John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Colleen Heflin:

Locally this week we are going to have some food drives where people can donate food that will go both towards, I think, Hendrick's Chapel as well as towards the community food bank. I think these are great ways of dealing with the short term need in our community. Those emergency food assistance providers are great ways to deal with the food insecurity, even if it's occurring in a cyclical way. Providing several days worth of food can really be meaningful and help support our community.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on this week's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, I am thrilled to welcome on both Colleen Heflin, who is the associate dean, chair, and professor in the Maxwell School's Public Administration and Internal Affairs Department. And Leonard Lopoo, a professor in the Maxwell School's Public Administration and International Affairs Department, who also serves as the director of the Maxwell X Lab and as the Paul Volcker Chair and Behavioral Economics.

John Boccacino:

This week's topic is going to be focusing on food justice, food insecurity, and the amazing research being done by the Maxwell X Lab, partnering with folks like Colleen and our great campus thought leaders here at Syracuse University. They were kind enough to join us for this week's episode, which again, will talk about food justice and food insecurity in and around the Syracuse and central New York areas and so much more. Colleen and Leonard, thank you for making the time to join us today.

Colleen Heflin:

Happy to be here.

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, it's great to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

John Boccacino:

The Office of Community Engagement is hosting Food Insecurity Awareness Week, a week long program designated to raise awareness about food insecurity both on the Syracuse University campus and in the city of Syracuse. And Colleen, I want to start off with you being a real expert in this issue of food insecurity. How exactly did you get started in this line of work, and what drives your work with food insecurity?

Colleen Heflin:

So I've been interested in different measures of economic wellbeing for a long time. And for a long time, most of the work was really done on income-based measures like poverty. But in 1996, the USDA created a new measure, the food security measure, and I happened to be one of the early researchers that sort of started playing around with that measure. And I found this to be a really, really impactful measure to think about, is adding a lot to the discussion. So food security means having access to sufficient food for all people at all times for an active and healthy lifestyle. And this to me is a little bit

different than poverty. It adds a lot to the discussion. And so I've spent a lot of my career since 1996 sort of trying to unpack the causes and consequences of food security and how our bundle of federal and state and local programs support food security, but also sometimes with problems with implementation may actually create problems as well with food security.

John Boccacino:

That's interesting you talk about the designation, the differentiation between the poverty rate, which unfortunately Syracuse has one of the highest poverty rates in the country at over 30%, one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. It's a real issue, food insecurity in the central New York and the Syracuse area. How do we get to this point where you've got high poverty, you've got high food insecurity, and you've got children who are struggling to get their proper nutrition?

Colleen Heflin:

I invite Len to join me this answer as well. He knows a lot about the Syracuse area and has done a lot of work. I think this has to do with issues, again at the local, state, and federal level. This doesn't happen overnight. This has been a longstanding problem having to do partly with the economic situation. Partly I would say having to do with the educational system and retraining of workers as the jobs available is shifting. As well as I think there's some issues with healthcare and access to resources that can support healthy family structures.

Colleen Heflin:

And then I think it's often a lot about structures. I've lived in many parts of the country and Syracuse City, we have very small local designations here. And so we have the ability to have geographic areas that are doing quite well next to areas that are doing not so well. And I think if there was more shared resources, we probably wouldn't see that disparity. We would have a lot more common view of, public good view of, the resource allocation. And that's my quick analysis. Len, I love to hear your answer to that.

Len Lopoo:

I mean, that's clearly a very difficult question. I agree with Colleen. I think that she highlighted a lot of the difficulties that we have in Syracuse. We have a local economy that I think is trying to adjust to the new world. I've been very impressed with a lot of the efforts that have been made locally with a lot of the groups that we've worked with. I think the city's thinking strategically now about how do you create jobs. They're bringing interesting employers into the area. I think there's a lot of effort to do retraining, to really take advantage of some of this ideas of moving into a technology-based economy. So I think that there's a lot of effort being done right now. There are amazing people in the community that are really being creative in the way that they're thinking about tackling some of our problems. So I'm excited to see where things are going. And I really like so much that Syracuse University is trying to highlight some of the issues that we have and to focus on food and how some of our problems might be addressed.

