Episode 37: Jamison Fargo

# KL: Katie Linder

# JF: Jamison FargoKL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode thirty-seven.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Jamison Fargo, an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University, where he is affiliated with the graduate emphasis in Sociobehavioral Epidemiology. He is also a Research Scientist with the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans at Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Dr. Fargo's primary research interests focus on preventing and ending homelessness, particularly among veterans, as well as preventing injury and victimization. He also has extensive methodological expertise in the application of modern psychometric, latent variable, and mixed-effects modeling techniques to research problems in the sociobehavioral, epidemiological, and educational sciences. Dr. Fargo earned Master’s degrees in Clinical Psychology (2003) and in Quantitative Epidemiology (2008) as well as a Doctoral degree in Experimental Psychology (2004) from the University of Cincinnati. In 2005 he founded the Office of Methodological and Data Sciences at Utah State University, which he directed until 2009. He previously worked at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a Senior Research Investigator in the Center for Health Equity Research, a Biostatistician in the Center for Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, and an Associate Fellow in the Center for Public Health Initiatives.

Thanks so much for joining me, Jamison.

**JF:** Thanks for having me on the program.

# KL: I think your work in the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans is really fascinating. I’m wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about that national center and how you became involved in that work.

**JF:** Yeah, sure. It goes back to about 2009. I had been working at Utah State University for about 5 years as an assistant professor. I had a position open up at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia that was a really good fit for me at that time. So we moved as a family out to Philadelphia and I started working in the School of Medicine as a biostatistician. I was interested in retooling and re-envisioning my research interests a little bit, taking things in a little bit different direction. I had stumbled across some research that I became interested in in homelessness, and had come to find out that the fellow, Dennis Culhane, that was leading this research was right there at the University of Pennsylvania. So I went over and met with him and he said, “Well, you know what, we’re starting a National Center on Homelessness among Veterans funded by the VA, and we’re looking for some researchers to work part time on projects, and we’re certainly looking for people with quantitative skills and statistical skills, so we’d love to have you aboard.” So I started working half-time for the center in the fall of 2009, right when it started (the VA’s fiscal year starts October 1st). So I began working with them right at the beginning, and have continued on in various capacities since then. So the center is really from the top levels of the VA, their top priority at that time was to address homelessness among veterans, particularly veterans who were recently returning from conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq. The goal was to eliminate homelessness among veterans within 5 years—that was the original mandate—throughout the VA. The center was charged with evaluating programs that the VA had put into place to assist returning veterans, and veterans from different conflicts decades ago, find ways out of homelessness, whether it be through housing or mental health services or whatever it may be. I’ll pause there and see what questions you have at this point.

# KL: Yeah. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit more… I would imagine that some of our listeners are just not really familiar with what it means to work with a national research center and how you—you’ve mentioned a little bit about how you came to be affiliated with it, but is this something where if you’re working with a center for a percentage of your time, does that mean that you’re funded through that center? Can you talk a little bit more about just the logistics of that connection and the relationship you might have with that kind of unit?

**JF:** Sure, yeah. I think every center is unique in how the arrangements are made. In my case, I had some of my own funding from some funded work, and I was working with another research investigator at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, so she was funding some of my time. Then I had some of my time that was just sort of open-funded through the biostatistical work I was doing in the School of Medicine, which was a little more ad-hoc. So I just shifted my proportions around and freed up half of my time, and then the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans funded half of my time at that point, so I had a couple of different offices I would go back and forth to. It makes your life a little more fragmented to do it that way, but it was a good setup for me and, I thought, very healthy for my career at that point. I attend staff meetings and this center, I mean all centers are different in terms how things are run. In this center we would, there were a number of researchers involved and for every project we would develop, there would be a couple of us working on them and doing parts of the project and there were some students involved as well. So that’s kind of how it ran for me after I got involved.

**KL:** I wondered if you can talk a little bit about some of the benefits of affiliating with a national center for research like the one that you’re affiliated with, you mentioned kind of retooling and trying to kind of think about your career at that stage and what you were trying to do. What have you found to be some of the benefits?

