training program at Heller, you will receive unparalleled research training.”

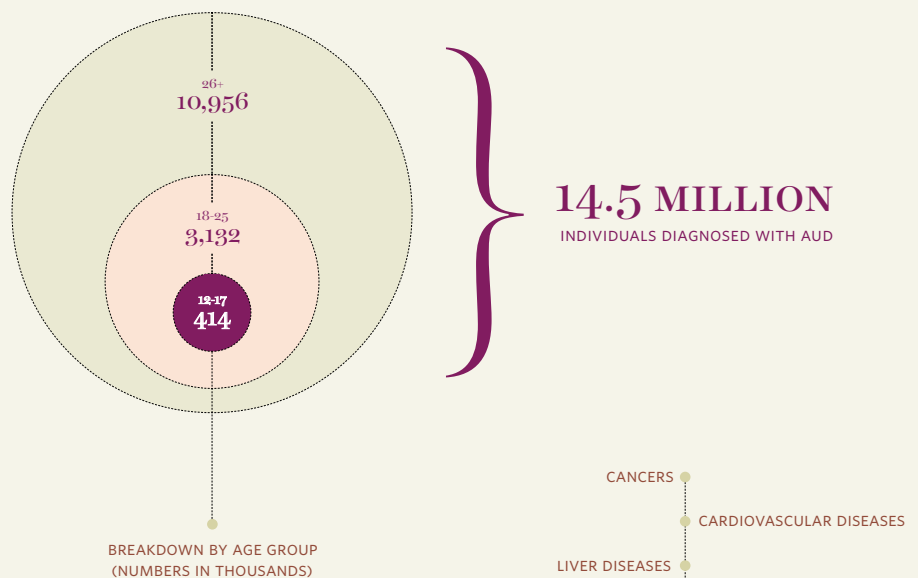
What’s abundantly clear is that the training leads to fulfilling careers that not only allow graduates to make valuable use of their degrees, their time, and their energy for the field but also to make a difference.

“One of the things that keeps us going is seeing the contributions that so many of the individuals we have trained are making in improving both the broader societal consequences of alcohol problems, as well as the lives of persons with addiction issues,” says Horgan. “That is an immensely rewarding goal.” 

NIAAA defines Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) as “a medical condition characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational, or health consequences.” A number of evidence-based treatment approaches are available for AUD, including outpatient and/or inpatient services provided by specialty programs, therapists, and doctors.

ALL STATISTICS GATHERED FROM 2019 NATIONAL SURVEYS

Diagnosis



Treatment for individuals with AUD

<10% AGES 12 AND OLDER RECEIVED ANY TREATMENT

<4% WERE PRESCRIBED MEDICATION APPROVED BY THE FDA TO TREAT THEIR DISORDER



INDIVIDUALS WITH AUD ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEEK CARE FOR AN ALCOHOL-ATTRIBUTABLE ISSUE THAN THEY ARE TO SEEK DIRECT CARE FOR SUBSTANCE MISUSE

Alumni Milestones



ABDISHAKUR AHMED, MA SID'20

Advancing sustainable energy in Somalia

Two out of three people in sub-Saharan Africa lack access to electricity, according to USAID. Abdishakur Ahmed, MA SID'20, is working to help increase this access in ways that are both economically and environmentally sustainable.

As an energy specialist for RTI International, Ahmed leads activities in Somalia, along with the East Africa Energy Program (EAEP), that support power generation and bring electricity to more households and businesses. EAEP, which is funded by USAID, works to optimize power supply and increase access to electricity in nine countries.

Somalia currently generates 80% of its electricity from imported diesel, which is a dirty and expensive source of fuel, Ahmed says. The goal is to transfer to cleaner and more domestic sources of power, such as solar and wind.

Investing in renewable energy is something countries can't afford to delay, he warns. The Horn of Africa is feeling the effects of climate change, as droughts, extreme heat, and rising sea levels threaten communities throughout the region.

"Environmental sustainability is really important because we can't afford the cost of fixing environmental damages later," Ahmed says. "We're already dealing with the consequences now."

In order to lessen Somalia's energy crisis, governments, private sector businesses, and development partners need to work together. That's where Ahmed comes in.

"They all have goals to achieve, and that informs the sort of work that we do with the stakeholders, and helps me understand and develop a more practical solution than an idea-based solution that may not take off," he says. "It makes our program more sustainable because it incorporates the realities of all these stakeholders."

