

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Ca Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Colleen Heflin:

Locally, this week we were going to have some food drives where people can donate food that will go both to the Hendrick Chapel as well as to the community food bank. I think there are great ways of dealing with the bottom need in our community. Those emergency food assistance programs are great ways to deal with the food insecurity if you're struggling in a cyclical way. Providing a small amount of food can really be meaningful and help support a community.

John Boccacino:

Yesterday on this week's episode of the 'Ca Conversations podcast, I am honored to welcome on both Colleen Heflin, who is the associate dean, chair and professor in the Maxwell School's Public Administration and International Affairs Department and Leonard Lopoo, a professor in the Maxwell School's Public Administration and International Affairs Department. He also serves as the director of the Maxwell X Lab and as the Paul Volcker Chair and Behavioral Economics.

John Boccacino:

This week's topic is going to be focusing on food justice, food insecurity, and the amazing research being done by the Maxwell X Lab, partnering with folks like Colleen and our great campus thought leaders here at Syracuse University. They were kind enough to join for this week's episode, which again, will talk about food justice and food insecurity in and around the Syracuse and central New York areas and so much more. Colleen and Leonard, thank you for making the time to join today.

Colleen Heflin:

Happy to be here.

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, it's great to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

John Boccacino:

The Office of Community Engagement is hosting Food Insecurity Awareness Week, a week-long program designed to raise awareness about food insecurity both on the Syracuse University campus and in the city of Syracuse. And Colleen, I am so excited to be a part of this effort. How exactly did you get involved in this line of work, and what does your food insecurity research focus on?

Colleen Heflin:

So I've been interested in different measures of economic wellbeing for a long time. And for a long time, most of the work as really done on income-based measures like poverty. But in 1996, the USDA created a new measure, the food security measure, and I happened to be one of the early researchers that started playing around with that measure. And I found this to be a really, really impactful measure to think about adding a lot to the discussion. So food security means having access to sufficient food for all people at all times for an active and healthy life. And this to me is a little bit

different than people add a lot to the discussion. And I've spent a lot of my career since 1996 sit
ing to unpack the case and consq
se and local programs, food security, but sometimes problems in implementation
may actually create problems in food security

John Boccacino:

That's interesting talk about the designation, the differentiation between the points, which
of course SCS has one of the highest points in the county over 30%, one of the
highest child poverty in the county. It's real is, food insecurity in the central New York and
the SCS area. How do we get to his point where we go to high poverty and high food
insecurity and we go to children who are struggling to get their permission?

Colleen Heflin:

I invite Len to join me this answer. He knows a lot about the SCS area and has done a lot of
work. I think this has done it is again at the local, state, and federal level. This doesn't happen
overnight. This has been a longstanding problem having to do with the economic situation. Partly
I would say having to do with the educational program and training of workers the jobs available is
shrinking. As well as thinking there's some health care and access to education can spot
healthy families

Colleen Heflin:

And then I think it's often a lot about this I've lived in many parts of the county and SCS
City we have very small local designations here. And so what the ability have geographic areas
that are doing quite well. And I think if there are some based
excess probably wouldn't be that disparity. We would have a lot more common level of public
good level of the excess allocation. And that's my question. Len, I love to hear your answer to
that

Len Lopoo:

I mean, that's clearly very difficult to Colleen. I think that she highlighted a lot of
the difficulties that we have in SCS. We have a local economy that I think is going to adjust the
new world. I've been very impressed with a lot of the efforts that have been made locally with a lot of
the good that we've worked on. I think the city thinking strategically now about how to create
jobs. They're bringing in new employees to the area. I think there's a lot of effort to do training,
to really take advantage of some of the ideas of moving into a technology-based economy. So I think
that there's a lot of effort being done right now. There are amazing people in the community that are
really being created in the way that they're thinking about tackling some of our problems. So I'm excited
to see these things are going. And I really like so much that SCS University is going to highlight
some of the issues that we have and to focus on food and how some of our problems might be
addressed.