**JF**: Yeah, great question, you know, centers like this attract some of the best minds in the field and so I was able to rub shoulders with those folks and really, you know although I haven’t done homeless research in the past, I had worked in areas that related to homelessness, for example, substance abuse issues, mental health issues, poverty, poor education, so all of my background kind of came together and galvanized around homelessness issues. But, I really didn’t understand homelessness policy and programs in this country and so working with those kind of individuals really helped me to get up to speed quickly. It’s also because it’s a national center, it has a national profile which is helpful for younger researchers to kind of get their name out there and get invited to national/international conferences and so forth. The best thing about this particular center, I felt, was we had and have access to national level data on veterans, and so we’re not just drawing from a small convenient sample in one VA medical center, it’s for the whole country. So when we do our work, we’re working with samples in hundreds and thousands if not millions, and that allows us to have a lot of power and precision and the ability to look at rather small subpopulations. Perhaps we can drill down to look at homeless individuals who also have an eating disorder for example, or who have a history of military sexual trauma, and we are still able to get samples in the thousands if not tens of thousands for these smaller groups. So there are a lot of advantages methodologically as well.

**KL**: I’m wondering, let’s dig in a little more to the kind of research that you’re working on. I’m wondering if you can tell us a little bit about the kinds of research questions you’re asking and the kind of data you’re collecting or working with, as the case may be.

**JF**: Yeah, my interest is in particularly looking at veterans who leave the service and they’ve been discharged from the military under what we call non-routine condition. So 70%+ of military service personnel are discharged under routine conditions. Their term of services is expired and they go home. There are quite a few who are discharged from the military for reasons related to a disability they received, an injury or it can be a mental health condition as well. They’re disqualified for some reason, there can be humanitarian reasons as well, maybe their partner at home is having some problems, or there’s been a death in the family, something like that. Then there’s also a group that are separated from the military because of what we call misconduct related reasons. These could be violence or crime or substance abuse in most cases. These are folks whose actions do not elevate to the full, kind of court-martial and what we refer to as a dishonorable discharge. Those folks are not eligible for those VA benefits when they get back. In these other cases where somebody has a misconduct separation it’s usually a more minor infraction and they’re still eligible for VA benefits. However, those folks have been of interest to us to see what sort of happens to them when they return home from military service as compared to routine separation or disability separation and so forth. So in terms of homelessness, we had a study published last year in JAMA, where we looked at the misconduct-related separations and found that they were at much higher risk for homelessness even at the first time they come to the VA. Then we followed them in the data for a year and then we looked for them again at 5 years. What we found was if you took a look at the homeless, the veterans who have experienced homelessness at each of those different time points, about 20-28% of them had been separated for a misconduct-related reason. It’s a really high proportion in any kind of field, social science in particular. You can kind of account for a problem to that degree, it’s a strong risk factor. So that paper got a lot of press and interest in sort of delving into that population—we need to understand them better, what’s happening to them when they go home, because you know they’re eligible for VA services which does also does include some homelessness prevention and intervention and so you know, what’s happening, how are these folks falling through the cracks? So those are the kinds of things we’re interested in looking at.

**KL**: Well Jamison, this sounds like such important work. We’re going to take a brief break and when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about Jamison’s work with biostatistics. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 2:

**KL**: Jamison, one area of your expertise that I’m really curious about is your work in biostatistics, and I’ll admit this is not something I know very much about. Can you describe, first of all, what does that mean, biostatistics?

**JF**: Yeah sure, biostatistics is just a branch of statistics that’s focused on issues around public health, healthcare, randomized controlled trials, epidemiology. It’s really kind of the focus, the subject matter, and there are some specific methods that are “biostatistical” but it’s really just the branch of your normal statistics that’s just applied in a certain area of research.

**KL**: Interesting, so can you give some examples of maybe questions that biostatisticians—that’s a mouth full—might be asking in their research?

**JF**: Yeah for sure, and they are sort of at a gross level two types of biostatistical folks out there. There are the folks who develop and work on biostatistical methodology. So they’re developing methods for missing data, messy data, and longitudinal data, they’re building algorithms, they’re working with statistical software development companies to develop routines and sub programs, to better analyze data, to increase efficiency and so forth. Then there a lot of folks who are more on the applied side and so they learn these methods, they learn the software to implement the methods. There’s a whole gradation there, there’s some places you can even get a bachelor’s degree in biostatistics, a master’s degree, and there’s a PhD in biostatistics, there’s a whole range of folks that have different levels of sophistication, so to speak, in what exactly they do, and most of them know at least one or two different statistical programming languages. So to answer your question, though, the applied folks would be using biostatistical methods, in many cases, to understand if a randomized controlled trial—where you have two or more groups and randomized conditions, there’s some baseline measurements, they’re followed over time, and one or more outcomes are tracked over time—and the researchers want to know if the intervention (whether it be some kind of therapy or a device or a medication) has been effective, and how effective is it, and how soon is it effective, what’s the dose response, and are there negative side-effects, and so forth. So, the biostatistician is really often part of a larger team charged with evaluating the hypotheses in a quantitative way, just like other statisticians might be on projects, but again, it focuses on healthcare outcomes.

