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Supporting Social Justice with Spatial Data Analysis

Sociologist Jennifer Candipan PhD considers 2022 to be an especially exciting time for researchers committed to helping solve systemic inequities. Given the ubiquity of smartphones and other digital devices in our lives, she’s able to make use of location data and sophisticated computing capabilities for analysis more readily than ever before. “We can now answer questions about segregation and mobility in a systematic way and offer new metrics that can be used in future research,” explains this new faculty member in Sociology.

After completing a post-doctoral research fellowship at Harvard, Candipan joined our faculty as an assistant professor in January 2021. She has brought to Brown new research and teaching expertise focused on issues of stratification, race/ethnicity, the dynamics of neighborhoods and schools, and inequality in education, among other areas of interest.

Candipan earned her PhD in 2019 from the University of Southern California (USC), where she also graduated with a BA in Literature and History. Growing up in southern California, it was in Los Angeles that she first began to notice the impact of systemic inequities on housing and educational opportunities.

“Everyone talks about Los Angeles as being this diverse metropolitan region,” Candipan noted while still a grad student at USC. “But seeing all the segregation in various contexts, the segregation at the neighborhood level and the school level and all sorts of institutional settings… really awakened me to these larger processes that were probably happening at a national level.”

For almost a decade, Candipan has been delving increasingly deeper into the relationship between neighborhoods and schools in terms of racial, ethnic and socioeconomic composition, effects on student outcomes, and inequality exacerbated by urban and educational policy decisions. This research culminated in a dissertation titled Spatial Dimensions of Stratification: Neighborhood Change, Urban Inequality, and the Neighborhood-School Link in the US.

“More generally I’m interested in understanding connections between people and places,” Candipan explains. During the pandemic she has continued her intense focus on researching place-based disparities—including in healthcare, with articles pending on spatial variation in the epidemic doubling time and all sorts of institutional settings. A recent paper was published in the American Journal of Sociology.

After noticing systemic inequities in Los Angeles, Candipan began researching the relationship between neighborhoods and schools, including inequality exacerbated by urban and educational policy decisions.

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### Trajectory of Growth & Change

**RESEARCH AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES** in the field of data analytics have never been stronger. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the data science field will grow by about 28% through 2026. Forbes recently highlighted an explosion of interest in the field of analytics, and Investopedia (an online financial data source) reports that “skilled data analysts are some of the most sought-after professionals in the world.”

In anticipation of this burgeoning need we founded our program at Brown in 2015. The Master’s in Social Analysis and Research (MSAR) offers high-level, cutting-edge training in data analysis for research in industry, the public sector, and academics. Our emphasis on methods for data collection, presentation, statistical analysis, and interpretation makes for a unique approach to the field.

Since its inception, our program has offered master’s students direct access to world-class, research-active faculty in the Department of Sociology. These mentors teach a diverse mix of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods courses with an emphasis on real-world applications. In addition, MSAR students have access to a broad range of advanced methods courses offered in other departments.

As we began our sixth year last fall, we were pleased with the steady rise in the number of applicants and the quality of students admitted. Program enrollment is highly selective and intentionally small to ensure the highest level of instructional quality and student excellence. Our current cohort of 11 is diverse in origin, disciplinary backgrounds, and career interests. We are happy to announce that beginning in July 2023 the MSAR program will be renamed the Master’s in Social Data Analytics (MSDA). The name change better reflects the direct connection between our curriculum and the rapidly evolving field of data analytics, as you will discover in the following pages. We designed this new newsletter to highlight faculty research and how graduates of the program are putting their data analysis expertise to good use.

### Methodology

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In teaching at Brown since 2015, Jayanti Owens PhD has seen just how hungry students are to learn research methods for reasons far beyond “just the methods themselves.” And yet it’s the methods that is allowing social researchers like her to dig into deeply entrenched problems and produce data that drives policy changes.

