The Child Opportunity Index
Mapping and addressing inequities in neighborhood resources for healthy development
FROM THE EDITOR

In early May, the World Health Organization declared Liberia Ebola-free. That was welcome news for a country that reported more than 300 new Ebola cases every week during the epidemic’s peak. In this issue of Heller Magazine, PhD candidate Elizabeth Glaser offers a first-person account of her experience conducting Ebola response work in Liberia. (This photo by Glaser’s teammate Farrah Kashfi, a global health sciences fellow at UCSF, shows staff waiting to take off their personal protective equipment. You’ll see more of Glaser’s Liberia photos throughout the magazine.)

You’ll also notice that several of this issue’s articles direct you to the Heller website for companion content. For a great example, check out the “Advancing Youth Opportunity” collection at http://bit.ly/youthopportunity. I encourage you to visit heller.brandeis.edu, follow Heller on Twitter or like us on Facebook to see fresh, engaging content like this throughout the year.

The Heller communications team also wants to hear your story. Let us know how, like Elizabeth, you’re having an impact on the ground. You can contact me at maxp@brandeis.edu. Thanks for reaching out, and for reading this issue of Heller Magazine.

Best,
Max Pearlstein ’01
Editor
While Heller celebrated its 55th anniversary last fall, the 2014-15 academic year also marked significant milestones for two of the school’s academic programs and one of its centers. Heller Magazine invited the directors of the MS in International Health Policy and Management and the MA in Coexistence and Conflict programs, which are both a decade old, and the Center for Youth and Communities, which is 30 years young, to reflect on their respective histories and offer their vision for the future.

We should also note that the MA in Sustainable International Development program is celebrating its 20th anniversary, which we highlighted in the last issue of the magazine by interviewing the program’s founding director, Laurence Simon, and its current director, Joan Dassin. If you missed it, you can read the article at http://bit.ly/SIDat20.
AFTER THREE DECADES, ENOUGH IS KNOWN FOR ACTION. THE CENTER FOR YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES HAS LONG BEEN FUELING IT.

BY SUSAN CURNAN
Professor and Executive Director
of the Center for Youth and Communities

REFLECTIONS ON 30 YEARS
It has been a great privilege and adventure to steward the Center for Youth and Communities over three decades and to chair an outstanding senior leadership team that bring their hearts, minds and entrepreneurial spirit to our mission-driven work. As Eleanor Roosevelt, one of Brandeis' founding trustees, said, "The work is made easier when your heart is involved." So it is with the center, where we have built a "high performance, high support" culture.

During the center's lifetime, we have both influenced, and been influenced by, the policies of six White House administrations. We have witnessed unprecedented demographic shifts in the U.S. population and labor market demands and opportunities, as well as the continued failure of our public education and workforce systems to keep up with these changes and adequately prepare our young people for college, work and life as engaged citizens.

As a university-based, community-engaged enterprise, the center and our network of partners have tackled and made progress on many of the most critical workforce and education issues facing the nation.

On the youth employment front, our evaluation research and capacity-building efforts have informed both policy and program design, with a focus on "results-oriented partnerships" to employ, educate and support young people. Our November 2014 briefing in Washington, D.C., titled "Enough Is Known for Action," brought lessons from our research and experience to the Inter-Agency Work Group, which includes the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services, as well as philanthropy, business representatives and practitioners. According to the Department of Labor, the briefing set the stage for sound youth-centered investments under the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Our persistent efforts to study the education achievement gap by addressing equity in access, opportunity and outcomes for all students led to expansion of new pathways and frameworks for postsecondary transitions. Our evaluation work with the Gates Foundation demonstrated effectiveness of a new "back on track" approach that brought community colleges and nonprofits together to help young people enroll, persist and complete college with a marketable degree.

Believing in public service and civic engagement led us to a long-standing partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service, which was founded in 1993 under the Clinton administration. For nearly 20 years, we have managed national service-learning programs, evaluated their impact and demonstrated their effectiveness, and we now work with the corporation and grantees as an evaluation partner for the Social Innovation Fund. We are also home to the Eli J. Segal Citizen Leadership Program, named for one of the great architects of AmeriCorps.

