

Teaching Narrative

My teaching focuses on microeconomic theory at the undergraduate and master's levels (APEC 3001 and APEC 5151), and on PhD-level development economics (APEC 8704). APEC 3001 is intermediate microeconomic theory, which is typically among the most challenging courses in an economics program: it makes heavy use of math and requires a high level of analytical rigor. At the same time, the preparation level of my students varies widely. My approach to teaching is to start with the basics but aim high, so that less-prepared students are not left behind, but stronger students are still challenged by the class. I also emphasize student mental health in my teaching, integrating it into my lessons and making sure I both connect students to essential resources and take care to monitor how my students are handling the stresses of undergraduate and graduate coursework. I constantly work to improve my teaching and adapt to changing circumstances, most notably during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I successfully pivoted to teaching a combined in-person/remote format. My effectiveness as a teacher has been recognized by my college: in 2021 I was given the CFANS Distinguished Teaching Award for undergraduates.

Keeping students engaged and interested

One approach I use to keep students engaged is to make extensive use of real-world examples. When teaching consumer theory, for example, I walk through an application to food stamps. This naturally links to debates about the optimal design of social programs: should we just give people cash? How restrictive should we be about what people can buy with food stamps? I then bring in empirical evidence from economics research to inform these debates. As part of this, I regularly incorporate my research expertise into my classes. In some cases, this means discussing a relevant finding by other scholars. In others, I reference my own research—in our food stamps vs. cash discussion, for example, I discuss my work showing a limited role of so-called “temptation goods” (like alcohol and sweets) in consumer behavior. I also draw on examples from a diverse range of settings. For example, when teaching about price discrimination, I discuss two mailers I got offering me different discounts on the same duct-cleaning service from the same company, and also about how market vendors in developing countries offer different prices to different customers.

Another approach is active learning: in particular, I push students to actually work through the problems rather than simply waiting for the answers. Every one of my undergraduate intermediate microeconomics lectures features multiple exercises in which students are asked to solve problems themselves; we then go through the solution together. I also use weekly surveys to assess students' comfort with the material and ask which topics need more clarification. Those surveys feed directly into how I run future class periods. At the graduate level, I promote active learning in different ways. For example, instead of doing a derivation myself, I will often ask the class to walk me through it. I also have graduate students present papers; engaging with a paper at a sufficient level to explain it to others is one of the best ways to truly learn about the research frontier in economics. I also grade not only on how well students present but also how well they participate in their classmates' presentations, which pushes active learning in another dimension.

Cultivating talent and promoting diversity among undergraduates

I use the difficulty of intermediate microeconomics, and the fact that nearly all our majors take it, to identify strong students and encourage them to stick with economics. To reach students who may not see themselves as potential economists, I email the top 10 percent of my students at the end of each semester to congratulate them—and to suggest they consider a career in economics. One goal of doing this is to address economics' diversity problem. The top students in my course are disproportionately female, so reaching out to them naturally offsets gender imbalances. Moreover, having a blanket rule mitigates the tendency for faculty to gravitate toward mentoring students who share their backgrounds. As a result of these efforts, I have become a career and academic mentor to many women and students of color. I also use my graduate classes in a similar way, identifying students who are potential coauthors based on the quality of their work in my class and the topics that they find interesting. This has led to several fruitful collaborations, and created a number of very strong mentoring relationships even in cases where the coauthored project never got off the ground. This approach is noteworthy because coauthoring with graduate students has historically been fairly uncommon in economics; I have actively worked to help change that pattern in order to provide better training to my PhD students.

I have been a very active mentor of many current and former undergraduate students. I have served as the formal advisor to 43 undergraduates, and I am also on one honors committee. I have informally advised nearly a dozen other students, ranging from UROP mentorship to providing career advice. To encourage students to meet with me, I regularly email my assigned advisees to suggest they get in touch. I respond rapidly to my mentees' emails (typically on the same day) and set up meetings whenever appropriate, typically meeting with half a dozen mentees each term. I have written recommendation letters for 17 undergraduates, and also for 7 masters students—some of whom started out as my undergrads, and continued on to do their masters degrees. My commitment to promoting diversity is evident in the students for whom I have written letters: over half are women, and over half are students of color. Several of these students have continued on to careers in economics, working at institutions such as the Congressional Budget Office and Cargill, and going on to pursue doctoral degrees in the field.

Mentoring and training doctoral students

One of the primary ways that I teach students is through my extensive work as a mentor and advisor. This is particularly true at the PhD level. During my seven years at UMN, I have served on the committees of 22 PhD students: as the advisor or co-advisor to nine students and as an additional committee member for 13 more. Eleven of those students have graduated: three of my advisees and eight other students. I am currently on the committees of nine APEC students—six as advisor or co-advisor and three as an additional committee member; I am also on one student's committee in the Carlson School. There are 60 students in the APEC PhD program, so I am to advisor to 10% of our doctoral students, and on the committees of 15% in total. Furthermore, I have also provided detailed feedback and guidance to over a dozen other PhD students whose committees I did not serve on, and I have served as the second-year paper advisor for seven PhD students.