**KL:** That’s really interesting. I think this is kind of a subfield of statistics that I just wasn’t really aware of, I’m wondering if—just to kind of pull it apart a little bit more—you’d mentioned having a bachelor’s or a master’s or a Ph.D. in biostatistics. What kinds of training might people who go into this area receive that other statisticians wouldn’t in terms of working with more of the health fields?

**JF:** Yeah. It really depends on the program. However, a number of programs will require their students take a couple courses that are not statistical, so for example, maybe a course in anatomy, or maybe a course in medical terminology, or some basic public health courses, like an intro to epidemiology, or an epidemiology study design course, where you learn about different epidemiological study designs like cohort studies or case-control studies or the randomized clinical trials, whereas other statisticians might just be pure math, stat folks. Some of them who have an interest in going into engineering fields and so forth might take a few engineering courses. So, there are some electives that would differentiate them. Where I went—and my degree, by the way, I don’t have a degree in biostatistics, I have one in quantitative epidemiology—but there are a lot of folks who get a degree in epidemiology or even a social science that might be health-oriented, like health psychology or something like that. But they’re very good at quantitative methods, and so they also end up working as biostatistician. So there are a lot of pathways into being a biostatistician, and it’s sort of dependent on your background, expertise, and the knowledge you’ve gained either through coursework or in an applied way working on different projects. A lot of folks, actually (I’ll just quickly add), who get a master’s of public health and then they take a number of stats courses, many of them also end up as biostatisticians.

**KL:** Hmm. So, it sounds like this is the kind of niche academic undertaking that could move you outside of academia into working with other kinds of organizations that might need a biostatistician. Would you say that’s the case?

**JF:** Yes, very much so. All the drug companies, each of them has a whole army of biostatisticians that assists on different analyses. Many other healthcare businesses do—take a company like Proctor & Gamble, where they have research and development going on, with healthcare products or food products, they’ll have biostatisticians, certainly, on their team as well to help them push their research forward and develop products. So there are definitely private-sector and then public-sector jobs—government as well. There are a lot of national labs, a lot of government research offices, and statisticians as well as biostatisticians can find employment in those sorts of environments as well.

**KL:** So given that, I’m wondering if you can share a little bit about what has kept you in academia, because you’ve really kind of focused on working with these national research centers, but also I know you mentor a lot of graduate students and do that kind of work as well. Given your skill set, can you talk a little bit about your choice to stay?

**JF:** Yeah. That’s a really good question. You know, when I was in grad school, it was very tempting—a lot of people, they’re working on a Ph.D., they’re getting a master’s at the same time, and there are a lot of great positions out there with a master’s degree—and so I had a lot of friends in grad school who just decided to move off at that point and just take a job, and I don’t blame them, and I think they’ve been happy with it. You know, I’ve loved the stimulating environment that academia provides. I love the freedom that I have here to pursue my research interests and to be free to pursue projects that I think make a difference in the world in terms of policy, or in this case of veterans’ homelessness (which is my research area) to hopefully help some veterans, who served our country. And the freedom I mentioned, it’s both intellectual freedom, but it’s also just lifestyle. In academics, we have summers off, we have holidays, we do have responsibilities—we have courses to teach and meetings to attend—but our schedules really are our own, for the most part, and that kind of autonomy, you just can’t put a price tag on that. But I certainly do know that there are more lucrative jobs out there in industry and other government positions, but I’ve been pretty happy with my job in academia.

**KL:** I love that you raise that point about weighing the different things, the different benefits that you might get from a job in academia, and I think many of us can agree that that scheduling piece is huge in terms of just having that flexibility. So thank you for sharing about your experiences there.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Jamison. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Jamison, something that you mentioned in segment 1 and my ears immediately perked—I’m just kind of fascinated by scholars’ stories about this—is you said you kind of realized you needed to retool a bit at one point in your career, and I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, because I think that sometimes, as scholars, we get on one path and we think that that’s just the path and we’re supposed to just go on this one route, but your retooling implies that you decided to shift a little bit. So can you tell us a little bit about that decision and how you knew you needed to retool?

