

New Cornell institute will focus on health policy

Cornell University

Two professors from Cornell's Department of Policy Analysis and Management (PAM) are forming a "community of scholars" from campus and visiting institutions focused on risky health behaviors and their implications for health care policy and public health.

The Institute on Health Economics, Health Behaviors and Disparities, co-directed by professors John Cawley and Donald Kenkel and set to launch July 1 with funding by the College of Human Ecology, is intended to attract scholars from a wide range of fields related to health policy, including economics, government, nutrition, communications, sociology, psychology and medicine.

Cawley and Kenkel envision the new institute as a home for research and evaluation that informs public debate, serves as a structure to mentor and support graduate students, and coordinates Cornell's expertise in these areas.

"Health economics, health behaviors and disparities are inherently multidisciplinary issues," said Cawley, noted for his research on the economics of obesity. "If you want to understand the factors that lead to risky health behaviors, as well as possible policy solutions, you need to get economists, sociologists, public policy experts, nutritionists and communications researchers all talking to each other. This institute is very much in the spirit of Human Ecology, where we take insights from various disciplines to work on common goals."

The collaborative approach is necessary, Kenkel said, because public health concerns pervade many areas of society and public policy.

In coming years, for instance, various health care reforms will start to reshape medical benefits programs offered by the state and federal government, employers and private insurers. Smoking and obesity, two of the foremost preventable health problems in the United States, endanger individual health but also add great costs to the U.S. health care system. In addition, prescription drug regulations are increasingly complex.

"The institute will take a broad perspective and seek to examine the factors that play into individuals' health decisions and behaviors," said Kenkel, who specializes in the economics of disease prevention and health promotion. "It will also be a place for investigation of research claims and policy proposals. There are lots of competing approaches for smoking cessation, for example, so the institute will try to define what is most effective in areas such as this."

Cawley and Kenkel said the institute, which will be part of the Cornell Population Program, will also support new research by graduate students and connect them with key faculty and up to a dozen visiting scholars each year. Through the

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institute, students could also access relevant data sets and administrative support for scholarly projects.

"We want faculty and students to be able to easily navigate these subjects and to pursue the research avenues that interest them," Cawley said. "We hope the institute will also shine a light on Cornell's wide-ranging expertise in these areas."

In addition to college support, the institute will benefit from National Institutes of Health grants and other funds from agencies that currently back Cawley's and Kenkel's research.

Ted Boscia is assistant director of communications in the College of Human Ecology.

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