

Student Center

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Maxwell School graduate student Reagan Baughman has worked on projects with several professors at the Center for Policy Research.

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—Reagan Baughman

Research to Help the Working Poor

When the time came for Maxwell School professor Stacy Dickert-Conlin to write about her research on the U.S. Census, she naturally thought that her first-year doctoral student research assistant, Reagan Baughman, should co-write the paper. “Reagan clearly knew the data backward and forward,” says Dickert-Conlin, a professor at the Center for Policy Research. Baughman had no prior experience with statistical analysis before tackling the census project, Dickert-Conlin says, but “she plugged away and got through it, and we turned that work into a paper.”

Three-and-a-half years later, Baughman has written another paper with Dickert-Conlin and has worked on projects with several professors, mentored other graduate students, and helped with the center’s recruitment efforts. “She’s very careful in her work, and contributes across the board to the department,” Dickert-Conlin says of the University Fellow. “I think she’s the most active graduate student we have.” Baughman, in turn, says Dickert-Conlin was a good match for her own interests, particularly research on the earned income tax credit, the subject of the first part of her dissertation. “I learned a lot from her research work, and she’s advised me on my work,” Baughman says.

Since high school, Baughman has been interested in public policy, particularly health care policy and the tax system. As an undergraduate at Drew University in New Jersey, she enrolled in political science and sociology courses, but soon found economics was a better fit. “I’d always done well in math, and I liked that I could incorporate math with a social science,” she says. “It was a more rigorous way to approach things. I liked using statistics and analysis.”

While at Drew, she became interested in the earned income tax credit—which reduces the federal taxes of some working people to offset increases in their living expenses and Social Security taxes—and decided to further research it for her graduate work. “The earned income tax credit has been around for 25 years,” she says, “but it’s become much more politically popular and the big expansions in it have occurred in the last decade, so there’s been a lot of research interest.” An advisor suggested SU as a good place to pursue research on the topic. “The Maxwell School has an excellent reputation,” she says. “I’d seen the Center for Policy Research while deciding whether to come here, and I knew it was the place I wanted to be. Meeting with students and faculty, I got the sense of an open relationship, that faculty and students work together in this Ph.D. program. And it turned out to be true. There are many opportunities at Maxwell, not only for the work you do, but for personal interaction and mentoring.” Coming from a liberal arts background at Drew, she enjoys the exposure to various fields at the interdisciplinary research center.

Part of Baughman’s dissertation looks at the impact of the earned

income tax credit on private health insurance for low-income working families. While the credit provides income that makes health insurance more affordable, workers face higher tax rates as they earn more. Baughman says higher tax rates encourage workers to shift their compensation to benefits rather than cash, since benefits are not taxable. "Researchers have already found that this credit encourages people to go to work," she says. "It provides incentive, boosts their wages, and reduces poverty, especially among families with children. But whether it encourages private health insurance coverage is an important policy question, because we have a problem in the United States with people being uninsured. Minimum or near-minimum wage workers are more likely than any other group to not have health insurance."

Dickert-Conlin praises Baughman for her creative choice of dissertation topics. "She came up with all of her own ideas, rather than having someone say, 'Wouldn't that be an interesting idea for you to work on?'" This, along with her experience at the Center for Policy Research, will give her many options, Dickert-Conlin says. "If she decides to go into government or consulting work, her experience here will be valuable in creating projects that involve teamwork," she says. "If she decides on academics, the fact that she comes up with ideas on her own and completes them will make her successful."

—GARY PALLASSINO

Working in the Interest of Others

School of Social Work senior Katherine Crosby is decades away from retirement, but she's already thinking about the future of the Social Security system. And, as she found out through an independent research project in her junior year, she's not alone among SU students in her concerns. "I was curious about Social Security and what other students thought about it," she says. "The aging population is growing so rapidly, and I wondered what the implications would be for my generation when we're in the work world and are supporting the elderly population."

Crosby's research was funded by a prestigious Andrus Foundation undergraduate scholarship. The \$5,000 scholarship, awarded to only eight students nationwide by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, required recipients to do independent research on aging and finance. Crosby received an additional \$1,000 to present her results at the Gerontological Society of America conference in San Francisco in November 1999. "It's a major national recognition," says Professor William McPeak, director of undergraduate programs at the School of Social Work. "It represents us well as a department and a university, and it represents Katherine well as an individual student. We're very proud of her."

Crosby's work ethic hasn't gone unnoticed at SU. As a freshman, she received a Chancellor's Award for Public Service for Student Leadership. She's also a member of the University 100, an elite group of undergraduates who meet with prospective SU students and their families. "She's one of those students who stood out from the beginning," McPeak says. "She's well-spoken, mature, bright, responsible, and thoughtful."

Crosby first became interested in Social Security through policy courses she took with social work professor Eric Kingson, a national expert on Social Security who provided Crosby with feedback on her research. "She took on a huge subject, produced a nice piece of work, and got some good experience at the conference," Kingson says. "It's great to



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Katherine Crosby, a senior in the School of Social Work, received a national award to conduct research on students' opinions of the Social Security system.

see a hard-working student like Katherine get interested in an area, grow, and then do really excellent work. She also cares a great deal about people."

Crosby, whose research was titled "Retirement Finances and Social Security According to Syracuse University Students: Attitudes and Opinions," questioned 72 women students in a survey group of freshmen and seniors from the School of Social Work and School of Management, believing these groups would reflect different political and social ideologies. Although the students expressed some skepticism about the system, Crosby believes it will endure and remain crucial. "Basically, the students were supportive of the system, but they think it needs reform," she says. "Most believe they need to begin saving now for their own retirement."

When Crosby arrived at SU, she immersed herself in community service, working with the Boys & Girls Club of Syracuse and participating in other volunteer activities. As a sophomore, she was student program director at the Alibrandi Catholic Center, organizing such activities as dinners and service projects, and was also involved in a fund-raising banquet for Oxfam, an organization dedicated to eliminating poverty worldwide. "Every student on this campus is fortunate to be here and needs to recognize that and be grateful for it," she says. "In being grateful, we need to help others who aren't so fortunate."

Crosby, who grew up in North Carolina, was first drawn to social work as a high school student working at a crisis agency. "Helping someone is like no other experience," she says. "It fulfills a need of mine—I want to help people because I've been helped along the way."

This year, through her required field placement, Crosby is interning at Hiscock Legal Aid, studying the role of social workers in the legal system. She's learning to work with clients and gathering experience in such services as drug treatment programs, temporary shelters, and mental health options. She's also observing the court system. "I'm learning a lot," she says. "This is my chance to implement skills I've acquired in the past three years, and to find out what it's really like out there."

In the fall, Crosby plans to attend law school, seeing it as an opportunity to expand her knowledge and ultimately pursue a career where she can continue to make a difference in others' lives. "I don't want to lose the mind-set of trying to help other people, because that's what drew me to this university, to social work, and to the idea of law school," she says. "I definitely have an interest in maintaining equality and justice."

—JAY COX