

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

FIELDS

Labor Economics, Public Finance, Economics of Education

REFERENCES

Professor Zhuan Pei
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Professor Maria Fitzpatrick
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Professor Pauline Leung
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Professor Benjamin Goldman
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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
2025	Jerry Ellig Award for Best Student Presentation, SBCA Annual Meeting
2023–2024	Jain Family Institute – Cornell 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 (\$15K)
2024	MIT Policy Impacts Early-Career Scholars Grant (\$10K)
2024	Cornell Labor Economics Small Grant (\$2.5K)

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
	* Scheduled

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, or 20 additional meals per student per year (a 10 percent increase). 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, either overall or across subgroups, in 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 SNAP Work Requirements”

(with Hyewon Kim and Pauline Leung)

Draft forthcoming pending Census Bureau disclosure review

In this paper, we examine the effectiveness of work requirements as a screening device in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the main food assistance program in the United States. “Able-bodied adults without dependents” (ABAWDs) are subject to work requirements, but during the Great Recession these rules were broadly suspended and later reinstated at different times across counties and states throughout the 2010s. Using linked SNAP and LEHD administrative data from eight states, we exploit the age-50 eligibility cutoff and county-level waiver reinstatements in difference-in-differences and triple-differences designs to estimate the effects of reinstating work requirements. We find that reinstating work requirements reduces SNAP participation and benefits among ABAWDs. We do not find robust evidence that work requirements increase labor supply. Moreover, our results suggest that work requirements disproportionately screen out low-income individuals, suggesting worse program targeting.

Disclaimer: This research was performed at a Federal Statistical Research Data Center under FSRDC Project Number 3049. (CBDRB-FY26-P3049-R12788)

“The Effect of High School Magnet Programs on Academic and Racial Segregation”
(with Katharine Sadowski)
Approved Texas Education Research Center project

We examine how magnet programs affect student, classroom, school, and residential outcomes using linked administrative data from Texas. Exploiting variation in the timing and location of magnet program openings, we estimate their impacts on student achievement and college enrollment among students attending their zoned schools. We also investigate changes in academic and racial segregation across classrooms within schools, across schools within districts, and across census tracts within school attendance zones. This research informs discussions about how and where to expand magnet programs to promote racially diverse and academically thriving student bodies.

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

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Programming	Stata, R, SAS, ArcGIS
Data clearance	U.S. Census Bureau Special Sworn Status (2022-present)

Last updated November 24, 2025