

ECON 498:
Senior Departmental Honors Seminar
Amherst College – Fall 2023

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Office hours: Mondays 11:30am-12:30pm, Wednesdays 1:30-2:30pm, and by appointment. Use this [link](#) to sign up for a 20-minute slot. (I won't be available during office hours unless you've reserved a slot).

Class Meetings

Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:00-2:20pm in Converse 207

Course Overview¹

The senior departmental honors seminar supports the first half of senior thesis work in economics. Doing research in economics is likely different from almost anything you've done before. Most surprising is the level of engagement and personal commitment required. You must be ready to self-motivate to spend a lot of time and energy working on your thesis research. Your curiosity will drive you forward and help you overcome the inevitable challenges.

This workshop setting will support you in this process and enable you to be successful in your independent work. Together with our community of researchers, you will learn research methods, engage with economic research, and develop your own research agenda. You will be asked to engage in thoughtful reading and discussion of your own and others' work. By the end of the semester, you will have developed an extensive and detailed thesis proposal that will clearly state your research question, place that question into context, and outline your methodological and/or theoretical approach. You will be well into researching your project and will have begun writing your thesis.

This process is daunting and exciting, challenging and also a lot of fun. Be prepared to dive deep and push yourself, and also to provide support and thoughtful advice to your classmates.

Course Goals

The first goal of the thesis seminar is to develop a thesis topic and begin writing the thesis. As part of that process, you will continue to refine and expand your thesis proposal. We will spend class time presenting and discussing your thesis projects. You will discuss your work with Prof. Hyman, your preliminary advisors, your peers, and other faculty. Over the course of the semester you will decide on your topic, write a literature review, acquire your data and develop your methodology (if you are doing an empirical thesis) and develop your model (if you are doing a theory thesis). At the end of the semester you will present the work you have done so far on your thesis project to the entire Economics Department.

The second goal of the thesis seminar is to foster the development of the skills necessary to do research in economics. These skills include: formulating a sound research question, designing a solid project, reading the economics literature, developing theory, analyzing data, and conveying ideas clearly. These

¹ Most of the content in this syllabus is from past syllabi for this course taught by Professor Jessica Reyes, used with her permission.

skills are not easy to learn, but you can make a lot of progress if you dedicate yourself to this endeavor. Actually doing research is the best way to learn. Motivation, dedication, and curiosity are essential.

The third goal, in furtherance of the above two goals, is to develop a strong community of researchers. While independent research is indeed independent, we can learn a great deal from each other. We all thrive if we support each other in our work. Economics research, especially solo-authored work like your thesis, can feel isolating and lonely at times – a major goal of this seminar is to prevent those feelings.

Course Information

Collaborative Learning Environment. Research is fun, and we are all in this together! Students are expected to do their part to foster a positive learning environment. Please arrive on time and participate actively. Please make every effort to speak respectfully, listen attentively, engage with others and their ideas, help each other out, and participate positively in all class endeavors.

Community. Building community is a super important part of the economics thesis process. I encourage you to work together, or at least in the same physical space, in the Reading Room, the Computer Lab, or the Department Commons. These spaces are yours to build community, talk about what you're up to, support each other, and find that missing semicolon that is making your STATA code crash.

Fairness and Equity. All rules are transparently and clearly stated in this syllabus and in class, and all rules and deadlines will be applied equally and fairly to all students. Exceptions will be made in cases of personal or family crisis, or medical emergency: please do not hesitate to reach out to me, your academic advisor, or your class dean if you are under strain. There are many supportive resources on campus.

Honor Code. It is important that your work in this class, like in every class, be in accord with the Amherst College Honor Code. You must treat all people with respect, your work must be your own, and you must fully cite any sources you consult.

Moodle. Please check the class Moodle site regularly. I will post updated versions of this syllabus (with updates to the course schedule) throughout the semester.

Grades. Grades will be based on the work you do on your thesis and in the seminar, including but not limited to: thesis proposals, thesis presentations, in-class activities, class participation, and work with Prof. Hyman and your thesis advisor(s).

Books. There are no required books for this course, but I recommend a few: *Doing Economics* by Greenlaw. It can be purchased online; copies are also available in the Economics Computer Lab. I also recommend *Economical Writing* by McCloskey, and for those doing empirical work, *A Guide to Econometrics* by Kennedy and *Mastering Metrics* by Angrist and Pischke.

