UConn Anthropologist Sarah Willen Awarded Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Grant to Investigate Americans’ Perspectives on Health Equity

September 12, 2017

Sarah S. Willen, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Connecticut, has been awarded a $699,960 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to study how Americans of diverse socioeconomic, professional, and racial/ethnic backgrounds think about equity and deservingness in the health domain.

Willen, together with co-investigators Colleen Walsh, an assistant professor of health sciences at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio, and Abigail Fisher Williamson, an assistant professor of political science and public policy & law at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, received the grant to support a two-phase study they will launch this October.

The researchers plan to investigate how Americans think about a question that plays a “pivotal but largely implicit role in American public discourse about society’s obligations to its members” – the question of “who deserves what in the health domain, and why.”

“Often we hear health researchers and folks in public health say things like, ‘everyone deserves to live the healthiest possible life,’” Willen said. “That’s a bold statement, and we don’t know whether it’s supported by all Americans. In fact, it’s possible some see things quite differently. Our goal is to develop a better understanding of how people’s moral values and personal experiences influence their views, and their actions.”

In the first study phase, the research team will engage residents of Ohio’s Greater Cleveland area using interviews and ethnographic methods. In the second phase, they will test their qualitative findings in a national survey.

The study will also draw on the expertise of researchers at Brown University, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, Cleveland State University, Syracuse University, the University of South Florida, and the Sisters of Charity Foundation. A key partner in the study’s first phase is HIP-Cuyahoga (Health Improvement Partnership-Cuyahoga), a county-wide initiative in Greater Cleveland.

The project will run from October 2017 until October 2019.

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

For more than 40 years the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve the health and health care of all Americans. We are striving to build a national Culture of Health that will enable all Americans to live longer, healthier lives now and for generations to come. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.