Advice on a path to a PhD in Public Policy

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Introduction

In the Fall of 2023, I was asked to be a part of a panel of recent economics graduates hosted by the [Womxn in Economics](#) undergraduate club at Northwestern University, my alma mater. To prepare for the panel, I responded to questions about my path to pursuing a PhD in Public Policy. I have put my responses in this written form to share more widely.

This is all advice based on my personal experiences. Please take it with a grain of salt, but I hope you may find it useful.

PhD-specific life and advice

What is a day in the life as a PhD student in Public Policy?

The PhD life for me is a mix of **two extremes**: going off into my office and doing a lot of **independent tasks** on the one hand, and, on the other hand, getting out into the world and **sharing my work** and ideas with other people.

I usually start my day by reading things in my inbox to catch up on new academic work and policy issues. I'll skim several abstracts of new research and new policy proposals from the federal government, for example.

Then I'll usually either have a "research" day or a "meetings" day, with 2-3 of each a week, on average.

On a "research day", I work independently a range of tasks, including:

- Reading papers or policy documentation to have a better understanding of the background or literature
- Collecting data, including
  - Web scraping data
  - Drafting surveys
  - Applying to access administrative datasets
  - Collecting policy information by visiting government websites or reading policy documentation
- Doing administrative tasks, like applying for approval from offices that review ethics of a study (IRB), or getting a legal agreement signed to access restricted administrative data
- Cleaning & analyzing data using Stata & R

- Writing research proposals to help fund my research projects
- Preparing presentations
- Writing (and rewriting) academic papers
- Writing non-academic pieces: short articles, tweets, etc.

On a "meetings" day, I'm either a consumer of other people's work, or I share and get feedback on my own work.

Consuming other people's work:

- Going to seminars and workshops to see other people present their work
- Meeting with visiting seminar speakers from other institutions
- Going to external conferences, once every 6 months or so

Meetings about my own work:

- Meeting with my advisors. I have one advising meeting a week, on average, for 20-45 min.
- Checking in with my classmates about what we are working on, the challenges we're running into, etc. I meet with both classmates who I am co-authoring with and classmates who are working on their own, separate projects. I have about 2-3 of these meetings per week.
- Presenting my work internally at Harvard, or at conferences. Per semester, I try to schedule 2 more formal presentations for later-stage work and 2 more informal presentations for earlier-stage work or new research ideas. I present more than a lot of other students, but I find it extremely useful! If I'm teaching or taking classes, I present less often since classes take up more of my time.
- Discussing my work in smaller calls with people in policy and stakeholders, e.g. people in government, think tanks, & nonprofits.

What advice would you give to students hoping to pursue higher education in economics? What would you like to have known when you embarked on that journey? What has enabled you to succeed as an academic?

Find good mentors. Find mentors and advisors that are a good fit for you. As I've mentioned before, mentors are key for guiding you through the academic path. What makes a good advisor for you is likely unique, so figure out who you can work well with, and who is willing to invest time in you and your success. It is also helpful to have a team of people who each have different strengths.

Learn research by doing it. Learn how to do independent research slowly, starting with "training wheels" on and slowly taking them off. This usually means starting off as a research assistant, then collaborating with a faculty member on a project or two, and then eventually working on your own. The best way to learn about research is to do it, and it's best to learn with people who have experience but who will also give you a bit of independence. Research takes a long time and is flexible and unpredictable at times, so there's no way you'll understand exactly what you're doing in the beginning. But working with someone who has research experience is how you learn. Even as an experienced researcher, you're always trying and learning new things, which is even a kind of "meta-skill" you can develop over time.

Learn how to code with real, messy data. Especially if you're interested in empirical research, it is very helpful learn how to code and work with data early on. Knowing how to run one regression in Stata is, unfortunately, not enough. You need to work with real data that is messy, and the only way to do that is to work on a project. Stata, R, and Python are the key languages for empirical research in economics and related fields.

Do a seniors or masters thesis. If you're interested in a PhD, I would do a thesis as an undergraduate or masters student and really do your best on it and seek out guidance throughout the year. Several PhD program applications will ask for a writing sample, and it usually needs to be something that you wrote independently. A thesis is often the best fit for this.

Apply for fellowships. My other advice is to apply early for all the fellowships you are eligible for. I was lucky enough to receive the NSF Fellowship, which has supported my stipend for three years in graduate school. Without that, I would have had to spend a lot more time teaching or applying for other fellowships during the PhD for financial support. With the fellowship, I have had more freedom to focus more of my time on research, which is very valuable for being able to focus and improve the quality of my work.

Tell us more about the journey thus far of striving to, and of course, eventually obtaining your Ph.D. in public policy on the economics track at the Harvard Kennedy School. What has it been like to pursue a Ph.D.? What is something about pursuing a Ph.D. that you only learned once starting it? Any differences between the perception and reality of the experience?

