A Passion for Children’s Health Research

When Dr. Jamie Seabrook started as an Assistant Professor in Food and Nutritional Sciences at Brescia last July, he brought with him a passion for children’s health research and a desire to explore the factors leading to social inequalities. Dr. Seabrook who also holds an appointment as an Adjunct Research Professor in the Department of Paediatrics at Western’s Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry—and Western Sociology professor Dr. William Avison, recently published results from their 14-year prospective study of single-parent families and two-parent families and the attainment of children’s socioeconomic success later in life. The ground-breaking study, Family Structure and Children’s Socioeconomic Attainment: A Canadian Sample, published in February 2015 in the Canadian Review of Sociology, was conducted entirely in London, Ontario and is one of the only major longitudinal studies of its kind with a Canadian sample. The findings from the study have produced a positive response within the research community and attracted significant media coverage. Seabrook and Avison followed a cohort of 1,020 single- and two-parent families for nearly two decades through independent interviews of the parents as well as the children, to see how well they did with respect to their educational, occupational, and income attainment. They found that the children of stable single mothers were just as likely to achieve educational and economic success as those from two-parent families and with respect to occupational attainment, fared even better. The most important determinant of children’s educational attainment, however, was maternal education, regardless of the type of family children were raised in. Dr. Seabrook says, “I think the real take home message from this study is that, rather than focusing on the specific types of families that kids grow up in, more attention in social policy should be given to education and helping those with economic disadvantage; it breaks the stereotype that kids from single parent families just don’t do well.” Dr. Seabrook’s research path continues in a similar direction with his current study, which examines the influence of socioeconomic status on the probability of adverse birth outcomes. Brescia MScFN student, Emily Campbell (supported by a prestigious graduate scholarship from Western’s Department of Paediatrics at Schulich) will conduct the study with Dr. Seabrook. But more importantly, child health outcomes research is a good reflection of Jamie’s personal outlook: “I love to see people who are more disadvantaged prosper and I’m highly motivated to see social policies develop that are able to help people who are economically disadvantaged gain those advantages they wouldn’t normally be able to afford.” Follow Jamie on Twitter @Jamie_Seabrook_
Helping Women Identify as Leaders: Colleen Sharen’s research opens the door to new opportunities

Colleen Sharen’s research happens at the intersection of pedagogy, identity and leadership. Her scholarly work has informed her teaching and program development at Brescia, and made important contributions to our understanding of women in leadership and entrepreneurship.

Sharen grew up in Grand Bend, an idyllic lakeside town an hour from London, as the daughter of the village mayor. She completed a degree in political science at Wilfrid Laurier University and later an MBA at the Ivey Business School. Along the way, she worked in government, the not-for-profit sector and the private sector. “It sounds like a weird career trajectory,” she says with a grin. “The theme that linked the jobs together was strategy – how you create a vision and then communicate and sell it.”

A decade ago while teaching part-time at York University, Sharen stumbled across the opportunity at Brescia and got the job.

She and colleague Professor Melissa Jean have become a powerful team, developing new degree programs in Food Management, Consumer Behaviour and Non-profit Management. They also created a strong co-curricular program entitled the Women’s Entrepreneurship Initiative (WEI). WEI serves both high school and university women, giving them the opportunity to interact with entrepreneurs and learn by doing.

Recently she and Jean collaborated on a research project to evaluate the effectiveness of the innovative Just Own It High School Girls Entrepreneurship Conference and Boot Camps developed by Brescia’s WEI. WEI offered a one-day conference for high school students early in 2015, and then two one-week “Boot Camps” in the summer. In the evaluation, conducted both before and after the events, they asked questions about the girls’ knowledge of entrepreneurship and their confidence in their own ability to be entrepreneurs.

Results showed that the one-day conference succeeded in increasing girls’ knowledge of entrepreneurs and what they do. Says Sharen, “It’s pretty astounding that we were able to make a significant shift in awareness and knowledge in a single day.” The boot camps not only increased knowledge but also raised entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Jean and Sharen will be presented the research at the United States Association of Small Business and Entrepreneurship conference this past January. They are also conducting a second study focusing on the learning of university women involved in WEI.

In a related study, Sharen and Dr. Rosemary McGowan (Wilfrid Laurier University) did a content analysis of business teaching cases published at the Ivey Business School during a one-year period, to see how women were portrayed. Among their findings:

- Only 52 of the more than 300 cases featured a female protagonist
- Cases with female protagonists generally didn’t describe the woman’s life, business history or credentials, unlike cases with male protagonists
- The cases with female protagonists tended to be in marketing or human resources (rather than finance and manufacturing)
- Most of the entrepreneurship cases involving women were set in developing countries
- In cases with male and female co-founders, there were twice as many words dedicated to the man as to the woman
Sharen notes that of the entire catalogue of Ivey cases, only about 13% have female protagonists. “The newer cases have about 26%, but that’s still not close to the 50% it should be.” She says the findings are significant in business education, and ultimately in shaping women’s career aspirations. “How we teach and what we teach inform students’ identity.”

Another project is a teaching case dealing with a business decision in a large non-profit organization. The case is “gender neutral” – the protagonist’s name is Chris and there are no pronouns. Students are asked to read the case and answer several questions. Then they’re shown a video of “Chris” discussing the case.

What they don’t know is that there are actually four videos – one of Chris as a white man, one as a white woman, one as an African Canadian man, and one as an African Canadian woman. One of the videos features the real “Chris,” and the other three actors speak exactly the same words.

When used in a classroom, different groups of students will watch different videos and then be asked to evaluate the leadership ability of the protagonist. The point, Sharen explains, is to shine a spotlight on “unconscious bias.” “I want students to understand that even if they consciously believe that men and women are equal, they may unconsciously be evaluating men and women differently.”