I also use my PhD course in development economics, APEC 8704, to train students to be effective researchers. The grades in the course center around a year-long project to write a development economics research paper. Rather than simply telling students to write a paper, I guide them through the process: they begin by writing an “aspirational abstract” in class, in which they pitch a research idea by inventing results that would make for an interesting paper. They then get feedback from their peers on this pitch, and turn it into a full aspirational introduction, which is 10% of their course grade, and which I provide detailed comments on. This is followed several months later by a “zeroth draft”, which is a set of results and a real introduction explaining what they mean. The grade and feedback I provide on the zeroth draft then feeds into the final paper, which they have another eight months to complete. (Note that research papers in economics tend to be longer than those in other fields, and thus take longer to complete.) I also provide explicit “tricks of the trade” at the beginning of each lecture, which explain key aspects of how the research process works that are otherwise part of the “hidden curriculum”. Finally, I use the papers we read and discuss in the course as a jumping-off point to discuss empirical methods, point out open questions in the literature, and give students insight into how scientific knowledge is created.

My work as an advisor and mentor to PhD students is noteworthy not just in terms of quantity but also quality. When I serve on a committee for a doctoral student, I provide detailed written feedback on their dissertations twice (once for their oral prelim and once for their final defense). I also am extremely responsive to other queries about research, down to the level of troubleshooting students’ computer code and helping frame their research questions. I actively encourage my students to meet with external faculty who visit to give seminars, which has enhanced both their training as researchers as well as the experiences of the visiting scholars. My commitment to mentoring continues throughout students’ careers: I have written recommendation letters for eight PhD students, and regularly provide guidance and mentorship to students who are several years beyond their graduation dates. In helping doctoral students seek jobs, I emphasize the optimal fit for their own career and life goals, rather than pushing them to seek academic positions; I also provide detailed guidance on how to navigate the PhD job market, from applications through negotiating offers.

To provide PhD students with feedback on their work and help them stay connected to one another, I co-direct the Population Health and Development (PHD) Lab with Professor Audrey Dorélien of UMN’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. The PHD Lab meets once every two weeks; the meetings include presentations of work in progress and also professional development topics that range from discussions of new econometric techniques to sessions on research compliance. We began the lab group in 2018; prior to 2018, I helped organize a similar group for the labor economics students in the department with Professors Elizabeth Davis and Joseph Ritter.

Involving students in research

Uniting the research and teaching missions of the university is one of my key goals as a professor. In addition to including cutting-edge research in the courses I teach, I also make a point of involving students in actual research projects as much as possible. At the undergraduate level, this means encouraging them to do research projects that build on what I cover in APEC 3001, and to apply for UROP and MSROP grants. I also give students opportunities to work as research

assistants (RAs) on my projects, in roles that vary from informal volunteer RA work to the CLA undergraduate internship program to paid hourly positions. These research opportunities both help students learn whether economics research is a good career fit, and also provide them with valuable experience that they can mention in a résumé or cover letter and that I can discuss in a letter of recommendation. I take an expansive view of my responsibility to involve students in research, and have even found roles for motivated high school students on projects.

I also create extensive opportunities for my graduate students to collaborate on my research projects. I find potential graduate student collaborators through APEC 5151 and APEC 8704, as well as through the guest lecture that I give in APEC 8901 (our orientation course for first-year graduate students). I begin by giving them opportunities to contribute to projects by helping with key steps of the process such as fieldwork management, data processing, and grant applications. If that goes well, I invite them to join the paper as a coauthor. This has led to numerous successful collaborations: I have published four papers with coauthors who joined the project as graduate students, and have four other ongoing collaborations with student coauthors. Even in cases where the coauthored paper does not work out, this has led to major benefits for the students. For example, one student built on the idea and data from an attempted collaboration with me to write two papers that will go in his dissertation and another that he is pursuing as an independent research project.

Promoting and protecting student mental health

Mental health struggles are unfortunately common among my students. In such a large university, students can easily slip through the cracks; I am committed to not letting that happen. If a student who appears to be having a mental health crisis does not respond to my emails, I get in touch with their advisors. In one particularly serious case, I even called UMN Crisis Services to (anonymously) discuss options for helping the student. (Fortunately, the student in question reached out to me soon afterward.) Once I get in touch with a student having a mental health crisis, I help them through it. This can include excusing missed exams, which my syllabus—and University policy—allows to be dropped for legitimate health reasons, including mental health problems. I also encourage them to take advantage of campus mental health resources. My approach to mental health is not simply reactive: I teach about the economics of mental health in class and provide links to campus resources.

Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Fall 2020, I taught in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This required providing multiple course modalities: I taught courses to a limited in-person audience, while also streaming live via zoom; the beginning and end of the course were fully remote. Successfully adapting the class to do all of this is one of my proudest accomplishments. I put in dozens of hours figuring out how to make it work, from finding the optimal lecture hall for the course, to working with OCM to control the cameras correctly, to finding a whiteboard on wheels so I could hold half of my office hours outdoors. For fully remote teaching, I found a way to use my iPad as a virtual lightboard; this let me draw equations and graphs in front of my own video feed, without having to displace my slides. I also shared this work and knowledge with my colleagues, to help them navigate the process themselves.