Ahmed says his experience at Heller gave him the skills and expertise to foster those collaborations.

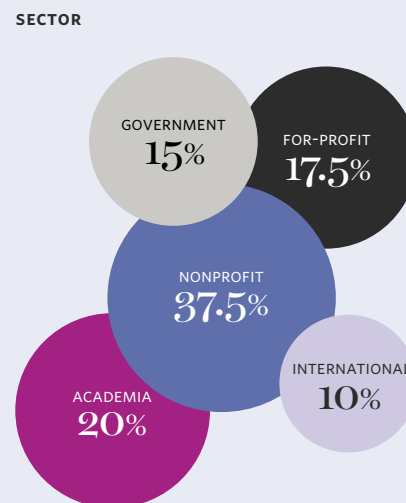
"When I came to Heller, I came from the entrepreneurship side of the power sector, and I didn't have a lot of experience working with development partners," he says. "What I found really useful at Heller was the opportunity to combine technical skills with management skills that are essential for development projects."

As he looks to the future of the energy industry in East Africa, Ahmed is excited by the potential for countries to integrate and collaborate at the regional level and beyond. Wherever his career takes him, Ahmed is prepared to help teams build energy-conscious solutions.

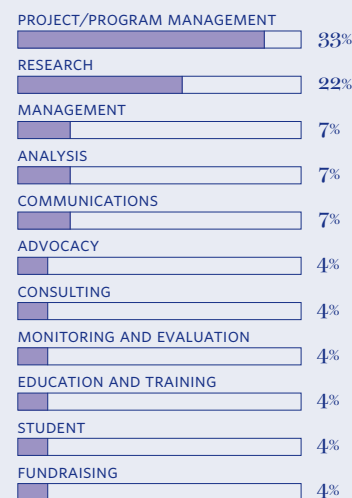
"Heller set me up well for this work," he says. "It was a great steppingstone." 📍

SID ALUMNI CAREERS: INCREASING SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Abdishakur Ahmed, MA SID'20, is one of many Heller alums who are advancing sustainable solutions to development challenges. See where SID graduates from 2021 are working now:



JOB FUNCTION



“Visionary. Compassionate. Leader. Those were the first three words I noted while interviewing Dr. Jill M. Baren ... [She] will lead us with confidence, authenticity, and an entrepreneurial style.”

WILLIAM LOWRY, VICE CHAIR OF THE LAKE FOREST COLLEGE BOARD AND CHAIR OF THE PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH COMMITTEE



DR. JILL M. BAREN, EMBA'19
From physician to college president

Dr. Jill M. Baren, EMBA'19, spent nearly 30 years of her career in academic emergency medicine before becoming the 14th president — and first woman president — of Lake Forest College in Illinois in July 2022. With her background, she says some people may be surprised that she's no longer in health care, but she's excited by the opportunities of her new role.

“I'm just so lucky to have arrived in a job like this,” she says.

Although her career paths seem drastically different, Baren says practicing emergency medicine is “phenomenal preparation” for becoming a college president. Both roles require strong leadership and management skills to navigate uncertainty and quickly assess team and community dynamics.

“It's always about matching resources to demand,” she says. “Making instant connections and being able to lead a team suddenly and quickly, as well as being able to assist, manage, and deploy resources is quite similar” in both contexts.

Baren's experience in Heller's EMBA program helped her strengthen those skills. Learning about different leadership


styles, as well as entrepreneurship and marketing, deepened her understanding of how a business is run.

“Even though I'm not working in health care, I have no regrets about the time I spent in the program. The coursework was fundamental to how I approach this job,” she says. “Whether you're in a hospital setting or an education setting, those lessons still apply.”

As college president, Baren is excited to shape the campus environment and create a positive experience for students as they work toward becoming productive citizens. She says Lake Forest's rigorous liberal arts education, combined with pragmatic elements of career preparation, resonates with her own career trajectory.

Baren also emphasizes the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in creating a culture that uplifts everyone. She strives to build teams that reflect different domains of diversity, encouraging people to challenge decisions and make their voices heard. She adds that students can also benefit from seeing diverse leaders in various roles and be inspired to pursue those careers themselves.

As Baren develops the strategic framework for the future of Lake Forest College, she looks forward to tackling issues related to improving access to education, shoring up resources, and growing fundraising and scholarship opportunities.

