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Statement of Teaching Philosophy¹

I view teaching and research as complements – not substitutes – to each other. Teaching makes me a better researcher, as it helps me determine how to explain ideas and knowledge clearly, articulately, and in a manner that is exciting. Teaching also allows me to think carefully about students’ questions, which at the surface may seem simple, but frequently can become a deeper inquiry. Similarly, my own research makes me a better teacher. Understanding how to pose and solve a problem in a scholarly article is similar to teaching students how to make a hypothesis about a problem in the world, how to develop a plan to determine if that hypothesis is true, and how to solve a particular problem.

Such a view leads me to the goals I set for my students at the start of each semester. First, by the end of the semester, I want my students to be able to work with data and to understand how to conduct a simple statistical analysis. In doing so, they should be able to critique other empirical studies that they may encounter in their work. I will spend the majority of this teaching statement focusing on this first goal given that I feel it is unique to my classes (in my department). Second, I hope that by the end of the course, students will have an improved ability to solve problems – to identify particular economic problems in their own lives, develop a plan for solving or testing those problems, and understanding how to think critically about the problem in order to develop a solution. In principles level classes, I would place less emphasis on empirical analysis – although it would remain at a more basic level – and more emphasis on the ability able to read and analyze current economic events and editorials written in a newspaper such as the *Wall Street Journal*.

Most students take my upper division classes without ever having had a class in advanced statistics or econometrics. Although calculus is a required class, many undergraduate students can graduate with no formal training in empirical economics. The applied economics profession has become more quantitative and students are increasingly being required to work with data on the job; despite this fact, most students come into my class without having any empirical economics training. As noted on one of my teaching evaluations by one of my students, “...being able to analyze data and effectively communicate [empirical] analysis to somebody else is the most critical skill to have coming out of school with an Economics

¹Having spent the last two years teaching upper division electives and supervising senior thesis projects, the teaching philosophy in this document outlines my teaching philosophy for these types of classes rather than a principles class.

degree.” Thus, I believe that it is important to emphasize non-technical statistical techniques in my economics class and to require students to study and critique empirical analysis.

I spend about one-third of class-time discussing empirical analysis in economics. Given my students have no formal training in econometrics, I use visual evidence and simple tables to make compelling claims about causal identification. Difference-in-differences and regression discontinuity designs provide students with easy to understand visual evidence. For example, in my public economics class, I introduce my students to the difference-in-differences methodology by discussing Chetty, Looney, and Kroft (2009). The authors in this paper asked a grocery store to post the sales tax inclusive price to certain items, while maintaining the pre-tax pricing convention to other items. I then walk through why a simple comparison of the treatment group to the control would not be enough and explain why the authors also need to collect data before and during the experiment. We then set up a four cell table of average sales for before and after the experiment by treatment and control groups. This simple comparison can teach students the basic idea of using the difference-in-differences to identify causal effects without ever mentioning the word regression. The same thing is true with regression discontinuity graphs, which I also introduce in the context of public or urban studies using this procedure.

Throughout the semester, I also require my students to collect data and to make simple comparisons of averages. For example, at the beginning of my urban economics class, each student is assigned a particular Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Throughout the semester, relating to each module of the class, students are required to collect data on their MSA and to compare the data across time and across urban areas. For example, students might use the BLS website to calculate location quotients documenting the concentration of particular industries within the MSA. They may have to collect data from the Census on racial segregation by county or may have to use the FBI crime data to determine changes in violent crimes over time. At the end of the semester, the students can use this data to write their term paper, which relates to a problem in their assigned MSA.

In both by classes, at the end of the semester, students are required to write a five page research paper on a policy reform. This paper requires them to collect data to back up their claims. I have found students to be extremely excited about this project and most of the papers are creative in what they study. Fancy econometrics is prohibited, but rather, students use simple comparisons of means – the best papers conducting a simple difference-in-differences or a regression discontinuity. Most importantly, students must acknowledge the limitations of their study to make causal claims by highlighting the assumptions they are required to make in their analysis.

The inclusion of empirical studies throughout my courses make the material real for the

students. Students can see the applications of the graphs or equations that we teach them. They develop an appreciation for why economics cannot easily answer questions that seem simple at first such as estimating the labor response to taxes. They understand why two economists can disagree over how large the deadweight loss to society is from a tax reform and gain an appreciation that their arguments will be strongest if they critique the underlying assumptions rather than the results. Several students have contacted me since taking my class noting how they use these skills daily in their job – whether its as a policy consultant or a government bureaucrat. As such, I think exposing students to empirics helps reinforce my second goal of improving their problem solving skills.

Many students do not like the empirical components of the class at first – it may be difficult because they have never seen such components in their other classes. I view this as a good thing. My role as an instructor should be to push my students to think critically and to challenge them to make them better. Learning should not be about taking an examination, but should impart the student with useful skills that will allow them to be constructive, but critical members of society. One of my students wrote an email to me saying, “At the time, I was just concerned about getting a good grade, but I got a lot more out of it. The main thing that I took away from your course was actually learning how to apply economic concepts in different contexts and thinking about these situations analytically. ...now, ... it seems like I think about one of your lessons every day.”

No matter their ultimate career choice, I am confident I have inspired some students to see or think about the world differently than before they entered my classroom. Students have written on my teaching evaluations, “his emphasis on critiquing academic research was valuable,” “the course helped me to further understand current events I was interested in,” and “he is the only professor who meaningfully relates the course material to the real world.” I, too am often inspired to think about the frontier of economic research – as my students often challenge me to think critically through the essays they write or the questions they ask. Teaching knowledge inspires me to create knowledge and creating it inspires me to teach it.