**JF:** Oh, sure. This is a great topic. You know, I think retooling is very healthy. There are some people who I think have locked onto an area of research or a topic, even in undergrad, and they have just stuck with it and pursued it and love it, and they continue their whole life to pursue that topic, and I think that’s wonderful. But that’s just not been the case for me, and this even probably goes back to graduate school. When I started, I was pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and I got through my master’s degree, and I realized that I had really fallen in love with methodology and statistical methods to address research problems, and I found myself not being so interested in helping people work out their psychological challenges. And so I switched over and completed my Ph.D. in experimental psychology and then did a master’s in quantitative epidemiology, which is sort of biostatistical, and got a faculty position and had quickly gotten involved in a number of large federal grants—NIH, Institute of Education Sciences, there’s a little bit of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some projects like that—as a methodologist, and so some randomized controlled trial work, some evaluation studies, some basic community health outcome studies, and I really loved the statistics, and I taught a number of statistics courses here at the graduate level at Utah State University, and sort of found myself wanting something a little bit different after four or five years. I had continued to publish my own work, mostly in the areas of sexual violence and sexual re-victimization—so, looking at people who are repeatedly victimized during their lives—and yet that was mostly using existing data in new ways that the original researchers had not done. Although I felt that research was really important and interesting, it wasn’t totally what I wanted to pursue the rest of my career, so when this opportunity to be at Penn came up, I thought, “Well, this might be a good opportunity to explore some new things.” And so, when I went out to Penn and was working as a biostatistician, that’s when I started to explore other avenues. I wanted to continue to use my statistical training and skills, but I wanted to use it in an area where I felt like I could make a difference and really help improve our understanding of some sort of social problem. And that’s when I mentioned, in the first segment, about coming into contact with some of the homelessness researchers at Penn, that’s when things really took off, and it was really cool how it just all came together. I’ve been pursuing that line of work now for almost seven years, and I think I’ll continue to pursue it for several more at least. It’s very enjoyable work. I’ve been fortunate to collaborate with people who I find just wonderful colleagues.

**KL:** So one of the things that you talked about which I think is really interesting is when you talk about retooling, it’s not like you set aside the experiences and the expertise you already had and moved on to something entirely different. You were trying to take pieces of what you were liking about what you were already doing and do those things more, or do them in a slightly different way, and—

**JF:** —Yes.—

**KL:** —that makes so much sense to me, because it’s not like throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it’s just saying, “I want to tweak something here. I want to play around a little bit with my skills.” Can you talk a little bit more about—because the way you’ve made it sound is kind of like, oh, these things just kind of fell in your lap a little bit, and I know that that’s just not always the case. Sometimes we will phrase it that way, but there are certain things we did to set up situations where we were networked in the appropriate ways. So, when you’d gotten to that point of wanting to retool, what were some of the things that maybe had been set up in your professional that allowed for that to happen?

**JF:** Yeah, that’s a really good question. You know, I think a lot of times, especially when we’re trying to figure out the direction we want to go in, we often come across things and in our mind we sort of way, “Oh, gee whiz, that sounds really cool. I want to do that.” And it could be a really cool and exciting thing, but it may not be the thing that really excites us, and it may not be the thing that we’re really inclined to do, whether it be our interests or our capabilities or whatever. And I started to take a look at the things that I was really drawn to, both through my first couple years in academics as well as in graduate school, and started to really say, “Okay, I feel like I have expertise and a knack for this thing and that thing and that thing, and what are the common denominators, or what are the overlaps among those things?” And it was honestly, it’s like, you sort of just see the outcomes of people’s decisions and their successes. You don’t see all the failures and things like—like, I was telling my students, okay, yeah, you’ve seen my CV, you’ve seen all my publications, but you can’t flip my CV over and see the back side with all the rejections and all the grants that I didn’t get funded, and all the things that didn’t work out, because there have been a lot of those. But certainly when I was pursuing this kind of retool era, there were some things that didn’t work out. I had contacted some other people, just to explore other options, and some things that I thought were going to work out, they didn’t. There was a certain degree of serendipity in the homelessness stuff, with the folks just happening to be there and my timing, and they’re starting a new center and I was able to jump right in, and it was great. But I think there were other forces throughout my career that certainly moved me to that point to be ready for that.

