

LEXIN CAI

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U.S. Citizen
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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

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

FIELDS

Labor Economics, Public Finance, Economics of Education

WORKING PAPERS

“The Long-Term Effects of Universal Free School Meal Policies: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision” (**job market paper, draft forthcoming**)

Abstract. 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 schools to provide 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, CEP has no discernible impact on academic, behavioral, or economic outcomes overall or across most subgroups, in either the short or long run. I quantify the trade-offs between CEP's modest benefits and higher program costs using the marginal value of public funds framework.

“Local Responses to Federal Grants: Evidence from the Universal School Meals Program”

WORK IN PROGRESS

“Effects of Work Requirements in Means-Tested Programs” (with Hyewon Kim and Pauline Leung)
draft forthcoming

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

“Examining Magnet Program Expansions on Student, School, and Residential Outcomes in Texas” (with Katharine Sadowski)

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)

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS

2025–2026	Ernest Liu '64, Ta-Chung and Ya-Chao Liu Memorial Fellowship
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
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)

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>

TEACHING

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

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

POLICY WRITING

“The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Includes Earnings Incentives” (with Elizabeth Wolkomir, 2019)

“House Farm Bill Would Increase Food Insecurity and Hardship” (with Ed Bolen et al., 2018)

“President's Budget Would Cut Food Assistance for Millions and Radically Restructure SNAP” (with Dottie Rosenbaum et al., 2018)

“Administration's 2018 Budget Would Severely Weaken and Cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program” (with Dottie Rosenbaum et al., 2017)

“Community Eligibility Adoption Rises for the 2015–2016 School Year, Increasing Access to School Meals” (with Becca Segal et al., 2016)

OTHER

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

REFERENCES

Zhuan Pei (Chair)	Associate Professor, Cornell University zhuan.pei@cornell.edu
Maria Fitzpatrick	Professor of Economics and Public Policy, Cornell University maria.d.fitzpatrick@cornell.edu
Pauline Leung	Assistant Professor, Cornell University pleung@cornell.edu
Benjamin Goldman	Assistant Professor, Cornell University bgoldman@cornell.edu

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