Pursuing a PhD (and my PhD program in particular) is very flexible and open. The first couple years are coursework meant to get you to "research frontier" by teaching you cutting-edge methodologies and getting you to read and deeply understand key literature in your fields. The third year and beyond—and to some extent before that—is all about producing your own research. I think having independence, initiative, and being entrepreneurial is what it takes to be successful in this stage. I have my three to five main faculty advisors that I meet with individually once every three weeks at most. So the reality is that you really are meant to be on your own to a large degree. That is an amazing opportunity, but it can be intimidating to many at first. That's why having "training wheels" on and guidance earlier on will set yourself up well for this stage.

You are also a teaching fellow for masters-level classes. Tell us more about your teaching pedagogy. Given your perspective now as a teacher, how has your opinion on students changed? What advice would you give students now that you see the world from the other side, as a teacher/professor?

As a graduate student, grades no longer matter. So when you take a class, you really need to **really think about what you want to get out of a class**. For example, I've found it's less useful to do try to do all the readings, but instead focus on the topics I'm most interested in. Or another good reason to take a class could be to learn a specific skill, like writing or coding. I think taking on that perspective that *you*—and not the professors—are in the driver's seat when it comes to your learning is useful. I think this is still possible as an undergraduate student, but it's harder because you don't know what you don't know. That's why it's especially important to find mentors and get their advice early on.

As an instructor for graduate policy students in applied econometrics, I recognized that not everyone is going to care about the technical, quantitative methods in detail. For example, many of those students will never run a regression in their lives after the class is over. That made me really think: what do I want people to remember or take away from this class in 6 months or 6 years from now? I think that changed the way a thought about teaching a lot. First, I care a lot more about the examples I chose to illustrate ideas. Is this something intuitive, striking, and relevant, so that it is easier to remember? Second, I realized it's important to communicate to students why we care about this skill, or this policy question before diving right into the technical or "mathy" stuff. Technical skills are part of what you teach, of course. But math is just a tool to answer this other substantive question that we care about. With that in mind, it's important to frame the problem in a way that I can get students to care about why the technical stuff matters. Students in public policy demand that kind of perspective even more than other kinds of students.

More general advice

Talk about a challenge you have faced studying economics or in your professional life and how you overcame it. What did you learn from this experience?

One challenge that I had was feeling imposter syndrome, especially early on in grad school. I would walk into a seminar room with famous people with big names and think my ideas were not important or polished enough for their attention. I should have been reaching out to them for advice and meeting with them to get feedback on my work, but I was so star struck or intimidated, that I didn't reach out! Relatedly, presenting in front a bunch of these professors for the first time was very intimidating. It has taken a few years, but slowly I've gotten over it (mostly). To get over this, I remind myself that I have a new perspective and new ideas to contribute. Building that confidence has taken time but comes with the experience of putting myself out there. It also really helps to have cheerleaders in my advisors, peers, friends, and family.

Uncertainty is a part of life. How do you deal with uncertainty in your undergraduate studies and professional life, if it applies to you? How has your relationship to uncertainty in life evolved the older you have become?

The research process is very uncertain and can be unforgiving. You may work on something for a long time, and you're uncertain if it's going to work out. By "work out", I mean things like, will you get access to the data that you need? And once you get the data, will you find something new and interesting worth writing a paper about? Then, a project may work out from your perspective, but peer reviewers or an academic audience at a talk have several concerns about the validity of your findings, and you need to figure out a way to address their concerns.

This means there are two important, interrelated skills as an early-career researcher. The first is **knowing when to keep pursuing a project idea** and when to pivot your time and attention to something else. The second is learning **how to take constructive feedback and criticism**.

A lot of people also say you need to learn how to eliminate bad ideas quickly. I think lack of feasibility is a good reason to pivot to a different project. But I think that initially negative or lukewarm feedback

from others is not a good reason to stop pursuing an idea, especially if it's something that you think is important.

If your ideas or project are not well received right away, it is an important skill to figure out why. Am I just not communicating my ideas clearly enough? Is there something particular that this person cares about that I should pay more attention to? Or is their concern worth disregarding? (This is somewhat rare.) Do I need to motivate my research question better? One thing to keep in mind is that you, as the main researcher, have probably spent more time than anyone else thinking about this thing, and so you know the most about it. The key thing is being able to communicate what you're doing to others and why it's important. If people don't understand that right away, I usually take it as, let me go back to the drawing board, and see what I can do to convince you that this is important and interesting. And so I keep going. That kind of stubbornness is a useful skill in research, I think! It's also important to see the feedback as about the research, and not about you as a person or your skills.

If you could talk to yourself in college now, what would you tell them? What would you have liked to have known now that you knew then?

I think I would have given myself advice about **building good advising relationships with faculty**.

First, recognize that **faculty are there to help** and engage with students like you. So as an undergraduate student, don't be afraid to ask for help. You can ask for help if you feel stuck in a class, if you're interested in becoming a research assistant, to ask about career advice or general advice, etc.

At the same time, recognize that **faculty are also busy people with limited time** and that they are typically on much longer time horizons than students. While an undergraduate's time horizon may be week-to-week with their class schedule, a professor's time horizon is closer to months or years. So being patient and letting faculty know about things well in advance (e.g. asking for a recommendation letter) is best practice to be respectful and professional.

