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# Chang Hopes Research Can Help Refugees Assimilate

Nov. 3, 2017

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Inspired by her firsthand experience with refugees while studying abroad in Germany last year, Illinois Wesleyan senior Hsin-Jou (Lily) Chang '18 (Tainan, Taiwan) is delving deeper into research that she hopes can assist in solving the economic assimilation puzzle.

"Based on my research, it seems like although all refugees start out worse economically, for some groups, they can excel pretty quickly," Chang said. "I'm concerned about those groups that are severely disadvantaged."

Recipient of the 2018 Mark A. Israel '91 Endowed Summer Research Fund in Economics, Chang earned a \$4,000 stipend to research how refugees who have resettled in the U.S. perform economically.

According to Chang's study, recent refugee arrivals from Iraq and Somalia are not assimilating within the U.S. labor market compared to earlier-arriving refugee groups from other countries. She presented these findings to Israel and a classroom of Illinois Wesleyan economics students on Oct. 25.

Chang hypothesized that refugees – fleeing for safety – would perform worse in the U.S. labor market upon arrival compared to natives and those immigrating for purely economic reasons, but that over time, refugees would develop U.S.-specific labor skills, experience decreased discrimination – and ultimately – assimilate economically. Chang studied data from eight refugee groups dating back to 1980.

Her hypothesis was proven true related to Afghan, Cambodian, Laotian, Romanian, Russian and Vietnamese refugees. But, according to Chang, Iraqi and Somali refugees show little to no economic assimilation.

"I thought the findings about what's happened to recent immigrants from Iraq and Somalia and their inability to assimilate and close the gap is disturbing," Israel said following Chang's presentation. "I was struck by how different it was from previous immigrant groups. So, it seems like something to explore more."

Chang's project is built upon a paper she wrote in a "Labor Economics" course, where she focused on labor market assimilation comparisons between Vietnamese refugees and other immigrant groups in the U.S. Her results showed that Vietnamese refugees received lower wages in the first decade upon arrival in the U.S., but over time, their earnings exceeded those of economic immigrants, as shown by data from 2010 to 2014.



Hsin-Jou (Lily) Chang '18 discusses her research regarding how refugees who have resettled in the U.S. perform economically with Mark Israel '91.



After learning that she had received the endowed summer research fund to expand her paper, Chang collected literature and data, examined the relationships among variables, and analyzed the results. She received mentorship throughout the process from Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics Michael Seeborg before presenting her findings to Israel.



Hsin-Jou (Lily) Chang '18 presents her research regarding how refugees who have resettled in the U.S. perform economically to Mark Israel '91 and a classroom full of economics students.

"It was definitely quite nerve-racking at first, but I was really glad to actually meet Mark in person and hear the feedback from him directly," Chang said following her presentation. "I really appreciate that, because of Mark, I along with other econ students are able to enjoy this kind of opportunity to focus on something we really are interested in."

Based in Washington, D.C., Israel works as a Senior Managing Director at Compass Lexecon. He previously served as an Associate Professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Israel received his Ph.D. in Economics from Stanford University in 2001 after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan in 1991.

"I think doing this kind of research is something that a place like Illinois Wesleyan can offer that bigger places can't offer – that one-on-one collaboration with faculty members," Israel said. "Michael Seeborg and I did lots of it, and it continued after I graduated. It was a big emphasis to what I ended up doing. So, I wanted to help more students have that same opportunity."

This spring, Chang plans to focus her senior honors paper specifically on why Iraqi and Somali refugee groups are not assimilating within the U.S. labor market.ref

"What can we do to help refugees assimilate into their host country's labor market faster?" Chang wants to determine. "How can we make their transition easier?"