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New lab to put Western on cutting edge of immigration research

By Craig Gilbert

A Western University research program that prides itself on improving the lives of immigrants while making students more employable is getting some new digs.

Western researchers Dr. Victoria Esses and Dr. Bipasha Baruha have plans for a new 1,000 square foot lab on the ninth floor of the Social Sciences Building.

The plan is to enable Western to perform top-notch research on the subject at a level unheard of in Canada.



Dr. Victoria Esses, a professor and researcher at Western University, is looking forward to moving into a new 1,000 square foot immigration research lab

The renovations and equipment will be funded by a grant from the Canada Foundation for Innovation worth \$181,474.

The three-room lab will be filled with professional grade video, publishing and communication technology that will help them perform top-notch gender disaggregated research (information on men and women) on immigration and settlement of newcomers to Canada.

The research is part of the seven-year \$2.5 million Pathways to Prosperity program, an alliance of university, community, and government partners dedicated to fostering welcoming communities and promoting the integration of immigrants and minorities across Canada.

Esses specializes in the settlement and integration of immigrants. She performs research and consults for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, settlement agencies and the London Middlesex Local Immigration Partnership.

“Canada provides a lot of services for immigrants, we provide employment, language, community connections all sorts of services for newcomers but how do you make sure those services are

optimized?” she said, describing her research. “The idea is to analyze those practices that are identified as very good and try and figure out why they work and how other agencies can make them work elsewhere.”

Part of the work involves interviewing immigrants on their perception of Canada and the welcome they receive, and using their reactions to tailor services and informative materials to their needs.

“This is important because otherwise we lose immigrants, they either go to other countries or they move to other cities,” Esses said. “There are a lot of cities in Canada now that need immigrants and want to attract and keep them.”

The research will help Canada compete with other countries as well – Australia and New Zealand chief among them.

“We can interview executive directors of settlement agencies across the country about their services (and) people in other countries in terms of what they are doing.”

There will also be a secure data analysis facility for processing personal and confidential data, and a facility for producing professional quality photos and videos.

“If you’re doing research you can develop information and test it out, but it has to look credible. It’s really important to figure out what type of information newcomers need and how to get it to them.”

Baruha holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Women’s Issues. She said collecting data that is broken down by gender is critical, and simply doesn’t happen enough in the developing world.

“It’s really important to base your decisions on good empirical data because otherwise you’re making policy decisions based on ideology and intuition,” she said. “I was in the United States for the past six years. When I came back I looked at Canadian research universities and organizations and I didn’t find anyone doing what we’re trying to do. That made (the application for the lab funding) that much more of a unique proposition.”

She added it fits well with the profile Western is trying to create on internationalization.

“We’re trying to be involved in creating global solutions for global problems.”

Baruha has consulted for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in the past. She said it is difficult to find solid data sets with information on both men and women specifically from the developing world, because it isn’t collected that way.

In many cases, census data isn’t collected at all.

“Data collection is expensive to collect and maintain,” she explained. “In developing countries it tends to be very imprecise, and even when census is set up it is hard to collect data on gender. In the Caribbean for example, we tried to collect information on household activities by men and women, and there was just no way to integrate that question.”

That said working with imperfect data gives students another dimension of real-world training.

“It’s not going to be perfect,” she said. “You have to make do with what you have. But even the existence of partial data sets can help give a better sense of how you can move forward than if you have none. We expect this to be a wonderful teaching facility.”

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