

## **DRC Summer Fellowship Personal Statement: Example 1**

I am excited to apply to Mathematica's Summer Experiential Learning Fellowship in Disability Policy Research as it would provide me the knowledge and skills to make major strides toward my career goals. I am a first-year doctoral student at the XXX in the program for XXXX. Over the past ten years, I have worked toward helping people with disabilities in five different states and in a multitude of roles. My journey from the classroom to research and academia has led me to my primary career goal: closing the research-practice gap in special education and disability services. I have rich clinical and academic experience to bring to this fellowship, and Mathematica's guidance would be invaluable to my career growth through developing my policy research skills.

After college I worked in two private schools for children with special needs, and each had very different approaches, which opened my eyes to how uneven service delivery can be. I have read a multitude of salient research findings, yet so often I do not see these findings applied to practice; at some point along the way, they get lost before reaching the people whose lives could be transformed from them. I consider this an injustice and it ignited my curiosity about the potential policy strategies to correct it. This curiosity led me to a research fellowship at the XXX, where I was the lead research fellow for a pediatric autism protocol. I then completed my Master of Education at the specialist level in school psychology at the XXX. There I was a policy fellow at the autism center, where I did background research for the director, investigating how federal stimulus money could be used toward increasing employment for young adults with autism.

After my master's I became a government relations intern at XXX, where I worked alongside the senior policy advisor to lobby at the federal and state level. Next I worked with the XXX to review special studies for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). I

have not yet had the opportunity to conduct formal policy research, and I have yearned to combine my clinical research knowledge with my deep content knowledge of special education and disability studies in order to investigate policy issues.

A key issue I am interested in is the transition out of high school for people with autism. I work as a graduate research assistant in XXX department. I co-teach a class to undergraduates in which we work with area high school students with disabilities to explore and plan for life after high school through the XXX program.

This summer fellowship at Mathematica would give me the opportunity to study the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on the quality of and access to transition services for people with autism. Anecdotally I have theorized as to why transition for people with autism poses unique challenges, and particularly to those with fewer financial resources. I am excited at the prospect of working with the experts at Mathematica to apply rigorous research standards toward investigating the phenomena I have observed and studying how SES and autism transition services truly interact.

This opportunity at Mathematica would enable me to synthesize what I have learned so far and help me further study the relationship between policy, scientific research, and education, which is integral to my career goal of working toward closing the research-practice gap.

## **DRC Summer Fellowship Personal Statement: Example 2**

Researching the implementation of and evaluating the policies and programs for the disabled has long been an academic interest of mine. As an undergraduate at XXX, I was invited to join a faculty-reading group on disability studies. That semester culminated in a term project in which I ran a focus group and conducted individual interviews with students receiving services from the College's Office of Disability Support Services. I wrote a research report documenting my results, identifying common challenges experienced by students and offering policy suggestions to the College to strengthen their services.

From 2009 to 2012, working as a research assistant/associate at XXX, I pursued my interest in policy research. Although I did not study disability policy directly, I couldn't help but notice how issues surrounding chronic health conditions arose in almost every project. For example, I contributed to a study of the childcare options available to low-income parents of special needs children, a study of service linkages and gaps for low-income mothers suffering from depression, and a study of housing options and financial support available to youth with disabilities emancipating from foster care.

My interest in disability has continued in graduate school where I have been studying Labor Economics, Public Finance, and Economic Demography. In fact, my conversations with child welfare administrators about the importance of the Supplemental Security Income Age-18 redetermination for emancipating foster youth inspired the research on which I have worked most in graduate school. Last year, in my term paper for Labor Economics, I used the Survey of Income and Program Participation to study the impact of the 1996 introduction of the Age-18 redetermination on youth and family outcomes including earnings, employment and education. To estimate the causal effect of the redetermination process on youth, I used youth who turned

18 before the 1996 policy change as a comparison group for the youth who had turned 18 after the policy change and had thus gone through an SSI redetermination.