John Boccacino:

And Len, I'm glad you mentioned the city going to step up and do our part. We consider
ourselves as the city's not just the city, appearing as a beacon on a hill. There's some
governance that are going to be tested and worked on to improve the plight of our neighbors. And
you at Max X Lab, I want to give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about the food

to fix this. And we let them longer than we food them. I'm really excited about this collaboration. I'm so thankful for the opportunity.

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, Colleen, thank you. That's really helpful. I mean, Colleen's absolutely right. It's really hard, but it's the way that you frame the information makes all the difference in the world. So saying the same thing in two different ways can be an effective way and can be completely ineffective. And it's very important that you kind of think through that. You're absolutely right. There are principles at play here, but Colleen's absolutely right, you and I, it may be the case that something works really well in some places, New York, and it doesn't work in other places. And so nothing is going to make everything fit in every place, but actually, yes. And I think that that's really something that's important for the X Lab, that we don't just say "Oh, this is going to work." That we stand and measure it and we do this a little bit. I think that's going to be convincing. It's convincing that people will work with it. It could be convincing to a few people, but we want to reach new programs. They want a certain level of evidence, and it's important that we reach that threshold.

Len Lopoo:

So absolutely that's what I mean. Colleen is absolutely right. An X Lab team person that's thinking about a lot of these things together and makes for a better product. And I think that's a lot of fun about the lab too, that you have such incredible scholars in so many fields that we can join together and create teams that generate so much more because of our collective effort.

John Boccacino:

It's fascinating when you're talking about you have this set of intentions for people who are going to get access to the benefits. And if they don't take it, and they're being told about it, they don't take it, and the impact that's one way that the program can go off the rails. And you mentioned randomized controlled trials or RCTs. We talked about that a little bit in the approach in Minnesota, but there's also the behavioral science aspect for it too. We're again, because of intentions don't always come through because of factors that are out of our control. Can you expand upon that a little bit? Len, in your research and maybe how the X Lab tries to account for that random chance of human beings and our behavior being unpredictable, and how you kind of contend with that?

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, absolutely. So I think the way that you described it is exactly right. That's how we design policy. What we really do is think this is our goal. This is what we like to get. We'd like for people to be able to enroll, for example, in this particular program. And the best way to do it is to do this particular series of steps. We're not always thinking that way. People are complicated. And so there are certain principles that we have found to be incredibly successful. Colleen mentioned a few of them a moment ago, so we know which means basically that we often want to describe something as a benefit or a right or something that they have, and if they don't continue to apply for this particular form to verify that they've lost something that's theirs, that's much more effective than saying, you can get this benefit if you apply.

Len Lopoo:

We've learned things like defaulting are really important. So, if there is an alternative that you are automatically enrolled in this particular benefit, we're doing some work in a slightly different

area on education. So if the underlying is that this is a benefit and we're going to still have a population that people stop taking that mind that this something that's and they sit from that perspective trying to get them to enroll, which requires some effort on their part. It's really a way of describing things. It's framing. It's really in some way simple, but we'd really do it in public policy and public administration. We do enroll people. We try to get them to participate, and we don't realize that we're actually sometimes making it harder for them.

Len Lopoo:

So if we start from a position of, "No, this is not what we're going to do," we're going to enroll in gun health insurance. It's not that you're already doing it. There's been lots of evidence that that's completely successful. We're going to help you fill out this FAFSA form for those who are interested in going to college. This is a benefit. We're going to help you. We've been able to do it. Then people wake up. They say, "Of course, please help me." But if you say, "Hey, this is a benefit that you can sign up for and apply for." People tend not to do it. It's really a matter of kind of reframing a benefit for them that can make all the difference in the world.

Colleen Heflin:

Can I bring this back to food security? Because there's another project we're working on together that has to do with information that military reservists are provided at the point of separation when they become civilians. And military food insecurity has been a real interest of mine for many years. And the point of separation is a time often where a lot of military are having to cover their own housing for the first time. There may be challenges going to find a job. And so there's often this increase in food insecurity during this early period.

