

Advising Statement

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Advising graduate students—training people who have so far only been consumers of research not only to be producers of research, but to be *producers of original, high-quality research*—is one of the most rewarding aspects of my job. To make the advising relationship as fruitful as possible, here are the principles that guide my advising.

Preamble

The Department of Applied Economics is housed in the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences (CFANS). Why is there is an economics department in the college of agriculture at this university? If you have never asked yourself this question, now is a good time to do so.

The University of Minnesota, like other land-grant universities, has a Department of Applied Economics in addition to a Department of Economics because our department used to be the Department of Agricultural Economics. Though the name of the department has changed, its core mission has not, and a large number of us still operate in the discipline—at times distinct from Economics, and at times a field of Economics—known as Agricultural and Resource Economics (or “Agricultural and Applied Economics”), which has evolved from focusing almost exclusively on production economics up to the 1960s to studying economic problems related to the environment and natural resources, international agricultural development, food markets, agricultural policy, and so on nowadays.

Consistent with that, most of the faculty in the Department derive a significant fraction of their salary from the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station (MAES) and, as such, are tasked to do publicly useful research in line with the MAES mission.

The advantage of our department has historically laid in the study of the economics of food and nutrition, of natural resources and the environment, and of international agricultural development. It still does. To truly make the most of your time as a graduate student in the Department, I strongly encourage you to recognize the tremendous opportunities right at your doorstep within CFANS, to work on issues related to those topics covered in the field of Agricultural and Resource Economics, and to exploit the proximity of top scientists in the other departments within CFANS.

This does not mean you should count cows, to repeat the hackneyed shibboleth about agricultural economics. Over the years, I have worked on things like food prices and social unrest, farmers markets and food-borne illness, the measurement of food waste, commodity prices and rural mortality—and that’s in addition to more nuts-and-bolts methodological work in applied econometrics.

Understand: Though getting a PhD in Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota will prepare you for a number of careers, working on those topics for which our department has an advantage will maximize your chances of getting a tenure-track position at a research university, if that is what you are

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interested in—the Department’s natural market for research-oriented academic positions being other agricultural and resource economics departments at land-grant universities.

That said, here are the principles that guide my advising.

1. It is *your* responsibility to seek my advising and to schedule meetings with me. I travel a lot, and when I am in Saint Paul, I tend to be busy with teaching, meetings, or I am spending time with my family. I will always do my best to accommodate your requests for a meeting within ten business days. It is your responsibility, however, to ask for my availability. I don’t have “free” time: Whenever there is a hole in my schedule, I usually work on research, so I will not pursue you for a meeting.

2. I expect you to have invested in and to maintain your working tools. The foundation of any good piece of applied micro research includes (i) a good research question grounded in (ii) a sound theoretical framework analyzed via (iii) a solid research design. I don’t expect you to consistently have groundbreaking research ideas. I expect you, however, to have invested in learning micro theory and applied econometrics, and to be familiar with the literature in your chosen field, as those are your working tools. Because your coursework will only bring you up to an ever-moving research frontier, I expect you to learn more about the concepts you use and the literature you are working in than what is offered in regular coursework.

3. I aim to make you a better researcher *and* a better writer. The best research question grounded in the best theoretical framework studied with the best research design will go nowhere if your paper is poorly written. I have high standards for my own writing, and I have equally high standards for yours, so don’t be insulted if I correct your writing. Clear and concise scientific writing is at least as important as (if not more important than, in some cases) technical skills for a professional research economist. If you haven’t done so already, get a copy of Strunk and White, and make sure you read it. English is not everyone’s first language (it isn’t mine), and so I may direct you to the [Center for Writing](#) if I feel your English needs work.

