

LEXIN CAI

+1 (202) 285-2066
lc973@cornell.edu

U.S. Citizen
<https://lexincai.github.io>

EDUCATION

Expected 2026	Ph.D. in Economics, Cornell University
2015	M.S. in Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania
2013	B.S. in Public Administration, Renmin University of China

FIELDS

Labor Economics, Public Finance, Economics of Education

REFERENCES

Professor Zhuan Pei
Cornell University
zhuan.pei@cornell.edu

Professor Maria Fitzpatrick
Cornell University
maria.d.fitzpatrick@cornell.edu

Professor Pauline Leung
Cornell University
pleung@cornell.edu

Professor Benjamin Goldman
Cornell University
bgoldman@cornell.edu

TEACHING

Spring 2022	TA for Behavioral Economics and Public Policy, Cornell University
Fall 2021	TA for Economics of the Public Sector, Cornell University

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS

2025–2026	Ernest Liu '64, Ta-Chung and Ya-Chao Liu Memorial Fellowship, Cornell University
2025	Jerry Ellig Award for Best Student Presentation, SBCA Annual Meeting
2023–2024	Jain Family Institute - Brooks School Fellow
2022	Outstanding TA Award, Cornell Brooks School of Public Policy
2020–2025	Sage Fellowship, Cornell University (x2)
2014	Dean's Merit Award, University of Pennsylvania
2012	Global KU Scholarship, Korea University
2010–2013	National Scholarship, Renmin University of China (x3, top 5% of class)

RESEARCH GRANTS

2025	Russell Sage Foundation Dissertation Research Grant (\$15,000)
2024	MIT Policy Impacts Early-Career Scholars Grant (\$10,000)
2024	Cornell Labor Economics Small Grant (\$2,500)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2026	ASSA Annual Meeting*
2025	APPAM*, Association for Education Finance and Policy, FLX Economics of Education Workshop (Cornell), Policy Impacts Annual Conference (MIT), Society for Benefit-Cost Analysis (SBCA), Symposium on the Frontiers in the Studies of Anti-Poverty Programs (Discussant, Cornell)
2024	APPAM * <i>Scheduled</i>

EMPLOYMENT

2022–2024	Research Assistant for Prof. Pauline Leung and Prof. Zhuan Pei
2018–2020	Research Analyst, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
2016–2018	Research Associate, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
2015–2016	Intern, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
2014–2015	Intern, World Wildlife Fund

SERVICE

2022–2025	Executive Board Member, Diversity in Cornell Economics
2022–2024	Student Representative, Cornell Economics Committee for Student and Faculty Engagement
2021–2022	Social Co-chair, Cornell Graduate Students in Public Policy
2014–2015	Co-founder, Wonk Tank, Penn Wharton Public Policy Initiative

WORKING PAPERS

“The Long-Term Effects of Universal Free School Meal Policies: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision” (Job Market Paper)

School meal policies in the United States are at a crossroads: half of public K–12 schools provide universal free meals to all students, regardless of income, while the other half offer free and reduced-price (FRP) meals based on income eligibility. Do universal policies improve student outcomes compared to targeted policies for low-income children? I evaluate the short- and long-term effects of universal free school meal policies using linked administrative data from Texas. I exploit the staggered rollout of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a federal policy that allows high-poverty schools to offer meals free to all students. I find that CEP increases meal take-up by 6.2 percentage points (10 percent). Higher-income students previously ineligible for FRP are more responsive to CEP than low-income students already eligible under FRP. Despite the increase in take-up, I detect no improvements in academic, behavioral, or economic outcomes overall or across most subgroups, in either the short or long run. Applying the marginal value of public funds framework, I show that the costs of CEP exceed its benefits, suggesting limited efficiency gains from universal provision relative to targeted support.

WORK IN PROGRESS

“Effects of Work Requirements in Means-Tested Programs”

(with Hyewon Kim and Pauline Leung)

Draft forthcoming pending Census Bureau disclosure review

“The Effect of High School Magnet Programs on Academic and Racial Segregation”

(with Katharine Sadowski)

Approved Texas Education Research Center project

“Work Requirements in SNAP and Postsecondary Enrollment” (with Meredith Welch)

With access to restricted-use data held at the Census Bureau

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Programming:	Stata, R, SAS, ArcGIS
Data clearance	U.S. Census Bureau Special Sworn Status (2022-present)
Languages	Mandarin (native), English (fluent), Cantonese (fluent), Korean (basic)

Last updated November 9, 2025