**KL:** That is so fascinating, and I think there was a recent piece, maybe in the last few months, about the CV of failures, and someone had posted theirs online, and it went a little bit viral [laughs] in the academic community, because they were really saying you don’t see that. And I love this idea of turning your CV over [laughs] and on the back there are all these things that you tried and that didn’t work out. So I think that’s really fascinating about, when you look back on the path, it looks, sometimes, very clear, but when you’re in it, maybe not so much. So when you were dealing with that and kind of bumping up against some things that weren’t quite working out for you, how did you keep pursuing? What was your motivation to keep going and see what you could find?

**JF:** Yeah, that’s a good question. I think it was just internal, you know, there’s got to be something I can latch onto here that can sort of pull all this together and something I can be happy with and feel fulfilled doing. I think I just kept knocking on doors and not being afraid to send my CV around or ask people questions and sort of just dive in, I guess. I wish I had a better answer, but it was just, I just kept on it.

**KL:** Well, I think perseverance is a great answer. [Laughs.] It’s something that we can all continue to hear, especially from a successful researcher like you, what it takes to get to that place. Jamison, thank you so much for taking some time to come on the show today and chat with me about your experiences.

**JF:** Oh, I very much enjoyed it. Thank you very much.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

# Bonus Clip

[Intro music.]

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 37 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Jamison Fargo shares about his experience as a methodologist. Take a listen.

Jamison, one of the ways that you define yourself as an academic is as a methodologist, and I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about what that means for your career in terms of your teaching, your research, but also how you engage with things like grant projects. What does it mean to play the role of being a methodologist?

**JF:** Yeah, that’s a great question. There are many faculty outside of, say, a statistics department who have—they’re interested in research methods in statistics, they use them in their work frequently, they enjoy studying up on the latest and greatest methods and applying them in different ways, and so I guess I’m one of those folks. There’s often a need for people with methodological expertise to assist other colleagues—faculty members and graduate students, maybe on their thesis or dissertation committee—as a methodologist to help ensure that the methodology of the study design is sound and that the analyses are appropriate for the research question and for the data. So, in my case, I’ve typically taught graduate-level statistics courses. They’re applied statistics courses in our College of Education and Human Services here at Utah State University, and students from across seven different departments come and take those courses from the college, and sometimes from outside of our college—we’ve had students from biology and business and so forth take our courses. And we’re really interested in an applied hands-on training so that students can be thoughtful about their analyses when they do them, they can be competent, they can be confident in reading research literature and understanding the methods and the statistics and the results. So, I feel like the role of a methodologist is often just kind of a friendly guide who helps people along in their research efforts. We can’t all be experts on every single thing out there, and so it’s important to have colleagues that you can lean on from time to time. And not all methodologists know about every methodology. I certainly have gaps in my quantitative understanding. There are certain methods and techniques that I don’t know much about, and I frankly admit that and try to refer people on to somebody else who might in those cases. In terms of grants, a methodologist takes on different roles. It could be a very small role that at the end of the day they help analyze the data. It could be a very involved role, maybe even up to 20 or 30% of a methodologist’s time in helping with all phases of the project: helping design survey instruments, the data collection and capture technologies, supervising undergraduate or other volunteer data entry personnel, or being part of the team as they meet to discuss problems, and how those problems are going to affect the methodology. We analyze data throughout the project and not just at the end to make sure things are on track or if they could be improved in real time during the course of the project. Methodologists will assist in report-writing, writing the final report for the grant, but also papers that might come out of the data for the project. A lot of methodologists will do graphs. They’ll develop tables and graphs that illustrate the data. So, they can have a pretty important role on grants. And usually when I served as a methodologist—these days I try to be on for 5 to 10% and then I’ll try to get some funding for graduate assistance to do a lot of the heavy lifting of the day-to-day stuff, and then I will supervise, and then I’m there to lend advice and expertise and guidance at the level that I work at. So, that’s kind of how I work as a methodologist where I am.

**KL:** Well, it sounds like a very varied role! Thanks so much for sharing more about your experience, Jamison.

**JF:** You’re welcome.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 37 of the Research in Episode podcast, with Dr. Jamison Fargo sharing about his experience as a methodologist. Thanks for listening!

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