Articles. Mostly you will be reading articles of your own choosing in your particular area of inquiry.

Computing. STATA (and other software programs) are available for you to download, to use via the Virtual Computing Lab, and to use in the Economics Computer Lab in Converse. I will post a how-to .pdf on Moodle about how to download Stata. Questions? Ask IT.

Thesis Advisor(s). Students will be matched with one or two thesis advisors who will further support your work, helping you focus your research efforts and refine your topics. You are expected to meet with your advisor(s) at least bi-weekly, and to share intermediate work with them regularly.

Seminar Speakers. The Economics Department will be hosting a few outside speakers throughout the fall semester. You may also find other presentations of economic research and attend them with a few classmates. You should attend at least two economics research talks during the semester.

Stata TA. We have a new Stata TA, Onu Das, who is a UMass PhD candidate. Her schedule is Tue 5:45-8:45pm, Wed 3-7pm, Thu 5-8pm in our computer lab (Conv 311). Go to her with all of your Stata questions! She will be a valuable resource for the vast majority of you who are writing empirical theses.

Course Outline (subject to change)

Week	Date	Topic	Assignments Due
Introduction			
1	9/5	Introduction	Proposals (1 st draft) due 8/30
	9/7	- Introduction continued, and beginning of workshopping proposals - Discuss advisor matches, and how to work with advisors	Read all proposals; prepare compliment and question on each
2	9/12	- Workshopping Proposals, continued	Reach out to advisors to set weekly (or bi-weekly) meeting time
	9/14	- Amherst economics thesis alumni virtual panel, featuring guest speakers: Claire Holleman ('21), Maira Owais ('23), Fabian Rivera ('19), Julia Turner ('19), and maybe others	Come with a question.
Fleshing Out Proposal; Prior Literature; Narrowing in on Topic			
3	9/19	- Workshopping Proposals, continued	
	9/21	NO CLASS – family medical appointment in Boston – sorry!	
4	9/26	- <u>Guest Speaker</u> : Cat Hannula, Social Sciences Librarian. Discussing: library research strategies, developing a bibliography, reviewing the literature, finding data	
	9/28	- Discuss research process (slides) <u>Seminar Speaker</u> : Greg Phelan , Williams (Macro)	
5	10/3	- Discuss last Thursday's seminar - Discuss proposals: successes and challenges so far	Proposal, Draft 2
	10/5	<u>Guest Speaker</u> : Jessica Kem, Writing Center Director. Discussing how to weave annotated bibliography into a well-written literature review. <u>Seminar Speaker</u> : Matthew Gudgeon , Tufts (Labor/Public)	
Focused Work on Data, Methods, Model			
6	10/10	NO CLASS – Mid-Semester Break	
	10/12	Stata Session with Stata TA Onu Das and Prof. Hyman	
7	10/17	1-on-1 meetings with Prof Hyman in his office, with other students doing thesis work in classroom	
	10/19		
8	10/24	- General check in and discussion - Hyman lecture: how to write an introduction (i.e., how to motivate your work, use the previous literature to set up your RQ, describe your paper, discuss your contributions)	
	10/26	Team-Building Exercise	
9	10/31	Proposal workshopping	

	11/2	Proposal Workshopping	Proposal, Draft 3 (due 11/3)
<u>Crafting and Delivering Thesis Presentations</u>			
10	11/7	- Hyman lecture: Presenting economics research	
	11/9	<u>Guest Speaker:</u> Susan Daniels, Associate for Public Speaking. Discussing best practices in presenting your work. <u>Seminar Speaker:</u> Joonkyu Choi , Federal Reserve Board (Macro)	
11	11/13	<u>Seminar Speaker:</u> S.K. Ritadhi , Ashoka University	
	11/14	- Practice presentations	First Draft of Slides
	11/16	- Practice presentations <u>Seminar Speaker:</u> Julieta Caunedo , Cornell University (Development)	
--	11/21 11/23	NO CLASS: Thanksgiving Break	
12	11/29 11/30	PRESENTATIONS TO DEPARTMENT: Wednesday: 4-6:30pm Thursday: 4-6:30pm	Final Slides
<u>Wrap-Up and Next Steps</u>			
13	12/5	Discussion of presentations and comments received	
	12/7	Discussion of presentations and comments received	
	12/8	Seminar speaker: Benjamin Goldman , Harvard University	
14	12/12	Discussion of next steps, and January plan	Final Proposal (Full and Abbreviated)