Colleen Heflin:

And so I am interested in seeing what the military provided at the point of separation, and the information is challenging. I just want to clarify. And so I asked the Veterans Administration, could we see if we could do make this a little better? And again, I went back to Len, and we have been working to come up with some way of simplifying the information and trying to make it so that individuals instead of trying to read the information that is being passed.

Colleen Heflin:

And so we have some really encouraging stuff and I'm going to present to the food and security working group at the Veterans Administration later this month. And again, like IVFF has been a great partner in pilot 0.011 fall report the mogva (to watch in Tj0T8sb. Spaterin Tj) J. With Tj0.011 them 0 Td (make v.038 0 1d and to

vision in 2008 that I think is incredibly influential. In fact, the Nobel Prize was awarded largely based on the ideas in that book that basically said, "Let's take data. Let's use it to understand the way people behave, and let's make impacts on the public sector." And that kind of came together along with a colleague that I mentioned earlier, Joe Bekofsky, who then allied to be a co-founder of the lab. And he'd done a lot of work in his area. I can say I think, to be fair, to bring behavioral science here into being a lot of success. Joe had done some work in the area and I was inspired by the idea of putting together a team at the Maxwell School. We could do it, as you said, to come off the hill and actually see if we can make some change.

John Boccacino:

How does the X Lab take that data and choose a means of success? How do you evaluate whether a program, whether it's a behavioral project, really achieves the goals and meets its mark?

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, so that's again, so much that I like about the work that we're doing, Colleen mentioned the RCT. When a new drug comes out, let's say a vaccine for a pandemic, we won't be providing that vaccine to individuals without going through an actual trial. We can figure out, taking oris' it? And we don't do that in the social sciences. At least we don't often do it in the social sciences. So that again, is what's so appealing to me. This is a way for us to become very scientific in our approach to being involved in the public sector. We can provide this information to the folks at Hennepin County or when we're working in the VA. We can do this the exact same way a physician would, a drug company would, to see if the... Tony Facci would to see if this is actually going to be a successful intervention.

Len Lopoo:

So we're doing the exact same thing. So, that's what I mean by the data. Sometimes we collect the data ourselves. Sometimes when we work with a partner and we say "Okay, we're going to, again, working on the SNAP program that Colleen and I have mentioned a few times, we're going to get registration from certain individuals and some of them are not." Well, we're going to get administrative data to see which of the people responded to our intervention and which did not. So we actually have real data that we can use. So that's what I mean by the data, and that's what I mean by being scientific. And I think that's really where the level of science needs to be when you're trying to help and affect so many people.

John Boccacino:

Well, and speaking of behavioral sciences and knowing that people have both short-term and long-term goals, a lot of prior research is trying to deal with, how do we then, Colleen, take all this attention for Food Insecurity Awareness week and make it into jobs once the week ends? We're able to build upon this and get some momentum to really continue to affect change?

Colleen Heflin:

I think food insecurity is a huge public health issue, but the community level, particularly we're all talking about childhood food insecurity. I think we can meet this need at the community level through the bottom emergency food assistance. We can all dig in and help our community in the short term.

Colleen Heflin:

To be more specific though, really, at the state and federal level and thinking had about the way we're pointing families, the child credit, training programs, improving the quality of education, school meals, I think there's a whole lot more that we really need to fine tune and make sure that we're doing does 't feel good and bad good, but actually effective. And so I think we need to take this of micro approach that the X Lab is using and apply that each level of policy. But in the bottom, I think joining people food. We know that's in the bottom. Ultimately, this shouldn't be a top-down approach, it should be a bottom-up approach. Change, but we should make sure that change is actually going to be effective, it does 't sound right.

John Boccacino:

It gives me great confidence, and it's a real challenge, knowing that we've got such talented and passionate leaders like Colleen Heflin and Len Lopoo coming in here and really going to attack these problems and working on partnerships to make sure that we can address these issues. I want to thank you both for making the time to join us on the podcast. Len, keep up the great work at the X Lab, and thank you very much today.

Len Lopoo:

Oh please.

Colleen Heflin:

Thanks Len.

Len Lopoo:

Thank you.

Colleen Heflin:

Thank you. Thank you John.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Connections' podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Connections' podcast.