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March 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Dianna Tran, Ph.D.

Dianna Tran is an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who is placed in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

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The second year of my SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellowship at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has given me the opportunity to gain additional experiences and insights that have contributed to my understanding of the intersection of research and policy within the federal government. More specifically, the exposure to a full cycle of the grant and contract process has allowed me to better understand various activities from developing, awarding, and carrying out research that informs the needs of the federal government. During my second year, I have also been able to see how my contributions make an impact in ways that were not apparent during my first year.

In particular, it has been rewarding to see the growth of the Network of Infant Toddler Researchers (NitR) Graduate Student and Early Career (GSEC) Workgroup since I became involved in leading and supporting the group over a year ago. When I started working with the NitR GSEC group, there was a desire to reinvigorate the group. By organizing meetings and events, we were able to understand the needs of the group and organize additional events that foster the professional development and sense of community within the group. A weekly writing group began several months ago and has been very successful in creating environments for peer networking and collaboration while allowing everyone space to work towards their research goals. Additionally, members of the NitR GSEC workgroup were given an opportunity to engage in a small group Q&A session with an esteemed speaker. Following the speaker's presentation, members were given dedicated space for questions and an opportunity to network with an established infant/toddler researcher. We are currently planning more events to give NitR GSEC members an opportunity to further network with established researchers in the broader NitR group and I look forward to seeing how the NitR GSEC group will continue to grow.

It has also been gratifying to see the Building and Sustaining the Early Care and Education Workforce (BASE) contract progress since I began supporting this project over a year ago. This contract aims to understand the effects of workforce turnover in the Early Care and Education field and evaluate promising strategies that support recruitment and retention. After planning how knowledge building tasks (i.e., literature reviews, environmental scans) would be carried out, we have now received memos that compare what has been found in the literature with strategies found in the environmental scan. It has been interesting and rewarding to have preliminary insights into our research questions and I look forward to supporting the contract as it progresses with secondary analysis and case studies.

Towards the end of my first fellowship year, I also began supporting the Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis (CCEEPRA) project. This contract is vastly different from other contracts I have been involved in because it is comprised of many research projects with a much quicker turnaround time than the typical 5-year contracts at OPRE. CCEEPRA aims to address policy or practice-relevant questions that pertain to the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) program and develop products that are accessible to those audiences. By being involved in CCEEPRA, I have had the opportunity to support different portfolios of projects at various stages—ranging from the development of research questions and work plans to the dissemination stages of a product. Within CCEEPRA, I have become most involved in supporting the portfolios pertaining to COVID-19 and the Child Care Early Education workforce.

Overall, upon reflecting on the knowledge and experiences I have gained during the second year of my fellowship, I realize I have gained a much deeper understanding of not only the research topics relevant to child care and Head Start, but also how rigorous research and evaluation is conducted to inform the needs of the federal government. I have also gained a broader understanding of the different ways that research, policy, and practice are connected. For example, being involved with NitR has given me insights into the bidirectional relationship that academic researchers and federal staff have where federal staff are informed about the latest research on infants and toddlers, and infant/toddler researchers receive updates on federal guidance and evaluation contracts that meet the needs of ACF. Being involved with BASE has allowed me to see how federal research and evaluation relies on connections to academic research and practice. In BASE and other contracts, the research involves seeking input from academic experts and community collaborators to produce information that informs program offices within ACF and the broader child care and early education field. And lastly, being involved in CCEEPRA has given me insights into an alternative mechanism that ACF uses to conduct research on a relatively quicker timeline than OPRE's traditional 5-year contracts, while maintaining the necessary connections between research, policy, and practice.

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