

# Social Policy Research Fellows Program

## The West Coast Poverty Center

at the University of Washington serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty in the west coast states.

A collaborative venture of the UW School of Social Work, the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, and the College of Arts and Sciences, the Center creates new opportunities for cross-disciplinary exchanges and collaboration among poverty researchers and fosters a network of poverty scholars in the west coast region.

At UW, the Center mentors the next generation of poverty scholars and practitioners through faculty awards, research assistantships and dissertation fellowships for graduate students, and graduate and undergraduate programs of study.

Beyond the university, the Poverty Center works to bring poverty-relevant knowledge to policymakers and practitioners through outreach, communications, and events.

More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available on our website:  
wpcp.washington.edu

## The Social Policy Research Fellows Program: Bridging the Gap between Poverty Research and Practice

**The Need.** The U.S. sustains high levels of poverty, economic insecurity and social and economic inequality even during periods of economic expansion. Two recessions in the last decade have only exacerbated problems of long term joblessness, low wage employment, housing insecurity and homelessness, savings and asset insufficiency, and severe social and health disparities.

There is a critical need to improve our understanding of and collective response to these problems. We need scholars who can produce the highest quality knowledge and policy professionals who can use knowledge to develop the most effective policy and program interventions. Too often, however, scholarship and practice fail to connect: knowledge produced through rigorous research is not accessible or relevant for policymakers and knowledge used in policy and program development is flawed by biased framing or the use of weak and unreliable methods.

**The Program.** The SPR Fellows Program will create teams of university scholars, doctoral trainees and policy practitioners who can generate and use the highest quality research to develop the most effective policy and program interventions to address issues of poverty, inequality, and asset development. The Program will leverage the resources of each of its partners to generate timely, relevant research and to increase capacity among scholars and professionals to produce and use such research in the future. Doctoral student Fellows will be recruited into the SPR Program after completing foundational training in one of the participating UW departments or professional schools. With SPR support, Fellows will complete one year of specialized, interdisciplinary coursework and a second year of applied research training under the supervision of a UW Faculty Mentor and a Policy Mentor in a public or nonprofit organization in the region. Each SPR internship will culminate in a research product that will be disseminated to both the sponsoring organization and the academic community.

**We launched the SPR Fellows Program in fall 2011 with an initial cohort of three Fellows.**

**The program has four major components:**

**1) Rigorous graduate social science research training for entering Fellows.** The UW is the premier research university in the region and one of the top ranked public universities in the nation. Doctoral students in the College of Arts & Sciences, the School of Social Work, and the School of Public Affairs will be selected for their academic potential and commitment to research addressing significant issues in social, health or economic policy. Fellows will acquire a strong theoretical and methodological foundation for applied social research in their home departments before beginning the specialized SPR curriculum.

**2) Emphasis on the connection between research and policy and practice.** In their first year as active SPR Fellows, students will take coursework on issues of poverty and inequality; policy making processes, applied research methods, and the application of knowledge to policy.

**3) Faculty and Policy Mentors for students.** Each SPR student will have both a WCPC Faculty Mentor and a Policy Mentor, an experienced professional in a leadership position in the government or non-profit sector in the region who will work with the student to complete a research internship in the Fellow's second year. Policy Mentors will participate in SPR classes and seminars and an annual Executive Session in which Faculty Mentors, Policy Mentors and Fellows deepen their shared understanding of substantive issues.

**4) Student-practitioner research collaborations.** During the students' second-year research internship with a public or nonprofit agency, Fellow/Mentor teams will conduct empirical research that advances understanding of some aspect of poverty and inequality relevant to the agency. Fellows will produce at least one research product for their sponsoring organization as well as a product that contributes to their academic career (e.g., a publishable paper, dissertation proposal, or dissertation chapter). WCPC will disseminate results through our Poverty Research Flash or other print and electronic vehicles. In addition, Fellow/Policy Mentor teams will have the opportunity to travel to and present in professional conferences.

### **SPR Outcomes**

**1. Produce new findings on poverty and inequality in the region.** We expect each of the SPR internships to produce research that meets the dual standards of relevance for the sponsoring organization and social science rigor.

**2. Increase regional professionals' capacity to access and use rigorous research to inform policy and programmatic decisions.** Through supervision of research internships and participation in seminars, Executive Sessions, mini-conferences and other activities senior professionals in the region will gain familiarity with current research relating to their substantive areas and the broader issues of the effective use of research in policy and programs. They will have opportunities to build relationships with university experts on issues relating to poverty and inequality who have the methodological skills to conduct robust, relevant research on policies and programs. We expect that participating individuals and their agencies will become more knowledgeable, sophisticated and enthusiastic about the use of rigorous research to inform decisions.

**3. Increase UW faculty's capacity to engage with professionals, agencies and communities in the design, implementation and dissemination of research.** Through participation as Faculty Mentors UW faculty will have new opportunities to engage with their professional colleagues in the field, to stay current on policy and program issues in their area of scholarship, and to bring their specific research expertise to bear on timely research projects. We expect that faculty will increase their appreciation of the benefits of applied research and become less negative in their assessment of the risks and costs of this type of research for academic success.

**4. Increase the number of new poverty and inequality scholars who are prepared to bring the highest quality of scholarship to applied research.** We expect that the completion of the SPR Fellows Program will help UW graduate students to launch and build successful, influential careers as teachers and scholars. Given their SPR experiences, we expect that they will be particularly well equipped to balance the demands of academic and applied social research.

**5. Create a replicable model of academic-community collaborations for applied research on poverty and inequality.** If successful, the SPR program can serve as a new model of academic-community collaboration to address critical social issues.

**For more information about the SPR Fellows Program, please contact Jennifer Romich (206.616-6121; romich@uw.edu).**