

Interview With Vivian Wong, Ph.D.

May 9, 2013

The Meadows Center: What is the most surprising finding you have encountered in your field of research?

Dr. Wong: I'm a research methodologist, and part of my job as a research methodologist is to look at the methods that we use to figure out whether a program or a policy or an intervention works—whether they actually work in the field. So one of the things that I have learned over the years is that it's surprising how often some of the methods that we use don't give us the answer that we expect, and so it actually requires a lot of really careful thought. So one of the things that we've learned is that randomized control trials and certain methods are really important for helping us understand whether a policy or a program works and that other methods that we use, where we compare a group of kids who were treated to other kids who were not treated but might look similar, often don't do as well in terms of giving us an unbiased answer of whether a program works or not.

The Meadows Center: Based on your research, what is the most important piece of information you would like to share with practitioners?

Dr. Wong: When practitioners read a newspaper article or when they read a claim that says that an intervention is empirically based, it's useful to first become a little bit educated

about what “empirically based” means, and that often means what type of methods were used to evaluate that program. It turns out that over the last 20 years, we’ve really developed a lot of really good methods for figuring out how programs work, and randomized control trials are one of the best ways to do it. There are other methods, too, but usually, the simple method where we compare the outcomes for kids who got a treatment versus outcomes for kids who did not receive treatment doesn’t work as well, so we should be cautious about those kinds of studies.