

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Department of Economics

Economics 4880: Seminar in Policy Analysis

Spring 2022

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Office: Monroe Hall, room 248

Office hours: By appointment

Class meetings: Mondays 3–5:30pm in New Cabell Hall 044 (in person)

Course website: Collab (<https://collab.its.virginia.edu/portal>)

Course Content

The goal of this course is to develop students' ability to evaluate and conduct empirical studies of the effects of government policy. To that end, each student will present an existing research paper, conduct an independent empirical policy analysis, present their research, and write a paper describing their research.

Learning how to evaluate and conduct empirical policy analysis: The first few meetings of the semester will involve lectures and student presentations of existing empirical policy analyses. This will give students a chance to learn about policies, data, and methodologies that they can use in their own research. The limited time for lectures is designed to allow the maximum time possible for conducting independent research, but it severely limits the material that can be covered. So students must supplement what we cover in class with independent investigation of the policies, data, and methodologies that they might wish to use in their own research. Each class meeting will have a few required readings, which will be available in electronic form on Collab.

Completing your own empirical policy analysis: Also during the early weeks of the semester, each student will submit ideas for potential research projects. These projects will be refined within the first month of the semester so that students arrive at a topic that is consistent with the purpose of the course and feasible to complete within a semester. After that, we will stop meeting as a class. Instead, students will meet one-on-one with me to discuss progress in the previous week and plans for the next week. In late April and early May, we will meet again as a class so that students can present their research. Final papers are due at the end of the semester.

Assignments and Grades

- Presentation of an existing empirical policy analysis, February: 10%
 - See the reading list for details about choosing a paper. You need not understand all aspects of the paper, but you should understand the policy setting, general empirical strategy, data choices, and key results.
 - Prepare a 20-minute presentation with slides from PowerPoint or similar software. This is not much time, so focus on what's most important. Explain the policy, data, empirical strategy, key results, and your evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. Practice out loud with a timer until your presentation is smooth and the right length.
 - Presentations will be graded on their clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Class participation, throughout the semester: 10%
 - Attend class meetings, complete required readings in advance, and participate during lectures and student presentations.¹
- Research updates, throughout the semester: 10%
 - Post research updates to Collab, following the template on Collab, by 3pm every Friday from February 4 to April 15 other than March 11 (spring break).
- Presentation of student research, late April and early May: 20%
 - These follow the same structure as the presentations of existing research.
- Final paper, submitted on Collab by 5pm on May 4: 50%
 - Papers will be graded on the quality of the research—including the question, analysis, and writing—*not* how interesting the results are (since it is often hard to forecast what one will find). Late work will not be accepted.
 - Papers must be novel to some extent. While some students begin by replicating a scholarly article, your paper must contribute something new relative to previous work (e.g., different data, more years of data, or different policy changes).
 - Papers should be 20–35 pages (1.5-spaced, 1-inch margins) and include the following sections: Introduction, Policy Background, Econometric Model, Data, Results, and Conclusions. Include a title page and a list of cited references. Model the style on excellent published papers, such as those we will discuss in class.

¹If you must miss a class in February when students are presenting existing research, write a two-paragraph summary of the papers that you miss: one paragraph describing the key methods and results and one paragraph offering your evaluation of the paper.

- Be aware of plagiarism guidelines. Your paper should reflect your own ideas and writing, and you must cite the ideas and words of others appropriately.² Let me know if you would like to use some of your work in this class for a similar paper in another course.

Course Format

We will meet as a class on Mondays from January 24 through February 14, and again from April 25 through May 2. For the rest of the semester, you will meet with me individually in weekly meetings (usually of 10–15 minutes) within the scheduled course meeting time. A detailed schedule appears at the end of this syllabus, and a “default” schedule of meeting times and presentation slots is on Collab. Feel free to trade slots if you wish. Just let me know if you do.

Detailed Requirements

Rough timeline: This course requires that you complete a novel policy analysis in a single semester. That is an extremely demanding timeline. Research takes a lot of time and involves many unforeseen difficulties. **You will get much more out of the course, and enjoy it more, if you start your research immediately at the beginning of the semester.** Start now, avoid unproductive time sucks as best you can (I will do my best to help), and write, write, write! I will try to help you stay on track by giving you guidance during your regular meetings with me, but ultimately it is up to you to make timely and satisfactory progress. To give you a general idea of timely progress during the semester, below is a possible timeline. Your actual timeline will depend in part on how your project unfolds.

- In January and early February, generate lots of potential ideas. Don’t worry if most are crummy. For each of the most promising few, sketch an “aspirational introduction.”³ This will help you develop and evaluate them. Write, write, write, right now, before you feel ready (since you will never feel ready).
- By mid-to-late-February, finalize your research question, including getting a complete “aspirational introduction” approved by me.
- By mid-to-late-February, start your analysis. Plan your analysis, acquire the necessary data, and begin data cleaning and analysis. Analysis takes a long time, so it is critical to start early. Examine the data thoroughly and ensure you understand it. Try to identify and solve any important difficulties that might arise ASAP. Now and throughout your research, be on the lookout for things that confuse you. That’s usually a sign of something being wrong.⁴

²For example, do not copy text or regression specifications from other work without an immediate acknowledgement and citation.

³See Jesse Shapiro’s excellent discussion at <https://www.brown.edu/Research/Shapiro/pdfs/foursteps.pdf>.

⁴But it’s sometimes a sign of a promising research idea. Either way, you want to know, and the sooner the better.

- In March and early April, complete multiple “micro drafts” of your analysis and paper, iterating back and forth between analysis and writing as efficient based on how things unfold. Do the results make sense? Are they robust? What placebo checks can you run? What sub-group analyses might be interesting? What is the best way to present the results?
- By mid-April, draft your presentation slides. Practice your presentation, out loud and timing yourself. This will reveal lots of problems with your slides and probably your paper as well. Fix those. Repeat as many times as you can. Then present to a friend and ask for their honest (but kind) feedback. Receiving and addressing feedback is critical to the research process. Remember: Limitations of your research (especially research done on such a quick timeline) are not limitations of you. Research is hard. The best research almost always starts out mediocre before being improved bit by bit over time.
- In late April or early May, present your research effectively to the class.
- By 5pm on May 4, submit a paper that describes your research effectively.⁵

⁵Given the tight timeline, even successful performance in this class might result in a *paper* that you are not so proud of. The goal is instead to follow a *process* you can be proud of, since a good process is what will allow you to achieve the key course goals: improving your ability to evaluate and conduct policy research.

Course Schedule

DATE	TYPE	TOPIC	READINGS	DUE
Block 1: Lectures and student presentations of existing research				
1/24	Lecture	Evaluating and conducting research	Background readings on collab	
1/31	Lecture	Evaluating and conducting research	Background readings on collab	
2/7	Student presentations of existing research	Evaluating and presenting research	Presentation papers on collab	Slides due on Collab before class (for presenters)
2/14	Student presentations of existing research	Evaluating and presenting research	Presentation papers on collab	Slides due on Collab before class (for presenters)
Block 2: Independent research on and individual meetings about student research ideas				
2/21 - 4/18	Independent research and individual meetings (no class meetings)	Conducting research	n/a	Weekly summary of research progress due every Friday from 2/4 - 4/15 except 3/11
Block 3: Student presentations of their own research				
4/25	Student presentations of policy analysis project	Evaluating and presenting research	n/a	Slides due on Collab before class (for presenters)
5/2	Student presentations of policy analysis project	Evaluating and presenting research	n/a	Slides due on Collab before class (for presenters)
Final paper				
5/4	Final paper	Conducting research	n/a	Paper due on Collab by 5pm on May 4