After earning a PhD in Sociology and Demography from Princeton in 2013, Owens landed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. That subsequently led her to Brown, where students are drawn to her approach in courses like Sociology of Discrimination and Experiments on Race, Class and Gender. “My research interests lie at the intersections of race and social stratification, education, social psychology, social demography, and population health,” Owens says. “I study how the social contexts of schools, families, and workplaces as well as the race and gender of individuals and their evaluators shape evaluations and, ultimately, lead to racial/ethnic and gender disparities in educational and economic outcomes.”

At Brown she has found “a place where interdisciplinary research gets put at the forefront in a lot of ways,” Owens noted shortly after arriving on campus. “Students are encouraged to think big rather than getting siloed into a specific discipline. It’s about drawing on the strengths of all of these different areas of inquiry. I love that.”

Well worth listening to on YouTube: the Watson Institute’s recent video interview with Owens as part of its Faculty Research Series on Race, Education, and the Criminal Justice System.

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Consider, for instance, the recent video experiment Owens designed and is conducting online with roughly 1,100 school teachers. The idea is to ask teachers to view a series of video clips of hypothetical students of various races engaging in identical instances of misbehavior or breaking school rules. The teachers are then asked to briefly respond to the behaviors they have observed in the videos.

This research is supported by a five-year William T. Grant Foundation Scholar Award that Owens won in 2020 for her work to reduce racial inequality in school discipline and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. At Brown she holds the title of Mary Tefft and John Hazen White, Sr. Assistant Professor of Sociology and International and Public Affairs, an honor that builds on the many opportunities that have opened since her undergraduate years at Swarthmore, where she first resolved to help rectify the wrongs of inequality in American society.

While so much of our everyday communication now captured in the form of electronic text, social scientists have access to enormous amounts of rich material to help answer important questions about today’s world—everything from the types of posts that get censored in China to whether social media drives or merely reflects public opinion. In order to make use of this huge and ever-growing repository of information, students need to learn the fundamentals of computational methods for social science research, along with cutting-edge techniques for analyzing large-scale textual data. That includes learning and practicing basic programming skills in Python; how to collect large quantities of textual and other data through web-scaping and APIs; and specific techniques of automated text analysis using appropriate methods for inductive or deductive inquiry.

The Computational Methods, taught by Assistant Professor Rachel Wetts, is informed by a range of readings, many centered on her own areas of expertise: the politics of white racial resentment and stalled political action to address climate change. “The ultimate goal is to encourage students to think about novel ways to apply these techniques to their own research questions,” Wetts explains. “Ideally, by the end of the semester they’ve discovered preliminary findings for a research paper that could be expanded and polished into a publishable article.”

Faculty & Methodology | Fresh Approaches to a Changing World

5.

SELECTED METHODS COURSES ON THE HORIZON FOR 2022–23

- Applications in Geographic Information Systems
- Causal Methods
- Comparative Historical Analysis
- Context Research for Innovation
- Demography
- Focus Groups for Market and Social Research
- Market and Social Surveys
- Market Research in the Private and Public Sector
- Multivariate Statistical Methods I + II
- Principles and Methods of Geographic Information Systems
- Qualitative Methods
- Spatial Thinking in Social Science
- Statistical Methods for Hierarchical and Panel Data
- Techniques of Demographic Analysis
I was really able to start my research and data career with this program.

— Fehintola Abioye ScM '21

I see to have a lot of interests,” says Rebekah Fehintola Abioye ScM ’21 with a laugh. As an undergrad, she admits she was torn between disparate majors but finally narrowed it down to two, earning a BA from Tufts in International Relations and Anthropology.

But that’s partly where Abioye’s decision to study at Brown during the 2020–21 academic year fits in. Few people might opt to go to grad school during the height of a global pandemic, but for her the time was right, regardless of the vicissitudes of a public health crisis triggered by an unpredictable new virus.

Abioye had explored life in Costa Rica for a year right after graduating from Tufts and was just about to complete a two-year fellowship working as a program coordinator at the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC). As she was trying to figure out next steps, she realized that MACDC’s advocacy work and policy positions were largely driven by research and analysis provided by—well, she wasn’t quite sure where she ultimately wants to focus her intellectual energy.

