

REVIEW OF THE CENTER FOR CHILD WELFARE AND ADOPTION STUDIES

Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) Code: 90.4407
Research and Service Center: Social Work

OVERVIEW

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies (hereinafter the “center”) at Illinois State University was founded in 1998 as the Center for Adoption Studies. The center was established in response to a request from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) for assistance from the School of Social Work at the University in evaluating child welfare outcomes in the state. In May 1999 Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) staff approved a request from the University for temporary (five-year) IBHE recognition of the center and its partnership with IDCFS. From that initial partnership, the Center for Adoption Studies became known as the primary research unit within the state of Illinois charged with studying the impact of adoption on children in the foster care system. Recognizing the long-term contributions of the center in the areas of public policy and applied research, the IBHE approved a University request for permanent recognition of the center in June 2005.

Since its initial work regarding adoption in Illinois, the mission of the center has broadened beyond adoption research to examine the full range of child welfare-related scholarly and programming initiatives including foster care, child and family well-being, educational outcomes for vulnerable youth, and culturally-responsive child welfare practice. The Center examines child welfare and adoption scholarly inquiries on a national and international scale. In keeping with this evolution of mission, the center name was changed from the Center for Adoption Studies to the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies effective October 15, 2015. The mission of the center was also revised to read: *The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies promotes culturally-grounded, empirically-based research and policy that informs child welfare and adoption practice and improves child and family well-being at the local, state, and national level.*

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies is one of two known higher education research centers in the nation that produces an inclusive spectrum of adoption and child welfare research, programming, and policy analyses. This is the second full review of the center since it was granted permanent center status.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Introduction and overview

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies is a grant-funded unit that reports to the School of Social Work within the College of Arts and Sciences at the University. The school provides administrative support to the center in the form of clerical assistance, payment processing, budget tracking, and website maintenance. The center director, a tenured social work faculty member, oversees the primary administrative needs of the center and facilitates strategic planning, development and implementation of initiatives, efforts to seek and maintain external funding, and assessment. Center staff are full-time faculty members with expertise in child welfare and adoption, child development, family communication, education policy, organizational development, and culturally-responsive practice.

Although the center director organizes and facilitates initiatives of the center, other faculty members from the School of Social Work or from other academic units across the University are often involved with implementation of those initiatives. Known as “faculty affiliates,” they may serve as principal investigators, co-principal investigators, or contracted faculty for center projects. Faculty affiliates agree to adhere to the mission and goals of the center and comply with the specific expectations of the funding source with which their work is associated. Major initiatives, past and present, undertaken by center faculty and faculty associates are briefly described below.

The Illinois Permanency Enhancement Project (PEP) is one of the central projects of the center. PEP began as a partnership with IDCFS to monitor child well-being outcomes for foster children, with a focus on racial disparities within the child welfare system. Illinois State University serves as the lead university on the project; other members of the collaboration are Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Northern Illinois University, and the University

of Illinois at Chicago. The collaborative project provides research, policy analyses, organizational development support, and community engagement resources. Faculty researchers also offer technical assistance to child welfare administrators, practitioners, and family law experts in making data-informed decisions. Since its inception in 2007, PEP has provided graduate assistantships, independent studies, and volunteer opportunities for more than 20 Illinois State University students, more than 30 in-class service learning project opportunities, and partial summer salary and research opportunities for School of Social Work faculty. In connection with the project, the center co-sponsors an annual IDCFS professional development conference with IDCFS, the three collaborating universities, and other partners.

First Star Academy is a national initiative founded in 1999 to improve the lives of child victims of abuse and neglect through college preparation programs delivered by partner organizations. Since the prior program review, the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies has partnered with First Star Academy to provide college readiness services for a cohort of Central Illinois high school students associated with the foster care system. Services include academic enrichment through courses taught by university faculty, life skills training, and mentoring by university students affiliated with the center.

The Foster and Adopted Youth Study examines the socio-emotional well-being, academic performance, and social support needs of foster and adopted youth who attend college. This research project utilizes a mixed-method approach consisting of an online student assessment and a qualitative study. Both have been conducted since the last program review. Undergraduate students working with the center collected data and interviewed research participants for the project.

Through the Youth in Care Scholars Network, the center and the School of Social Work are committed to engaging and supporting Illinois State University students either currently or formerly involved with IDCFS. Support provided by the center and school includes an annual fall reception and campus resource presentation for the students; faculty mentorship; collaborations with university academic services; peer-relationship building, leadership development, and cultural enrichment; and student advocacy.

Through the Lifebook Work with Children project, the center provides Lifebook workshops, services to children and families, and training materials to child welfare practitioners. Lifebooks are documents comprised of pictures, stories, and artifacts organized chronologically to preserve a child's major life events. Lifebooks can be used as a therapeutic tool to help youth integrate past experiences with their present circumstances in a healthy and constructive manner.