This summer through the Experiential Learning Fellowship I would love to continue research on the determinants of a successful transition to adulthood among youth with disabilities and the impact of important policies affecting this population. This proposed research topic relates directly to my graduate study of Labor Economics, Public Finance and Economic Demography. Within this broader topic, one specific summer research project, if I could obtain access to the Social Security Administration's administrative data, might be to re-do my SIPP analysis using their data. Another potential summer research project might be to study the long-run impacts of government decisions on the financing of special education. To the extent that school finance decisions impact student services, these decisions may also affect adult employment or higher education success among disabled youth. Such a line of research may help uncover the strengths and weakness of different school financing choices.

This unique fellowship will certainly help me further my graduate study. In particular, the expert mentorship of Mathematica researchers and the opportunity to learn about current and pressing policy issues will help me whittle my broader interests down to specific and insightful empirical research questions. This research will help me shape my dissertation agenda.

### **DRC Summer Fellowship Personal Statement: Example 3**

**My background:** The summer fellowship offers an invaluable opportunity to research childhood mental illness disability policy while immersing myself in a community of researchers exploring disability policy. I am a pre-dissertation PhD student in sociology at XXX, where I focus on the political economy of U.S. healthcare, law, and quantitative methods. During my XXX in experimental psychology with honors, my thesis showed how members of the public were more supportive of mental illness funding allocations by government when the illness was depicted as improvable; for more difficult to improve illness, they thought nonprofits should play a larger role. The thesis, awarded XXX medal for the best theses university-wide, sparked my interest in how different sectors (e.g., education; healthcare) split disability service provision. My undergraduate minor in economics trained me in econometric approaches and programming in STATA and R, while my simultaneous M.A. in XXX gave me the chance to explore ethical issues with prenatal screening for disabilities.

**Reasons for interest in disability policy:** Between college and graduate school, I was awarded a 2-year pre-doctoral research fellowship from XXX s. There, I became interested in the rise of disease-specific advocacy groups and their effect on disability-relevant policy. Since groups are often successful at changing state-level rather than federal policies, what impact does their work have on service access for children who have the same diagnosis but live in different states? Using time-series regressions, and focusing on autism and the passage of private insurance mandates for expensive services (e.g., applied behavior analysis) in 30 out of 51 U.S. states, I drew upon data from the NS-CSHCN, pediatrician workforce counts, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) child counts to show that the mandates go to states with stronger existing autism research infrastructure (what I call a cumulative advantage outcome)

rather than states with weaker infrastructure where they could help spark service development. In addition, while autism special education rates increased in all states, mandate states experienced a significantly more rapid increase after the mandate's passage than both that state before the mandate and non-mandate states, suggesting that the mandates complement rather than substitute for special education services. This project sparked my interest in interdependence between child mental illness service sectors, in which SSI benefits play a crucial role.

**Proposed research topic:** Aizer et al. (2013) have investigated reasons for the rise in childhood mental illness SSI cases from 340,000 in 2002 to 700,000 in 2012. The authors, who show how rising rates of special education utilization are responsible for large between-state variations in SSI case growth, note the need for future research on *mechanisms* through which this occurs. My project would take up this call, investigating mechanisms by which a state's increase in special education utilization increases the state's childhood SSI mental illness caseload. Although there are minimum federal guidelines for each special education disability category (e.g., autism; emotional disturbance), states can define their own criteria as long as it exceeds the federal minimum. This has led to variation in criteria expansiveness—for instance, some states' autism category includes autism and Asperger's; others include autism alone. How does this variation affect rates of SSI case growth in those states? I have already assembled a database of states' special education criteria for autism spectrum disorders and their expansiveness; over the summer, I propose to expand this database to include all SSI-relevant special education categories. I would then perform time-series regressions with state and year fixed effects to see if states with more expansive special education criteria 1) experience faster special education increases relative to other states; and 2) if those rates of increases lead to increased SSI cases for the diagnostic category. This analysis can help SSI best serve families, as

the project will explore the relationship between *non-means tested, school interventional* supports and *means-tested, non-school financial* supports for childhood mental illness.

**How it relates to graduate work:** in future research, I hope to further investigate childhood mental illness assistance; ideally, if I could obtain access to a sample of anonymized data from case adjudications, I could take up Aizer's call to analyze how evidence of special education receipt may increase an application's chance of acceptance. These projects are part of my more general graduate school interest in how legal entitlements surrounding childhood mental illness arise, shape between-child inequalities, and are impacted by cultural developments like the rise of disease-specific advocacy groups.