Over the years, we have worked in all of America's states and commonwealths, developed a network of partners in more than 200 cities, and raised more than $75 million to support our mission and network. Our staff and researchers have served on many review boards and work groups with the National Academy of Sciences, and have been recognized by the White House Domestic Policy Council and others.

But what have we learned? And how will we draw on these lessons as we continue to address the unfinished agenda related to social and economic justice and the systematic change needed to achieve it?

THREE LESSONS FROM THREE DECADES: SCIENCE, PARTNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP
The social change and social justice work we are engaged in is hard, takes a long time, and is littered with more failed attempts than sustained innovations. We need to be intellectually curious, and steady, patient learners and doers, and we can never be satisfied that we have the formula or algorithm to fix the problems quickly and easily. The three lessons include:
1. SCIENCE MATTERS/KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

It is important for members of the academy to acknowledge and honor that knowledge has many sources. In our case, as a university-based “knowledge broker,” we apply both lessons from scholarly research and experience. Some call the latter the “scholarship of practice.” We capture voices from the field using “numbers plus stories” that evolve from an ongoing systematic evaluation of an issue, program or policy with our learning partners. We are committed to producing knowledge, or evaluation results, that are reliable, useful and timely so as to inform decision making, support continuous improvement, and prove not only if something works, but how and for whom. We live where the scientific method meets social justice and social policy. Practitioners test our theories, benchmarked in research, every day. As Justice Brandeis warned, “The logic of words should yield to the logic of realities.”

Having said that, we have also learned that knowledge by itself does little. In the old paradigm, one might produce a “research-based policy brief,” send it off, and hope to make a difference. Today, we know better. It is rare for policy decisions to be purely rational or scientific — they are always political and usually relational. As Oscar Wilde once observed, in politics, “the truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

2. RESULTS-ORIENTED PARTNERHIPS ARE IMPERATIVE

While we’ve seen a knowledge explosion over the past three decades that has satisfied the questions of what works and for whom (at least for now), we have also learned that everyone doesn’t have access to this knowledge, and that no one entity can “go it alone.” Collective action that prioritizes outcomes and impact for young people is imperative. We are constantly expanding our toolkit to help cross-sector stakeholder groups define their theory of change, measure impact and create a learning culture for continuous improvement.

3. ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP TRUMPS ALL

Successful resolution to the crisis in youth unemployment and education requires adaptive leadership among practitioners, policymakers, philanthropy and the business sector, and the allocation of resources commensurate with the scale of the problem. Until such commitment is made, even the best evidence-based programs will simply be a stopgap. There must be social and political will and capacity to progress toward equity in access, opportunity and outcomes.

I call these times both alarming and encouraging, alarming because the problems remain great, as manifest in these statistics:


NEARLY ONE IN SEVEN 18- TO 19-YEAR-OLDS IS DISCONNECTED FROM SCHOOL AND WORK, AND 6.7 MILLION 16- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS ARE DISCONNECTED FROM BOTH EDUCATION AND WORK

30 PERCENT OF HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMEN DO NOT GRADUATE IN FOUR YEARS

FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND HISPANIC STUDENTS, ON-TIME GRADUATION IS MORE PRECARIOUS; IT’S A 50:50 PROPOSITION

JUST ONE IN FOUR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ATTENDS COLLEGE, AND ONLY ABOUT HALF OF THOSE WHO START WILL FINISH

THE ODDS OF STAYING IN SCHOOL AND LATER GETTING A GOOD JOB IMPROVE GREATLY IF THE INDIVIDUAL HAS A JOB WHILE STILL A STUDENT

TEEN EMPLOYMENT RATES HAVE PLUMMETED TO THE LOWEST LEVEL IN 60 YEARS (33 PERCENT)

Despite those troubling figures, the times are also encouraging, providing what I call a “perfect storm of opportunity,” because young people are resilient change agents, enough is known for action, and cross-sector leadership is proving it’s possible to make a difference.