4. I am neither a *de facto* coauthor nor do I shun coauthoring with grad students. Some advisors systematically put their name on their students’ papers, no matter how much they have contributed to them. Some other advisors see graduate students purely as research assistants whose names belong in an acknowledgements footnote, and those advisors almost never coauthor with their advisees. I enjoy coauthoring with students, but I see myself as a coauthor (and will ask for a byline) if and only if I have significantly contributed to a paper. I aim for balance: I see graduate students coauthoring with their advisors as part and parcel of the apprenticeship that is graduate school, and as a necessary step in the transition from student to independent scholar. I am happy to coauthor with graduate students if there is a double coincidence of research interests.

5. Good papers take time. If we do end up coauthoring, don’t try to rush me into working on our paper. I will get to it when I can make time for it, for three reasons. First, I have a very satisfying life outside of economics which I will not sacrifice in the name of work. Second, I am always working on several research projects, and any paper I coauthor with you is only one of the things I am working on. Lastly, writing a good paper takes time, and a lot of that time is not spent working on the paper itself, but is spent instead thinking about it while doing other things. My shortest time ever from idea to publication has been two years. That was exceptional. My average time from idea to publication is on the order of four or five years. [There are several strategies in the quality—quantity space that will help make you successful](#); mine tends to emphasize quality over quantity.

6. Letters of recommendation. I need at least two weeks to write letters of recommendation, and I cannot guarantee that I will submit letters with a deadline that is in less than two weeks. When you apply for jobs (and you should really apply for any job you are remotely qualified for; the decision criterion to be applied is “Do I prefer unemployment to that job?,” and unless the answer is “Yes,” you should apply), I will personalize up to five of your letters of recommendation.

7. Bellefleur Research Group (BeRG). Every semester, I organize a seminar just for my advisees which they must attend regularly and at which they must present once per semester. Whether you are an MS or PhD student, and whether you only have a research idea you’d like to discuss or would like to present a full paper, you have to present. I will schedule meetings of BeRG in a way that works for the largest number of people. The one presentation you make each semester at BeRG is your chance to get my undivided attention for an hour as well as to get feedback from me as well as from your peers. Participation and attendance are entirely optional, but I will keep track of who participates as a gauge of your interest in research, and I will be discussing that in the letters of recommendation I write for you. No remote attendance is allowed.

8. Feedback on papers. I organized BeRG so that I wouldn’t have to read multiple drafts for a student each semester. Still, occasions will arise where you might want feedback on a second paper in a given semester, or where you want me to have a second look at a given paper. In that case, give me at least one month to get to your paper and send you detailed written comments.

9. It’s later than you think. I aim to have you graduate in five years. If you go on the market in the summer between years four and five, this means you must have a job-market paper (JMP) ready to go by August of year four. Since a good paper takes time, this means you really need to start working on your job-market paper no later than the summer of your second-year. Don’t bet on your second-year paper becoming your JMP. At best, your second-year paper will make for a good paper in a three-paper dissertation, or something you might aim to publish before graduation.

10. Milestones. Most dissertations are composed of three papers. To pass your prelim oral, the standard is to have (i) one paper that is “finished,” meaning circulable as a working paper, and presentable at conferences, (ii) one paper that is advanced enough to have preliminary results, but which might need additional robustness checks, and (iii) an idea for a third paper, viz. a research question, some potential sources of data, and an idea of which research design you’ll use to answer your research question. The best dissertations (i.e., those that have a chance at winning awards) are those where (i) the three papers are on a coherent theme rather than a collection of papers on different topics, and where (ii) the author shows methodological breadth (e.g., solid theory in addition to solid empirics, observational and experimental methods, different research designs). Ultimately, if you find a tenure-track position, the market has spoken more loudly than three or four of your professors have, and you are almost surely ready to defend.

I turned my answer to many common graduate-student questions into a book titled [*Doing Economics: What You Should Have Learned in Grad School—but Didn’t.*](#) If we end up working together, get a copy of the book and read it so you can be up to speed on the various areas of life as a researcher in economics.

Thank you for granting me the privilege of being part of your education.