

## **Najmah Thomas, PhD – Research Statement**

My research agenda is shaped by in-depth exposure to the realities of policy development and implementation, which I gained as a public administrator at various levels in the government and nonprofit sectors. I am committed to a research approach that employs multiple methodologies, is interdisciplinary in nature, and is relevant to current policy issues. The substantive policy areas for my research agenda are leadership in public organizations, youth leadership development, nonprofit capacity building, and economic and workforce development systems.

### **Previous Research**

Titled “Making it Work: Credential and Employment Outcomes of Out-of-school Youth in Southside Virginia”, my dissertation study analyzed data collected from a cohort of at-risk youth who participated in employment and training programs operated in Virginia under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). I employed quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate how youth locate and use resources in their environment. The research framework that I utilized for this study included social capital and human capital theories. This framework combines research by Schultz (1961), Becker (1962 and 1964), Granovetter (1973), Bourdieu (1986), and Coleman (1988). Using secondary data from the Virginia Employment Commission and primary data collected through surveys and focus groups, I investigated the impact of social capital on the accumulation of human capital for a cohort of at-risk youth. My findings suggest that some forms of social capital contribute to successful transition to post-secondary education and employment success for youth who faced barriers to education and employment.

### **Current and Future Research**

#### **Economic and Workforce Development Policy**

The research I conducted during my dissertation study will serve as a starting point for future scholarship in regard to the intersection of economic development and workforce development policies. I intend to focus on three central questions in this topic area. What is the level of alignment between public economic development efforts and workforce development efforts? Does the level of public resources allocated to workforce development and economic development systems result in similar levels of return on investment? What is the role of local and regional policy leaders in alignment of economic and workforce development systems?

#### **Leadership in Public Organizations**

A primary focus of my research agenda is investigating the impact of leadership on organizational behavior and efficacy in the public sector. I am particularly interested in analyzing how public organizations are meeting the challenge of balancing continuous change, intensified requirements for accountability and return on investment, and the environment of declining public resources. Three primary questions will guide my analysis

in this area. What are the primary tools for organizational leadership in the context of change at the community level? Are nontraditional leaders and individuals from underrepresented populations included in succession planning for public organizations? How can the servant leadership model be effectively incorporated in the public sector?

### **Leadership Development for At-risk Youth Populations**

An immediate research goal is to produce manuscripts for publication based on my dissertation research. I intend to expand the study data to include program services, employment, and credential outcomes for youth across the state of Virginia. This larger dataset will allow me to further analyze what positively impacts the ability of at-risk youth to make successful transitions to the labor market. Three primary questions will guide my analysis in this area. What components of leadership development are most beneficial for improving the ability of at-risk youth to successfully transition to post-secondary education systems and the labor market? Is social capital a predictor or producer of leadership skills in at-risk youth? What is the appropriate role of public workforce programs in regard to the emerging workforce?

### **Building Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector**

My research agenda also includes nonprofit organizational management. Specific areas for investigation are governance policy, evaluation methodologies, and collaboration strategies. For this research, I will concentrate on three questions related to organizational management and leadership development within the sector. What are appropriate measurements and assessments of nonprofit organizational capacity? Should nonprofit capacity building efforts be targeted at the individual or organizational level? Can public and private foundations have a measureable impact on nonprofit organizational management?

### **Target journals:**

*Administration and Society; American Review of Public Administration; Community Development Society; Human Resource Development Quarterly; Journal of Leadership Studies; Journal of Management Studies; Journal of Public Performance and Management; Journal of Public Policy; Leadership Quarterly; Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly; Nonprofit Management and Leadership*

### **Potential funding sources:**

Annie E. Casey Foundation; Bank of America Charitable Foundation; Lumina Foundation for Education, Lynchburg Community Trust, Smith Richardson Foundation, US Department of Health & Human Services – Administration for Children, Youth and Families; US Department of Labor – Employment and Training Administration