Also, the extent to which you can "**manage up**" with faculty is very helpful.

- **Advice for emailing.** For example, keep emails brief and specific, saying exactly what you're looking for. Make it as easy as possible to schedule a meeting, and send calendar invites and reminders. Especially if you're cold emailing, don't be offended if someone doesn't get back to you right away. They are probably just busy, so it's okay to send a reminder after a week, or sooner if the issue is more urgent. Another useful tip is cc'ing their assistant if they have one listed on their website, especially when reaching out for the first time. Many faculty rely on their assistants to help with scheduling, so this can also help move things along.
- **Advice for office hours.** If you're going to office hours, come with a set of specific questions, and/or send them a page or two of written materials in advance. As you build a relationship with someone, talk to them about their personal preferences and expectations for an advising relationship, and try to adhere to them.

How do you think about networking?

The social science academic world is very small: people you meet are in a network of people who research the same issues, and everyone (eventually) knows each other.

If someone tells you that you should talk to someone, do it! These leads can lead to future job opportunities, new relationships, etc. Take advantage of connections and knowledge that other people have.

Is there anything else you would like to share with current economics students, any final thoughts, or words of encouragement?

There are a lot of great people in the economics profession. Seek out a mentor or two early and keep a good relationship with them.

My general advice is to always be doing something that you're genuinely passionate about and interested in. Then, wherever that leads you in your career will make you happy, and a bonus is that you will do better quality work.

My personal path

Why did you decide to study economics?

As an undergraduate freshman at Northwestern University, I started in the Mathematical Methods in the Social Science (MMSS) program. MMSS is an adjunct major, so I needed to pick a second major. A lot of students paired MMSS with an economics major, so I started taking introductory economics classes as a freshman. From taking these intro classes, I learned what economics really was. I saw that economics was a set of quantitative & conceptual tools that could be applied to many things, including social problems that I cared about like poverty and inequality. So I stuck with the major and kept going.

As you continued your studies, how did your understanding of yourself and what you wanted to do with your life evolve?

At first, I was very interested in development economics. Then, I became involved in U.S.-based research as a part-time research assistant at the Two-Generation Education research initiative, run by Professors Lindsay Chase-Lansdale & Teresa Sommer. I started this position in my sophomore year and by the time I was a junior, I knew I wanted to go to graduate school. I saw that there was still so much work to do to understand policy issues related to poverty in the U.S., and I thought that I was personally better suited to study U.S. policy issues than those in other countries. By the time I graduated, I was interested in working on topics in public and labor economics in the U.S. context. The community and mentorship I had with the Two-Generation Education lab and professors at the economics department were key to figuring this out and connecting me with other people to talk to in order to figure out how to make this path work.

Upon graduating from Northwestern, you worked as a Research Specialist Intermediate at the University of Virginia's Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. Tell us more about that. Why did you decide to take this as one of your first jobs out of school?

By the end of undergrad, I knew I wanted to go to graduate school. I learned that was becoming increasingly common for students to do a predoctoral fellowship, or "predoc" for 1, 2 or sometimes 3 years before starting a PhD program in economics or a related field. So I applied to many of these opportunities, and I'm so grateful that I had the position at the University of Virginia. I really learned

how to do research when working full-time as a research assistant (RA) in a way I couldn't by only working part-time.

The mentorship I had from my three faculty mentors was amazing; shout out to Jennifer Doleac, Sally Hudson, and Adam Leive. As a full-time RA, I was connected to a research community, but unlike other positions, there weren't many other predocs around me. In my experience, I had a fair bit of independence, and I had mentors that learned to trust me. Eventually they would say, here's this interesting policy question, see what you can learn about it, and I would go off and try to collect data, do some background research, etc. Then I would come back a few days or a week later and they would help me figure out how to keep going on the project from there. That experience was much more similar to my day-to-day in graduate school than anything I did in undergrad, or even the first two years of graduate school taking classes.

I also had the opportunity to teach and take classes during those years. That was an amazing opportunity for me to build up my skill set even more before going to grad school.

You research and write about Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): the largest nutrition assistance program in the U.S, extensively. Tell us more about why SNAP and public policy more generally appeals to you so much as a topic of inquiry. How did you find the specific topic within economics that really piques your curiosity?

I started researching SNAP when I was a research assistant at the University of Virginia. Among all the topics that I studied there, I found it the most interesting because I had a personal connection to the importance of social safety net programs in people's lives. When I was a research assistant and early grad student, I got pretty in the weeds into SNAP policy documentation and literature, and then I began to realize how the program is relatively understudied. There are a lot of basic questions about the program that we don't know the answers to yet. I think a barrier for economists to study the program is that the rules are somewhat complicated. To study something well, you must understand the context well, and that's something I'm trying to do with SNAP.

I have also always liked research topics that are very applied and policy relevant. As in, if I answer this question, can that knowledge be considered and potentially change decision-making to improve people's lives? I think I saw that close connection to policy in the SNAP space, which is something else that keeps me motivated to study this topic.