US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient: Constance Viehbeck

Project title: Expedited Drug Approvals, Demographic Representation, and FDA Governance

Summary of project:

This project examines how the US Food and Drug Administration, one of the world's most influential drug regulators, shapes health equity through its approval decisions. The PhD asks why women and ethnic minorities are often missing from the clinical trials behind drug approvals, whether representation gaps are associated with disparities in post-market outcomes, and which institutional barriers have made these gaps persistent. The Phelan Summer Research Grant funded a period as a visiting researcher at the Harvard–MIT Center for Regulatory Science in September 2026. The visit had two purposes: to work through the methodological and data foundations of the project's quantitative components alongside researchers in regulatory science, and to begin building the US-based academic network the project depends on. Both were achieved, and the visit meaningfully strengthened the design of the dissertation while supporting the empirical work now underway.

Objectives and how the grant was used

I applied for the grant to fund a research visit that would let me develop the project's methodology in direct exchange with experts in regulatory science, and to lay the groundwork for its US-focused later stages. The grant covered return travel to Boston, accommodation for the visiting period, and associated local costs.

The visit lasted approximately 2.5 weeks. My time was spent in a mix of focused work on the project's core methodological and empirical questions and in discussion with faculty and researchers whose expertise spans pharmacoepidemiology, health economics, and regulatory science. The value of the period lay in the kind of sustained, in-person exchange that is difficult to achieve remotely.

What the visit achieved

Sharpening the conceptual framework. The most significant outcome was a substantial refinement of how the project is framed. I came away with a clearer commitment to articulating explicit causal mechanisms connecting the regulatory pathways I study to the outcomes I am interested in, rather than documenting association alone. This principle has become the organising thread of the dissertation and has tightened the logic linking my papers to one another.

Advancing the data collection. Alongside the conceptual work, I have made substantial progress on the empirical foundations of the first papers, assembling a considerable body of trial-level and regulatory data. The visit helped refine this effort, clarifying which data environments can support the analysis I intend and how to structure the dataset so that it answers the questions I care about. The project now rests on a concrete and growing empirical base rather than a plan alone.

Deepening the methodological approach. Discussions during the visit helped me think more rigorously about how demographic representation and post-market outcomes can be measured, what different data environments can and cannot support, and how to design the analysis so that it isolates the questions I care about. I developed a clearer understanding of the practical constraints involved in this kind of work and of the design choices needed to address them. These refinements would have been much slower to reach at a distance from the people who work with these methods daily.

Strengthening the project's data strategy. A recurring theme was the difficulty of finding data that can support the analysis I want to conduct. Working through this with experienced researchers clarified both the limitations of particular approaches and some viable routes forward, giving the quantitative work a firmer and more realistic footing than it had before the visit.

Situating the work in its US context. The visit also gave me a clearer, first-hand sense of the political and institutional environment surrounding my research. Questions of how the US collects, classifies, and reports demographic data, and of the place of equity in federal decision-making, are the subject of active debate in the US at present. Seeing how live and contested these questions are sharpened my sense of the project's timeliness and of why an institutional and political analysis, alongside the quantitative work, is essential.

Building the US network

Beyond the methodological work, the visit established relationships that the later stages of the project depend on. I met researchers across several institutions and disciplines relevant to my work, and a number of these conversations have developed into ongoing contact since my return. Building this network in person has given the project's US dimension a foundation it did not previously have, and it opens further possibilities for collaboration as the research matures. For an early-career researcher, this kind of network-building is difficult to overstate in value, and it is among the most lasting benefits of the visit.

Outcomes and next steps

In concrete terms, the visit has produced a substantially revised conceptual framework for the dissertation, a more rigorous and realistic methodological approach, and a clearer strategy for the data challenges the project faces, and it has run alongside substantial progress on the data collection underpinning the first papers. It has also established a set of active US relationships that will carry into the rest of the PhD. My immediate next steps are to consolidate these methodological refinements with my supervisors and to build on the empirical work already underway, now on firmer foundations than I had before.

Reflection

The grant moved my research forward significantly. Its value lay in tangible progress on both the design and the data that underpins it, in conversations that reframed the project, in candid guidance from people who know the field intimately, and in relationships that will shape the collaborations the dissertation depends on. The visit also brought home the timeliness of the questions I am asking and their relevance to how the US governs its medicines. I am grateful to the Phelan US Centre for making it possible, and I return to the rest of the PhD with a clearer, better-grounded, and more ambitious plan than I left with.