“I'm most looking forward to addressing how to build the most inclusive campus as I possibly can,” she says. 



YUQI WANG, MBA/MPP'20 **Fostering equity** **in Kendall Square's** **business sector**

For Yuqi Wang, MBA/MPP'20, programming and policy go hand in hand.

Wang is the director of programming for the Kendall Square Association (KSA) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a business development organization that aims to build a strong, vibrant community in Kendall Square.

KSA's members range from life science and tech firms to restaurants, retail, and hospitality companies, as well as non-profit organizations — all working together to build a collective where everyone can benefit from shared resources and programming.

"Kendall Square is not just about science, tech, innovation; it's how art and science intersect," Wang says.

As the director of programming, Wang leads programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as corporate responsibility and community impact. One of the flagship programs is Inclusion Drives Innovation, which focuses on helping participants develop the tools and skills to improve intersectionality and fight against white supremacy.

Wang says her experience as an MPP student helped her develop a holistic awareness of how policy is created and how systems are interconnected.

"Even though I'm not in a policy role per se, [I see how] a lot of institutional structures created in a racist society still play out," she says. "I now have a more nuanced understanding of how these racist structures work and how we can be a key part of removing them."

Wang adds that the Social Impact MBA program increased her emotional intelligence, helping her understand different management styles and how to be flexible when working with different people and companies. She says class participation requirements pushed her to assert her opinions quickly and confidently.

"Being a manager can't be a one-size-fits-all kind of thing," she says. "Working with community stakeholders, you need to continue to have strong emotional intelligence and be comfortable enough to communicate your ideas."

Wang says her work at KSA has opened her eyes to the many ways programming can make a difference in the community. As she continues to enhance the programming in Kendall Square, Wang looks forward to improving DEI work and encouraging people to be better allies.

"It all comes down to power at the end of the day, and programming and policy are two sides of the same coin," Wang says. "When you're trying to think of how [you] can be a change agent on an individual level, there is a lot of potential in programs to push people and companies forward to change policies.

"I find that very fulfilling and very cool." ■

ALUMNI ADVANCING **DIVERSITY, EQUITY,** **AND INCLUSION**

Like Yuqi Wang, many Heller alumni are moving into the growing profession of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), helping organizations, industries, and communities cultivate a culture of belonging for all stakeholders.

Here are a few examples of Heller alumni who are leading DEI efforts in their organizations:

- **BRIAN GIBBS, PhD'95**
Vice president and chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer at UMass Memorial Health Care in Worcester, Massachusetts — the third-largest health care system in the state.
- **SAPNA MULKI, MA SID'09**
Principal at Water Savvy Solutions, an independent consulting practice based in Columbus, Ohio, that is committed to helping water and wastewater organizations embed DEI values into their workplaces and project implementation.
- **SHARRA OWENS-SCHWARTZ, MBA'10**
Vice president, inclusion, diversity, and equity, at Rocket Software, a private software development firm based in Waltham, Massachusetts.



ISAAC CUDJOE, MA COEX'18
The new Heller
Alumni Association
Board president

When Isaac Cudjoe, MA COEX'18, graduated from Heller, he always had the feeling he'd be back. "Heller is like a home with its light on, welcoming intellectual thought, new ideas, and creativity," he says. "You may have left home, but home is still always there for you."


Cudjoe, who now serves as the Alumni Association board president, left Heller armed with knowledge and skills in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and international development, which allowed him to tackle his goals head-on. In 2019, Cudjoe co-founded Brothers With Books, a community action group cultivating literacy. "I remembered my teachings at Heller — about how important it is to be immersed in your community, about how important it is to listen to stakeholders' opinions, about how important it is to build things with your neighbors. I put the skills I learned into practice on a very local level."

Cudjoe went on to earn a second master's degree, and eventually a doctorate in public policy, from Walden University. He wanted to truly understand the policies that kept detrimental systems in place

so he could help to change them from the ground up.

Recently, Cudjoe became the co-CEO of Peace First, a global organization that empowers young people around the world to be peacebuilders and changemakers. He is proud to be a part of such a powerful movement and feels that his experience at Heller prepared him for this role. "Peace First feels like the embodiment of the action Heller was nourishing me for," he says.

He hopes to continue inspiring young people around the world to be active in their communities and manifest the change that's desperately needed to bring resources and opportunities to marginalized populations.

