

## John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

**getting to know you****A Q&A with Meghna Hari**

*Meghna Hari is a research project manager at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Her research at the center focuses on using statewide education and earnings data to evaluate the effectiveness of workforce programs. This project ties together her background in quantitative research with her wide variety of research interests.*

**What is your educational and professional background?**

Since graduating with my Master's degree from the University of Illinois, I've mostly worked in planning and research organizations. My background has been in quantitative research, with a focus on planning.

Before coming to the Heldrich Center, I worked for two years in St. Louis on transportation modeling. Then, I worked for five years in Boston at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council on demographic and housing analyses. Toward the end of my time in Boston, I began looking into issues such as income disparity, workforce housing, and upward mobility, and it was at that time that I became interested in workforce development. The work I did in Boston ultimately led me to working at the Heldrich Center, and the project that I'm doing here.

**What is your role at the Heldrich Center and which project are you currently working on?**

Currently, I am working with Heldrich Center colleagues Stephanie Holcomb and David Seith to build the statewide New Jersey Education to Earnings Data System (NJEEDS) database. I've been coordinating with the three state agencies in New Jersey from which we are sourcing the data — the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, the New Jersey Department of Educa-



tion, and the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development. This coordination involves obtaining data, understanding it, and ensuring that we interpret it correctly, store it securely, and present it accurately. The main goal that we are working toward at this point is ensuring that all the data align well and are being secured.

I came to the Heldrich Center and this project in July 2017. The vision of this project is finding out the income outcomes of the people who go to school in New Jersey, go to college in New Jersey, and who end up working in New Jersey. Since the data forum that the Heldrich Center hosted in December 2016, we have done a lot of the backend work, such as laying the foundation for the different data that each of these organizations have. This involves a whole range of datasets, such as working with higher education data to find out where the students are enrolled, what majors they are going into, how many credits they take, if they transfer

or take a break in their education and then come back, and tracking them through their college years to graduation and then into employment. The state agencies have these datasets in different pieces sorted by their own interests. For the purpose of this project, we are stitching the data together and then linking it back to data we get from the Department of Education. We then try to go back further with the data, and we try to get income data if the person were to work in New Jersey.

### **How does this project tie into your research interests?**

My research interests fall under a broad umbrella of how research can be used in social science for presenting outcomes of inequality. My background has been mostly in demographics projections and housing, but then it changed focus toward workforce housing, and that is how I got into workforce development.

This project ties in all the different pieces of my research interests. I am able to look at the different qualities that affect people at different times in their lives. I'm aware of the different factors that are beyond the data state agencies can collect, that affect people's decision to live and work in New Jersey. As a researcher, if you're aware of what is missing, then you are able to get a better story.

Through the NJEEDS project, we get to track someone's life for at least 15 years and we hope that the data paint a picture of what students will need in the future. For example, we need to know from a young age, what schools need to do to get students ready for higher education, then into a career that they want, and ultimately to an income that will help them live the lifestyle they choose.

### **What has been the most memorable project that you have worked on?**

The following project ties into my motivation for wanting to work at the Heldrich Center. Toward the end of my work at the planning agency in Boston, we were commissioned by the state for a workforce housing project to find out if the data showed that the state had enough affordable living options to support the workforce. After looking at all income levels, what we found was that not only was it less affordable for the middle-income

level to compete in the market for housing options, the economy was shifting in such a way that there were more low- and high-income jobs and the middle was shrinking.

This caught my attention from a personal perspective because if you don't have the middle-income level, then there's no upward mobility. This is when I became more interested in applying my research skills to something that works toward that goal of workforce development and helping people to progress from low-income jobs — getting them the training and tools they need to get and keep a job, then progress up the ladder. Through this research, we are able to help the next generation attain a better education and better skills to get into higher-level jobs. This is something I'm more aware of now that I'm working at the Heldrich Center on a day-to-day basis and that's important for my understanding of why we are doing this research.

## About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policy-making and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is also deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, "Solutions at Work," the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches

workers' skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center's projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- > Disability Employment
- > Education and Training
- > Unemployment and Reemployment
- > U.S. Labor Market and Industry
- > Workforce Policy and Practice
- > Work Trends Surveys

Learn more: [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)

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