PhD Student Promotes Inclusive Excellence through Research in Clinical Psychology
by Stacey Stevens

Skyler Leonard, a second-year PhD student in child clinical psychology, is an example of how students incorporate Inclusive Excellence (IE) into their academic pursuits. IE is the recognition that a community or institution's success is dependent on how well it values, engages and includes the rich diversity of students, staff, faculty, administrators and alumni constituents.

Leonard studies how students’ mental health impacts their academic achievement. While IE and mental health concepts may appear unrelated, Leonard shows how this is not the case.

“I’m interested in developing and testing interventions that improve the academic functioning and mental health of students,” said Leonard. “Specifically students from traditionally marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, gender and sexual minorities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students with histories of trauma exposure.” In this way, Leonard’s work recognizes the rich diversity of these students and attempts to finds ways these students can be academically successful.

“All of my research questions, clinical work, and career goals are motivated by issues of social justice, community service, and IE,” said Leonard.

Leonard received a BA in psychology from the University of Washington and joined Teach for America as a corps member. In this capacity, Leonard taught in a low-income school for two years in Phoenix, Arizona. It was here that Leonard received his Masters of Education from Arizona State University. Leonard then taught elementary school and middle school math near Seattle, Washington for another two years.

“I always knew I wanted to pursue graduate level research,” Leonard said. “I knew I wanted a career doing research focused on children and traditionally disadvantaged populations.” It took his experiences in the classroom to hone his research interests. It was these experiences that helped him develop questions that would be the motivation for pursuing a PhD in clinical psychology.

“What really sets Skyler apart,” said Omar Gudiño, assistant professor in psychology, “is his experience with Teach for America and his ability to use this experience to inform his development as a child clinical psychologist. Skyler is truly passionate about using his skills as a researcher, teacher, and clinician to address the needs of underserved communities. In addition, Skyler is driven to take action and to engage with underserved communities to ensure that his scholarship is informed by the community and is of benefit to the community.”

Leonard chose to pursue his PhD at DU for the opportunity to work with Gudiño in The Services for At-Risk Youth and Families (SAYF) Research Lab. “I was inspired by the work of Dr. Gudiño in assessing mental health service disparities among racial and ethnic minorities,” he said. “I was inspired by how the
SAYF lab partnered with community agencies to meet the mental health needs of marginalized groups and test the efficacy of treatments for children and adolescents exposed to trauma."

Leonard also chose DU for its focus on clinical work with children and families, a small size and collaborative department atmosphere, and the international reputation and acclaim of the department and faculty.

“I knew this was a place where I would be challenged and receive excellent training in research and clinical work,” Leonard said.

Since his arrival, Leonard has been very active in research.

“Dr. Gudiño and I recently submitted a paper for publication on a study examining the efficacy of a treatment for girls exposed to trauma,” said Leonard. “I am currently completing the data analysis on a study for my thesis examining the impact of school related factors on academic achievement and mental health among children and adolescents in the child welfare system. My colleague, Lane Nesbitt, and I recently submitted a grant proposal to conduct a study examining the adoption process experiences of same-sex couples.”

Leonard stays involved on campus by acting as a member of the Multicultural Interest Group, where he organizes volunteer opportunities for the psychology graduate students, staff and faculty. One such opportunity Leonard was involved with was the provision of free mental health screenings to children and families at a Latino/a health fair.

“I believe that involvement with the DU community, and greater Denver community, is crucial for students to develop an understanding of how their studies and research connect to the real world,” said Leonard, who plans to pursue a tenure-track position at a university dedicated to inclusive excellence and community engagement following graduate school.