Cudjoe credits the COEX program in particular for opening his eyes to the perspectives of people who grew up in conflict regions. "It wakes you up. You learn not to take your life for granted," he says. "You realize that there are people who are more experienced, better poised, and smarter who should be leading decision-making about how we resolve conflict. When I left Heller, I realized it's such a unique place." 

Welcoming New Faculty



Alexandra Piñeros-Shields, PhD'07

VISITING ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF RACIAL EQUITY

Alexandra Piñeros-Shields, PhD'07, brings over 30 years of experience working with oppressed communities to advance human and civil rights through innovative practices that promote meaningful civic participation. She serves as chair of the board of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, and on the boards of the ACLU of Massachusetts and Philanthropy Massachusetts. Prior to joining the Heller faculty, Piñeros-Shields was the executive director of the Essex County Community Organization, an interfaith, interracial, and interclass network. She has also held teaching positions in the former Soviet Union and in China. Now, she works with the Racial Justice x Tech Policy Initiative (RJxTP) and teaches courses on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and on economic inequality and immigration policy.

◀ "I AM REALLY, REALLY EXCITED TO HAVE A HOME AT HELLER WHERE I CAN CONTINUE TO FOCUS THE WORK ON RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE, AS I HAVE BEEN DOING IN THE FIELD."



Mursal Manati

VISITING SCHOLAR

Mursal Manati has a doctor of pharmacy and master of science in food, nutrition, and dietetics, and has worked at the decision-making and leadership levels in different organizations in Afghanistan. She was director of the public nutrition directorate at Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health, and previously served as director of the specialists' directorate at the Afghan Atomic Energy High Commission for five years, coordinating all nutrition programs and activities with national and international partners. In these roles, Manati was an essential author of the development, revision, and strategy of numerous policies concerning health and nutrition, as well as nuclear and radiological materials waste-management guidelines. In addition, she taught one-year diploma courses in nutrition at Kabul University of Medical Sciences at Ghazanfer Institute of Health Sciences and organized training programs for a variety of governmental and nongovernmental agencies.

◀ "HELLER IS LIKE A FAMILY — THE PEOPLE ARE VERY WARM AND KIND. YOU NEVER FEEL LIKE YOU'RE ALONE BECAUSE EVERYONE CARES ABOUT YOU AND IS WORKING TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS."

PHOTOS BY ANNA MILLER



We give to Heller because ...

“We give to Heller because it’s been central to our family for over 55 years! When we were growing up, students taught by our father, the late Professor David Gil, would gather at our home for vigorous discussions, and we spent many hours of our formative years on campus. We are exceptionally proud of our father’s contributions in mentoring and inspiring generations of students who have taken the solid foundation of social policy theory they gained through a Heller education and gone on to combat social and economic injustice.

“After our father passed away in 2021, we created the David and Eva Gil Fellowship in our parents’ memory to preserve their legacy and provide critical financial aid funding to the Heller School so that an advanced degree can be accessible to a graduate student who might not otherwise have had that opportunity. We invite others to also support the Gil Fellowship or another fund at Heller.”

— Twin brothers Daniel and Gideon Gil

Gifts in support of the David and Eva Gil Fellowship and other financial aid funds can be made online at heller.brandeis.edu/give.

To learn how to set up your own fund or ask any other questions about donating, please contact Courtney Lombardo, Associate Director of Development and External Relations at clombard@brandeis.edu.

David Gil with Heller students, circa 1970s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ROBERT D. FARBER UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

BACK COVER(AGE)

LISA LYNCH

“Employment has fallen like a stone. And with that, you see a marked increase in labor action and strike activity. People are tired and overworked.”

QUOTED IN THE WASHINGTON POST ON HOW WORKER SHORTAGES ARE FUELING AMERICA'S BIGGEST LABOR CRISES

PAMINA FIRCHOW

“Many people see peace not in terms of the deals made by political leaders, but in terms of their family and immediate locality.”

QUOTED IN THE WASHINGTON POST ON HOW RESEARCHERS MEASURE WHAT PEACE IS

ANITA HILL

“When it comes down to it and we have to act, we're not necessarily ready to hold people accountable, and I mean even hold our institutions accountable.”

QUOTED ON CBS NEWS ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HOW TO MOVE FORWARD AS A NATION