Sharen believes it’s important to understand how pedagogy, identity and leadership interact if women are to realize their full potential as business leaders. “If you don’t see others like you leading, it’s hard to form your own identity as a leader,” she says. “Ultimately my work is about opening choices and options for young women in a way that is meaningful, effective, and academically rigorous.”

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Living Research
Dr. Doelman, who began working at Brescia in 2001, is a well-established researcher of the early modern literary period in England (1603 – 1640), and has produced scholarly breakthroughs in the field through this research on epigrams and an unexpected discovery of a George Herbert poem that had been misidentified for years.

He is currently researching and transcribing unpublished, hand-written manuscript funeral elegies from the same early modern period in England, and focusing his energies on a book-length study of the subject entitled, Distraction and Detraction in the Early Stuart Elegy. He hopes to develop a web-based edition of the unpublished elegies (somewhere around 180-200 in total)—often posthumous laments or pieces of praise on a range of important figures in England at the time. Doelman regularly visits England for his research as most of these unique unpublished manuscripts reside in places such as the British Library, Bodleian Library, and Cambridge University. But for Doelman, the research is also about rediscovery and reconnecting with the material:

“There is a whole wealth of poetic material that has not been looked at because of the way in which it was circulated in the period, and what motivates me is the sense of discovery and freshness in looking at materials that I know really haven’t been read or thought about in 400 years. It’s kind of like solving a puzzle.” Doelman has been keeping extra busy in his role as an external reader of a new edition and translation of George Herbert’s Latin poetry, and polishing up the final draft of his forthcoming monograph, The Epigram in England: 1590-1640, published by Manchester University Press, 2015 (based on research funded by SSHRC, 2003-07). Dr. Doelman was recently awarded Brescia’s inaugural Excellence in Research Award, and has been named the Brescia Excellence in Research Professor of the Year (2015-16).

Professor Doelman’s Faculty Profile: http://brescia.uwo.ca/about/our-people/profiles/profile-jim-doelman/

Excellence in Research Award: http://brescia.uwo.ca/about/our-people/awards/award-for-excellence-in-research/
Institute; she excelled in bringing people together and leading organizational change initiatives. In 2000 she led the start-up of CSTAR (Canadian Surgical Technologies & Advanced Robotics), an advanced centre for research and training in minimally invasive surgical technologies and techniques. After completing a PhD at the Ivey Business School and a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan, she was recruited to launch and lead a new innovative program in public health at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry. A Trustee at Brescia for many years, she resigned her Board appointment to apply for the job she now holds since January 2015.

Le Ber says her research is a natural extension of her work in health care. “The reason I went into management in the first place was because I could see the health care system needed to change,” she says. “Eventually I began to think I could be more effective doing research on how to make change and preparing the next generation to push the system further than I was able to.”

Le Ber’s PhD research focused on cross-sector partnerships created for social innovation, that is social system change, and “hybrid” organizations that combine market-based activities with a mission focused on a common social good or benefits for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The challenge for these hybrids is to align the social purpose with the economic activity sustainably. “The business sector works very differently from the not-for-profit sector,” she says. “And there are complex processes of leadership at work to bridge the two.”

In a major SSHRC funded research project, Le Ber and a colleague are studying interdisciplinary teams of researchers funded by Grand Challenges Canada. Grand Challenges is an organization dedicated to finding innovative solutions to seemingly intractable global health challenges. Interdisciplinary teams of researchers are given $100K to work on bold new ideas to address issues such as maternal and child health and diagnostics in low- and middle-income countries using scientific/technical, business and social innovations. “These teams are not organizations or companies,” says Le Ber. “They’re just groups of individuals with complementary expertise. We’re looking at the processes of innovation within these transdisciplinary teams.”

Using her public health background, Le Ber is also working on a Public Health Ontario funded project with public health agencies, to develop indicators that will enable leaders in public health agencies to know whether they are addressing social determinants of
health to reduce health inequities for the most vulnerable in their communities. Measures include identifying vulnerable and marginalized populations, and engaging them in program development.

Inspired by Brescia’s mission to produce graduates who “lead with wisdom, justice and compassion in a changing world,” Le Ber is very interested in issues of gender and leadership. She is part of a group of international researchers who are exploring the development of women's leader identity through voice, resiliency and experiential learning using a process of “collaborative auto-ethnography.” “We’re a diverse group of women who all identify as leaders, so we decided to study ourselves before we study anyone else,” explains Le Ber. “There are some very important questions to ask around the development of girls and their leader identity.” Several members of the group are also working on an article about women’s aspirations for leadership. In addition, Le Ber has recently been approached about co-editing a book on Women on Corporate Boards.

In related work, and with funding from the Brescia Research Grant, Le Ber is also exploring the practices of leadership in a women’s circle. A key preliminary finding of the collaborative study is that to reach "resonance", that is a solution arrived by authentic consensus-making, all parties must be willing to explore "dissonance" and the incongruous beliefs or experience that limit that outcome.

The Circle study also raises questions about the sacred as a component of leadership. “I don’t know what the results will be, but I do believe that to be effective as a leader, you have to bring all of yourself to the table -- and that means your spirituality too.”

Le Ber believes research and teaching about women in leadership is critical. “Most of the intractable problems in the world today are the result of failed leadership,” she says. “The world needs women to lead together with men. But this isn’t just about gender – it’s about diversity and the inclusion of all non-privileged groups within society.” She points to research that clearly shows diverse teams are better at problem-solving than homogenous ones.

Le Ber herself will continue to ask tough research questions and search for new understandings. “What inspires me? Everything! The people around me. I’ve been curious from day one.”

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*LivingResearch*