John Boccacino:

And Len, I'm glad you mentioned the university, trying to step up and do our parts. We consider ourselves partners with the city. It's not just the university operating as a beacon on a hill. There's town gown relations that are trying to be stressed and worked on to improve the plight of our neighbors. And your Maxwell X Lab, I want to give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about. It's not just food

insecurity issues that the X Lab focuses on. It's so much broader than that. Can you give our audience a little background on the Maxwell X Lab, it's goals, and how you guys really try to put policy into practical application when it comes to issues that are affecting citizens?

Len Lopoo:

Sure. Absolutely. So the X Lab is about five and a half, getting close to six years old now. I think the idea of the X Lab originally when we started, had a few goals. The first was that we take some of the innovations that we are learning about through behavioral science, which I'll say more about in a moment. I think kind of an innovative way to combine some of the different ideas that we've learned over the last really three or four decades that's primarily in psychology and bring those into social science. And the thing that the X Lab is trying to do is take these innovations and work with partners and communities, local governments, nonprofits, state governments to try to figure out ways to use these innovations successfully.

Len Lopoo:

We'll give you an example. Colleen and I have done a couple of really, I think, cool projects that we can provide more information or example for you.

Len Lopoo:

The other big thing that the X Lab does is we do have a lot of evaluations. So part of what we think a lot about in the Maxwell School and our department in particular is how do we know whether these ideas are working? We're very data oriented. There are lots of great ideas out there, and we want to know what is successful. It's not always the case that some really good idea with the best intentions is working, or is it working the way that we thought that it would, or is it affecting a different group than we expected it to?

Len Lopoo:

And so we have such experts on campus that think about these issues that made a lot of sense to have partnerships where we work with, again, work with communities. Syracuse being probably our primary partner, quite frankly, to see what is successful, what's not successful, to use data and to, like you said, to really combine the incredible work that's being done by wonderful people and take the expertise that we have from faculty in areas like food, in areas like other urban issues, some of which we're talking about now, education, we've done work on taxes. We've done work on DEI.

Len Lopoo:

There's lots of things that we want to try to understand better. Is it working? And that's really sort of the idea that we had originally with the X lab, and the Dean, David Van Slack has been so supportive. It's really been instrumental in the success of the lab. So it's really been a big team effort.

John Boccacino:

With the partnership, with Maxwell X Lab, with Len's Department, and then with what Colleen with her work in food insecurity, real world applications. So how do the two of you work together to study and assess this issue and then try to come up with some ways to implement best practices to address the really crippling issue that's affecting our city?

Colleen Heflin:

Sure. So let me start. So I've been researching the SNAP, commonly known as the food stamp program, for some time. And one of the findings that I have helped illuminate is that there's a problem called administrative churn where individuals at the point where they need to go through the re-certification process to stay on the program often fall off for a variety of reasons. Because they don't understand what they're supposed to do, they don't get the message, there's lots of reasons. But this means people actually become food insecure for a short period until they can get back on the program. And so I knew this was a problem, and I know the SNAP program very well and all the different parts of the re-certification process. But what I was not as an expert in behavioral science. So I came to Len in the X Lab and I said, "How could we redesign this process better?" If we can explain to you what the process is, can you help us figure out what's the best place to start to change the process where we could actually make it so people can get through this re-certification process and have more stability in their access to food resources? So Len, do you want to take over from there?

Len Lopoo:

Sure. So yeah, we had an interested partner in Minnesota actually. And Colleen had worked with them. She actually had a colleague at the University of Minnesota who had a great relationship with folks in Hennepin County, Minnesota. And so we started to think about how might we communicate more effectively with the people on the SNAP program. How do we reduce the burdens on them as they're trying to go through the process of re-certifying and making sure that they stay on the program? And so actually Colleen and my co-founder, Joe Berkofsky, went to Minnesota and spent several days there and learned a lot about the specifics of the program in Minnesota. And I think what we learned was there are a lot of rules that the folks on SNAP have to follow, and they sort of lose track of deadlines and which forms need to be filled out when.