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“Rebekah has such a wonderful breadth of experience and interest,” says Michael White, Director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC), which Abioye joined two years ago. “She’s someone who understands that good research is key to the success of any project, whether it’s a policy initiative, a community development program, or a business venture.”

Abioye’s research interests are diverse, ranging from international development and aid to social justice and environmental sustainability. Her experience in these fields has given her a unique perspective on how to approach complex problems and develop effective solutions.

“I have a sense of how the worlds of data and policy intersect,” says Abioye. “I see how data can be used to inform policy decisions and how policy decisions can impact data collection and analysis.”

Abioye’s work at MACDC has allowed her to apply her research skills to real-world challenges. She has been involved in projects that aim to reduce inequality and improve the well-being of underserved communities.

“I have learned so much,” says Abioye. “I have developed skills in data analysis, policy research, and community engagement. I have also built a network of contacts and mentors who have supported my career development.”

Abioye’s experience at MACDC has prepared her well for her graduate studies at Brown. She has had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of people and to lead projects that have a real impact on the communities they serve.

“Rebekah is a fantastic addition to our program,” says Scott Schubert ScM ’16, who is working as a data analyst at Enveritas, a nonprofit dedicated to helping coffee growers around the world make a living above the poverty level.

“In Schubert’s previous position, he worked as a data analyst for Enveritas, a nonprofit dedicated to helping coffee growers around the world make a living above the poverty level. His work involved developing and implementing data-driven strategies that improve the lives of coffee farmers. Schubert’s experience at Enveritas has given him a deep understanding of the challenges faced by coffee farmers and the importance of data-driven solutions for addressing these challenges.

“I learned so much,” says Schubert. “I have developed skills in data analysis, policy research, and community engagement. I have also built a network of contacts and mentors who have supported my career development.”

Abioye is equally brilliant about the program, saying, “I’ll never forget it because I learned so much.” Even though she admits that attending most classes virtually led to Zoom fatigue and “made for a very hard year personally,” she enjoyed living in Providence and felt “very cared for and listened to” thanks to supportive professors and peers.

Companies hiring for these roles want people who are able to think critically and work with data so that it can really drive business decisions. — Scott Schubert ScM ’16

The recent grad also cites her internship experience as a high point of her year. With help from Senior Lecturer and MSAR Associate Director Carrie Searpin PhD ’07, she connected with The Leadership Alliance, a consortium of 30 institutions committed to developing underrepresented leaders and role models in academia, business, and the public sector. “It was a great internship,” Abioye says. “I was very different from the higher-level quantitative and qualitative analysis I was learning in my classes” since it was very immediate, practical and hands-on.

In other words, the internship was about “having all this data that we were trying to organize in a helpful way so that it can be utilized by the people who need it.”

All in all, both alumni agree that the MSAR program provides students with well-rounded research toolboxes useful in a variety of different sectors—from Scott’s previous position as a data analyst at Enveritas, an NGO working to alleviate poverty for coffee farmers around the world, to Abioye’s current position as a data project manager at Housing Navigator Massachusetts.

“A lot of people think of analytics and data science as a very technical field,” Schubert says. “But companies hiring for these roles want people who are able to think critically and work with data so that it can really drive business decisions. Thanks to this program those are the skills that have allowed me to be successful so far and will help me in the future.”

“This is a really good program for someone like me,” Abioye adds. “—someone not 100% sure where they want to go but interested in something related to research. I was really able to start my research and data career with this program. It helped me figure myself out a bit more, and I’ll remember it as a tough but a good time.”

Differing Paths, Shared Sentiments

“..."I care about representation because with more...”

“...would be useful for many things.”

“...people who are able to think...”

“...people who need it.”

“...people who..."
WHY CHOOSE THE SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH PROGRAM AT BROWN?

Among the advantages of our one-year master’s program:

- We offer more than 25 quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods courses.
- Courses are taught by world-renowned, research-active faculty.
- Our one-year ScM is STEM designated.
- Our small program size guarantees a high level of faculty/student interaction and advising.
- We emphasize data collection, analysis and interpretation.
- Students are encouraged to participate in faculty research projects and professional internships.

brown.edu/sociology