

## Teaching Foundation Courses in Statistics and Microeconomics to MPA students at Cornell

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Cornell's Institute for Public Affairs (CIPA) is a deliberately interdisciplinary and flexible MPA program that utilizes the full range of resources available at Cornell to allow our fellows to craft an MPA that reflects their personal public leadership aspirations. To prepare our fellows to take advantage of Cornell's offerings our program features a set of required key foundation courses including courses in microeconomics and inferential statistics/regression analysis. For the last four years I have been the instructor for both the CIPA microeconomics and the statistics courses—these are courses specially tailored for a professional Masters student who will be working in the public affairs/public policy arena.

The policy-oriented microeconomics course I teach is pitched at the intermediate level although the course requires no prerequisites. The primary goals of this course are (1) to learn the core concepts of microeconomics and (2) to develop analytical problem-solving skills. The course mission is that by achieving these two goals our fellows will have the foundation to understand the rich array of economic applications that will be presented in subsequent more specialized courses. The problem sets, lectures and exams are built around public policy examples—both domestic and international. In addition, students are required to write two short papers. The first short paper asks students to pick a policy-oriented recent news article on any microeconomics topic from a major newspaper and then, using the tools (including graphs) and terminology learned in the course, explain the economics “behind” the article. Most news articles rarely, if ever, mention the economic terms or models discussed even though the implicit economics is typically very relevant to fully understanding the article. Students find that if they can identify and think about even one or two economic elements in a news story, they understand far more about the issue than most other readers, who only read the words as they are written on the page and are now better suited to contemplate policy alternatives. In the second writing assignment, due on the last day of the semester, they choose an article from either the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* or the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* that relates to a topic of personal interest. The purpose of this assignment is to teach them how to distill current academic research (that is often quite technical and full of academic jargon) into language that makes it suitable to be shared with a broader audience. This is a skill they will need in much of their future work as many of their constituents, clients or colleagues will not be economists and, thus, an ability to translate economic research into everyday language will be very valuable.

The inferential statistics and regression analysis course I teach has similar goals in that I try to balance a rigorous treatment of the concepts and analytical methods with a deep appreciation for the usefulness of good empirical research in addressing public affairs concerns.