Len Lopoo:

And the first thing that we try, which ended up being quite successful, was just to communicate with them differently. Rather than sending a lot of messages through the mail, which was I think their primary mode and that they called them with the robo calls, which I think we all are familiar with now, they were not responding. They were not getting the information. They were not quite understanding what was going on. So we just developed a texting program, something that simple. Something really inexpensive. And instead of using these phone calls or these auto dialers, the text messaging became much more effective. We were able to reach them, we were able to improve re-certification for the SNAP program depending on the group, five to 10% really at almost no cost. So it was really an effective way of overcoming a barrier and learning more about why this system wasn't working very well.

Colleen Heflin:

And he's underselling this a little bit. So the innovation here wasn't just texting instead of calling. He would use specific behavioral science insights about what words to use. And we actually used randomized controlled trials with different messages to try to figure out what were the right sort of messaging strategies that worked best for this population. And so whether it was about loss aversion or was it more about appealing to people's sense of rights and responsibilities or this sense of this is how most people do this, so sort of get with the program. And so this insight was not just about texting, but the exact message and the exact wording. And we used this RCT approach so we could figure out which was most effective. So we left Hennepin County with the clear sense of not only the problem, but how

to fix this. And we left them stronger than we found them. It was just really exciting collaboration. I'm so thankful for the opportunity.

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, Colleen, thank you. That was really helpful. I mean, Colleen's absolutely right. It's really strange, but it turns out the way that you frame the information makes all the difference in the world. So saying the same thing in two different ways can be an effective way, and can be completely ineffective. And it's very important that you kind of think through that. You test what actually works. There are principles at play here, but Colleen's absolutely right, you want to test. It may be the case that something works really well in Syracuse, New York, and it doesn't work quite as well in Hennepin County, Minnesota. And so not just trying to make everything fit in every place, but to actually test it. And I think that that's really something that's important for the X Lab, that we don't just say, "Oh, this is going to work." That we test it and we measure it, and we do this in a pretty sophisticated way, so that it's very convincing. It's convincing that people we work with. It could be convincing to funders, people who want to try new programs. They want certain level of evidence, and it's important that we reach that threshold.

Len Lopoo:

So absolutely, that's what I mean. Colleen is really such an X Lab team person that she's thinking about a lot of these things together with us and just makes for a better product. And I think that's a lot of fun about the lab too, that you have such incredible scholars in so many fields here that we can join together and create teams that just generate so much more because of our collective efforts.

John Boccacino:

It's fascinating when you're talking about, you have this best of intention for people who are trying to get access to the benefits. And if they don't understand what they're being told about it, they don't understand the impact. That's one way that the program can go off the rails. And you mentioned randomized control trials or RCTs. We talked about that a little bit with the approach in Minnesota, but there's also the behavioral science aspect for it too, where again, best of intentions don't always come through because of factors that are out of our control. Can you expand upon that a little bit, Len, in your research and maybe how the X Lab tries to account for that random chance of human beings, and our behaviors being unpredictable, and how you kind of contend with that?

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, absolutely. So I think the way that you described it is exactly right, that I think when we design policy, what we usually do is think this is our goal. This is where like to get. We'd like for people to be able to enroll, for example, in this particular program. And the best way to do it is to do this particular series of steps, but we're not always thinking that way. People are complicated. And so there are certain principles that we have found to be incredibly successful. Colleen mentioned a few of them a moment ago, loss aversion, which means basically that we often want to describe something as a benefit or a right or something that they have, and if they don't continue to apply or sign this particular form to verify that they will lose something that is theirs, that's much more effective than saying, you can get this benefit if you apply.