Through the Adoption and Same-Sex Couples initiative, the center has provided expert research and policy commentary on current laws and policies related to adoption by same-sex couples.

Accomplishments since the prior program review

Center leader transition in 2014-2015. The center faced major challenges in 2014-2015 related to personnel and funding. The center director and co-founder retired in 2014. In addition, the center had just one grant-funded project at the time (PEP), and it was at risk of ending due to the state financial crisis. Since then a new director has been appointed, new center faculty and faculty associates have been engaged in the work of the center, and new initiatives have been developed and funded. In 2014-2015, the year of transition, the center focused on service-learning projects involving Illinois State University students. During the year the center produced two new service-related publications: an Adoption Search and Reunion Guide and an Adoption Resource Guide for Central Illinois. The center also began sponsoring an annual Youth in Care Scholars welcome reception for students receiving financial support from IDCFS.

Expanded funding sources. As a result of the 2014-2015 efforts to reinvigorate the center, its external funding has increased five-fold, from \$50,000 in 2013-2014 to \$250,000 in 2017-2018. Center funding sources now include two IDCFS grants and two grants from private foundations (Spencer Foundation and First Star Academy/Give Something Back Foundation).

Expanded student research and learning opportunities. Since the 2014-2015 year of transition, the Center has re-established itself as a fully operational learning laboratory for students who serve as paid and unpaid research assistants, interns, and volunteers. Center faculty members have overseen 40 student research, internship, or employment opportunities since the prior program review, nearly half involving students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Engagement in interdisciplinary partnerships with other units at Illinois State University. These have included research partnerships with faculty in the School of Communication and Department of Family and Consumer Sciences and programming partnerships with faculty in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations, the Department of Special Education, University College, and Student Counseling Services.

Media presentations/interviews. Successful efforts to expand center research and programming since the 2014-2015 transition year have resulted in positive media coverage and increased visibility for the center. Center initiatives have been featured by the local, state, and national media.

Assessment

For the 2013-2014 program review, the center developed a strategic plan that articulated the center mission and goals for the four-year period following that review (2013-2017). Using the logic model paradigm, the plan set forth short-term, intermediate, and long-term performance projections for the center. For this 2017-2018 program review, center faculty has evaluated progress toward achieving goals and performance projections set forth in the 2013-2017 strategic plan. This assessment exercise resulted in compilation of a new strategic plan to guide work of the center for the next four years (2017-2021). The new plan includes an updated mission statement, new center goals, and a revised logic model with short-term, intermediate, and long-term projections.

Resources

During this review period, the center has been supported almost exclusively by grants from external entities, including IDCFS, the Spencer Foundation, the Give Something Back Foundation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Since inception of the center in 1999, external grants and contributions have totaled approximately \$5 million. The School of Social Work continues to provide in-kind contributions in the form of facilities, administrative staff support, and faculty release time.

Response to previous program review recommendations

Work with University Assessment to refine and implement a formal assessment plan for the Center to systematically document the work of the Center. See the Assessment section above.

Expand and diversify external funding beyond the State of Illinois and Donaldson Foundation. Because the center is focused primarily on public-sector child welfare policies and services, the State of Illinois continues to play a central role in the work of the center as both a research collaborator and potential funder. The state, primarily through IDCFS, has been the major funding source of the center since its inception in 1999. Nevertheless, since the 2013-2014 program review the center director and faculty have successfully secured private external funding from the Spencer Foundation, First Star Foundation, and the Give Something Back Foundation. Additionally faculty have made a concerted effort to seek funds from other entities, working closely with the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the University. Those efforts have succeeded in diversifying and stabilizing center funding. The center will work to maintain diversification of its funding sources moving forward.

Major findings of this self-study

- The center has met expectations related to expanding and diversifying its funding sources.
- The center has exceeded expectations for collaboration through increased interdisciplinary faculty research and program partnerships.
- The center has exceeded expectations related to student service learning, research, and mentoring opportunities.

- The center should continue to expand its impact nationally through presentations, journal publications, media coverage, and national policy talks.
- The center continues to require dedicated administrative support and faculty release time to sustain a structured center assessment process.
- The mission and work of the center exemplify Illinois State University goals of “supporting student and faculty scholarship,” “educating globally aware and socially engaged leaders,” and “sparking continuous creativity and innovation.”

Initiatives for the next program review cycle

- Sustain the research and program partnership with the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University.
- Document and disseminate outcomes of the First Star Academy.
- Explore global and international child welfare-related research and service initiatives.
- Continue to expand and diversify funding sources.
- Continue to expand and diversify interdisciplinary partnerships.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

Review Outcome. The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies (hereinafter “the Center”) to be in Good Standing.

The committee thanks the Center for a thorough self-study report that describes the Center and its initiatives since the 2013-2014 program review in a manner accessible to persons not familiar with them. The committee recognizes the Center as one of only two child welfare research and service centers in higher education in the U.S. and the only one focusing on policy and advocacy.