Len Lopoo:

We've learned things like default settings are massively important. So, if there is an understanding that you are automatically enrolled in this particular benefit. We're doing some work in a slightly different

area on recruitment for education. So if the understanding is that this is yours, this is your benefit, and we're going to start with that assumption that people sort of take that mindset that this is something that is theirs, and they'll start from that premise rather than trying to get them to enroll, which requires some effort on their part. It's really just a way of describing things. It's framing. It's really in some ways so simple, but we'd rarely do it in public policy and public administration. We try to enroll people. We try to get them to participate, and we don't realize that we're actually sometimes making it harder for them.

Len Lopoo:

So if we start from a position of, "No, this is yours." We're going to enroll you in health insurance. It's yours. You've already qualified for it. There's been lots of evidence that that's completely successful. We're going to help you fill out this FAFSA form for those who are interested in going to college. This is yours. It's your benefit. We're going to help you. We're there to do it. Then people will take it up. They'll say, "Of course, please help me." But if we say, "Hey, this is a benefit that you can sign up for and apply for." People tend not to do it. It's really just a matter of kind of reframing a benefit for them that can make all the difference in the world.

Colleen Heflin:

Can I just bring this back to food security, too? Because there's another project we're working on together that has to do with information that military servicemen are provided at the point of separation when they become civilians. And military food insecurity has been a real interest of mine for many years. And the point of separation is a time often of where a lot of military are having to cover their own housing for the first time. There may be challenges trying to find a job. And so there's often this increase in food insecurity during this early period.

Colleen Heflin:

And so I was interested in seeing what the military provided at the point of separation, and the information was challenging. It just wasn't very clear. And so I asked the Veterans Administration, could we see if we could try to make this a little better? And again, I went back to Len, and we have been working to come up with some ways of simplifying the information and trying to make it so that individuals that read this flyer understand the information that is being presented.

Colleen Heflin:

And so we have some really encouraging results, and I'm going to present to the food and security working group at the Veterans Administration later this month. And again, like IVFF has been a great partner in providing some support for this given their interest in food and security and military transitions. And I think this is just one of those great examples of Syracuse University and partners working together to really use our expertise across multiple domains to really try to address real problems, and in this case it's military food insecurity.

John Boccacino:

Colleen, what are some of the ways that the research that Len and his partners and the X Lab came up with from Hennepin County, how are we going to apply that to Syracuse to help address food insecurity?

Colleen Heflin:

Locally, I think to address food insecurity, I think we should really be thinking about strengthening our systems generally. I think locally this week we are going to have some food drives where people can donate food. That will go both towards, I think Hendricks Chapel as well as towards the community food bank. I think these are great ways of dealing with the short-term need in our community. Those emergency food assistance providers are great ways to deal with food insecurity, even if it's occurring in a cyclical way, providing several days worth of food can really be meaningful and help support our community.

John Boccacino:

And when it comes to the activities that are planned here on the university campus for Food Insecurity Awareness Week, what are some of the biggest ways you feel that our staff, our students, and our faculty and alumni can get involved and try to combat this food insecurity problem?

Colleen Heflin:

Well, I invite them to be involved in the food drives that are going to be occurring across campus. There's also going to be some opportunities to donate to Hendricks Chapel and support our local campus food bank as well as many of the other food bank and food kitchens around Syracuse University.[

John Boccacino:

When it comes to the X Lab, Len, I want you to tell our audience a little bit more about you and your background. How did you become so interested in this line of work? Because it seems like it's so fascinating taking something where there's a real world problem and how we tackle it and address it. You're a problem solver. You and the X Lab folks are working on ways to tackle these problems. How did you get involved in that line of work?

Len Lopoo:

Well, my background is very similar to Colleen's. I have from graduate school many, many years ago, had a strong interest in the low-income population, poverty programs. And so a lot of my research over time has been looking into social programs and the effects that they have on families. Part of what I have noticed over time is, Colleen mentioned this several times, data are hard to come by, and we often don't measure the things that we really would like to know. We often don't have it at the level of detail that we really want to have it at.

Len Lopoo:

The lab honestly came about, I think through a variety of ways, one of which was my real interest in starting to do social science research where we collect our own data and where we were running interventions that we could actually measure things, where we didn't have to use evidence from a variety of sources and kind of tell a story that was consistent with what the data seemed to say, but that we could actually measure very specifically what we were trying to do. So I think that was a large part of it. That is this evaluation part of what the lab does and why the behavioral part is so important.