The committee commends the Center for its service to the citizens of Illinois as well as for its efforts to further the strategic plan for higher education in the state (*The Illinois Public Agenda*) and the strategic plan for Illinois State University (*Educate • Connect • Elevate*). Center initiatives are intended to promote child and family well-being for historically vulnerable and marginalized populations. The Center impacts child welfare and adoption policies in Illinois and nationally through applied research and its dissemination, partnerships with agencies and organizations whose mission is to implement child welfare or adoption programs (principally the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services), professional development training to staff of such agencies and organizations, and direct provision of services to children and their families through center-sponsored programs.

The Center works to further *The Illinois Public Agenda* goal of increasing the number of Illinois residents with high-quality postsecondary credentials. Through participation in the nation-wide First Star Academy initiative, the Center is preparing foster care children in Central Illinois for postsecondary education, including preparation for study at Illinois State University, through learning and mentoring opportunities on the Illinois State campus. The First Star Academy at Illinois State University is one of only two such programs in Illinois. To implement the First Star program, the Center has mobilized efforts of multiple academic and service units at the University, in doing so significantly expanding the reach of the Center beyond its home in the School of Social Work. The committee commends the Center for bringing this opportunity to Central Illinois. The committee also recognizes the Center for its efforts since the last program review to provide more Illinois State University students with opportunities for experiential learning, civic engagement, self-guided discovery, and knowledge building. Students serve as research assistants, interns, or First Star Academy mentors with the Center or conduct independent research related to center initiatives. Students have accompanied center faculty in meetings with policy makers and have testified before members of the Illinois General Assembly regarding state funding of higher education. The Center has also furthered *The Illinois Public Agenda* goal of better integrating educational, research, and innovation assets in the state to better meet the needs of its citizens. Through its applied research, the Center seeks to identify changes that could be made to child welfare policies and practices in the state to increase their effectiveness and efficiency.

The initiatives described above further the *Educate • Connect • Elevate* values of learning and scholarship, individualized attention to students, integrity, and civic engagement. Through its focus on children and families identifying with traditionally underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, the Center also furthers the university value of diversity. The Center has studied racial disparities of the Illinois child welfare system for more than a decade. Approximately half of the 40 Illinois State University students involved in work of the Center since 2013-2014 and half of center faculty and staff self-identify with racial or ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented at the University.

A concern identified through the 2013-2014 program review was whether funding of the Center is sufficient to further its goals and diverse enough to promote its financial stability. The committee recognizes efforts of faculty and staff to increase external funding since the 2013-2014 review, from \$50,000 to \$250,000, and to increase the number of funding sources, from one to four. Those changes have permitted the Center to designate three faculty members at the University as research associates affiliated with the Center. With the additional faculty involvement, the Center has been able to expand its dissemination of research findings through academic and professional publications and presentations. Having additional faculty should aid continuity of center initiatives when faculty or staff changes next occur.

Recommendations. The Academic Planning Committee makes the following recommendations to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. In the next center review self-study report, tentatively due October 1, 2022, the committee asks the Center to describe actions taken and results achieved for each recommendation.

Continue efforts to secure external funding. Securing external funds needed to continue the work of a research and service center is an ongoing challenge. The committee supports ongoing center efforts to seek and secure external funding from multiple sources to support the mission of the Center and to further its financial viability and stability during the next program review cycle.

Continue efforts to expand interdisciplinary partnerships. The committee concurs with the goal of expanding the reach of the Center to other units and disciplines at the University through interdisciplinary partnerships that involve faculty and students in child welfare or adoption initiatives. An immediate opportunity for a mutually-beneficial interdisciplinary collaboration is finalizing a research and programming partnership with the Care4U initiative administered through the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University.

Continue implementing and refining the assessment plan for the Center. Through the 2013-2014 program review, the committee recommended that the Center refine and implement its assessment plan. The self-study report evidences success by the Center in doing so. Through the self-study process, the Center has assessed its work relative to the goals and strategies set forth in the 2013-2017 logic model and then developed a new model to guide its operations during the period 2017-2021. The committee encourages the Center to use its new logic model to periodically assess progress made toward its goals during the next review cycle, to use assessment findings to modify operations and initiatives as needed, and to revise the logic model as part of the next self-study process to guide work of the Center during the subsequent review cycle.

Continue communicating the work of the Center. The committee encourages faculty and staff members to continue their efforts to communicate work of the Center, findings of its research and service initiatives, and implications of those findings for child welfare and adoption policies and practices in Illinois and beyond. Among the information to be compiled and disseminated during the next program review cycle are the experiences and outcomes of the First Star Academy initiative.

Explore international and global research and service opportunities. The committee encourages the Center to consider expanding its influence nationally and internationally by pursuing its goal of exploring international and global child welfare-related research and service initiatives.