Len Lopoo:

The behavioral side of this came from a few sources. One is it was innovative that there were real successes that were being shown in the public sector in this area. There was a book called Nudge that

was written in 2008 that I think was incredibly influential. In fact, the Nobel Prize was awarded largely based on the ideas in that book that basically said, "Let's take data. Let's try to use these innovative ways to understand the way people behave, and let's make impacts on the public sector." And a lot of that kind of came together along with a colleague that I mentioned earlier, Joe Berkofsky, or at least I alluded to when we co-founded the lab. And he'd done a lot of work in this area. It was a way, I think, to evaluate, to bring behavioral science where it was showing a lot of success. Joe had done some work in the area and I was very intrigued by the idea of putting together a team at the Maxwell School where we could work, as you said, to come off the hill and actually see if we can make some change.

John Boccacino:

How does the X Lab take that data and churn out a measure of success? How do you evaluate whether a program, whether a study, whether a project really achieve the goals and met its mark?

Len Lopoo:

Yeah, so that's, again, so much what I like about the work that we're doing, Colleen mentioned the RCT. When a new drug comes out, let's say a vaccine for a pandemic, we won't start providing that vaccine to individuals without it go through an actual trial where we can figure out is it working or isn't it? And we don't do that in the social sciences. At least we don't often do it in the social sciences. So that again, is what was so appealing to me. This was a way for us to become very scientific in our approach to seeing what works in the public sector. We can provide this information to the folks at Hennepin County, or when we're working with the VA. We can do this the exact same way a physician would, a drug company would, to see if the... Tony Fauci would to see if this is actually going to be a successful intervention.

Len Lopoo:

So we're doing the exact same thing. So, that's what I mean by the data. Sometimes we collect the data ourselves. Sometimes when we work with a partner and we say, "Okay, we're going to, again, working on the SNAP program that Colleen and I have mentioned a few times now, you're going to get registration from certain individuals and some of them are not." Well, we're going to use your administrative data to see which of the people responded to our intervention and which did not. So we actually have real data that we can use. So that's what I mean by the data, and that's what I mean by being scientific. And I think that's just really where the level of science needs to be when you are trying to help and affect so many people.

John Boccacino:

Well, and speaking of behavioral sciences and knowing that people have both short attention spans and a lot of priorities that they're trying to deal with, how do we then, Colleen, take all this attention for Food Insecurity Awareness week and make it so it's not just lost once the week ends? We're able to build upon this and get some momentum to really continue to further affect change?

Colleen Heflin:

I think food insecurity requires many levels of activism, but at the community level, particularly where we're talking about childhood food insecurity, I think we can meet this need at the community level through the short-term emergency food assistance. We can all dig in and help our community in the short term.

Colleen Heflin:

To be more systematic though it really requires change at the state and federal level and thinking hard about how are we supporting families, the child tax credit, retraining programs, improving the quality of education, school meals. I think there's a whole system here that we really need to fine tune and make sure that what we're doing doesn't just feel good and sound good, but is actually effective. And so I think we need to take this sort of micro approach that the X Lab is using and apply this at each level of policy. But in the short term, I think just give people food. We know it works in the short term. Ultimately, this shouldn't be what's required. We should figure this out systematically. And so I think we should continue to support broader change, but we should make sure that change is actually going to be effective, it doesn't just sound right.

John Boccacino:

It gives me great confidence, and it should the campus community too, knowing that we've got such talented and passionate leaders like Colleen Heflin and Len Lopoo coming in here and really trying to attack these problems and working on partnerships to make sure that we can address these issues. I want to thank you both for making the time to join us on the podcast. Len, keep up the great work with the X Lab, and thank you for your expertise today.

Len Lopoo:

Our pleasure.

Colleen Heflin:

Thanks, Len.

Len Lopoo:

Thank you.

Colleen Heflin:

Thank you. Thank you, John.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.