

Teaching statement — Evan Riehl, Cornell University

I’ve taught three courses during my six years at Cornell:

- **ILR 2400 – Economics of Wages & Employment.** A required sophomore/junior level course for the ILR major.
- **ILR 3445/Econ 3770 – Inequality in U.S. Higher Education.** An upper-level economics elective course that is cross-listed in ILR and economics.
- **ILR 7450/Econ 7420 – Seminar in Labor Economics I.** A 2nd-year PhD course in labor economics that attracts students from the PhD programs in economics, the Brooks Policy School, and Applied Economics and Management.

In addition to these courses, I’ve also received teaching credit for organizing the Workshop in Labor Economics (ILR 9400/Econ 7845), which is a seminar series for visiting faculty speakers. Table 1 shows the semesters in which I’ve taught each course.

Table 2 shows my mean evaluation scores in each course, excluding the workshop. I’ve received consistently high evaluation scores in my classes, with an average of 4.76/5 for item Q15: “This was an excellent course.” In 2023, I was awarded the ILR School’s MacIntyre Award for Exemplary Teaching and Advising.

Below I describe my objectives and teaching philosophy for each course. I also provide details on my mentorship of students through advising and co-authoring.

Table 1: Courses taught at Cornell by semester

Semester	ILR 2400 Econ. of Wages & Employment (Undergrad)	ILR 3445/ Econ 3770 Inequality in U.S. Higher Education (Undergrad)	ILR 7450/ Econ 7420 Seminar in Labor Economics I (PhD)	ILR 9400/ Econ 7845 Workshop in Labor Economics (Organizer)	Total teaching credits
Fall 2017			X		1.0
Spring 2018		X			1.0
Fall 2018			X		1.0
Spring 2019	X	X			2.0
Fall 2019			X	X	1.5
Spring 2020	X	X		X	2.5
Fall 2020				X	0.5
Spring 2021				X	0.5
Fall 2021				X	0.5
Spring 2022					0.0
Fall 2022	X		X		2.0
Spring 2023		X			1.0

Table 2: Mean evaluations by course — Scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)

Question	Econ. of Wages & Employment			Inequality in US Higher Education				Seminar in Labor Economics I			
	Spr 2019	Spr 2020	Fall 2022	Spr 2018	Spr 2019	Spr 2020	Spr 2023	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2022
Q01. The instructor was well prepared for class.	4.8	5.0	4.9	4.9	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Q02. The instructor encouraged students to ask questions.	4.6	4.8	4.7	4.9	5.0	4.9	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.9	4.9
Q03. The instructor helped me to learn to think more critically.	4.4	4.8	4.6	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.9	4.9	4.9	4.9
Q04. The instructor stated the objectives of the course at the beginning of the semester.	4.8	4.9	4.7	4.9	5.0	4.9	4.9	5.0	4.9	5.0	4.9
Q05. The instructor provided clear explanations of course materials in lectures.	4.6	4.8	4.7	4.8	5.0	5.0	4.8	4.8	4.8	5.0	5.0
Q06. The instructor was willing to help students in office hours.	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.9	5.0	5.0	4.7	5.0
Q07. The instructor presented lectures in an organized fashion.	4.7	5.0	4.7	4.8	5.0	4.9	4.8	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Q08. The instructor is an excellent teacher.	4.5	4.7	4.7	4.8	5.0	4.9	4.8	4.9	4.9	5.0	4.8
Q09. The instructor assigned readings that were clearly related to course objectives.	4.5	4.8	4.3	4.8	4.9	4.9	4.9	4.9	5.0	5.0	5.0
Q10. The instructor gave examinations on important aspects of course materials.	4.3	4.8	4.6	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.8	5.0	4.9	5.0	4.9
Q11. The instructor provided adequate feedback on my work in the course.	4.3	4.5	4.4	4.8	4.8	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.9	5.0	4.9
Q12. The instructor realized when students needed further clarification.	4.1	4.5	4.5	4.7	4.9	4.5	4.8	4.8	4.7	4.9	4.9
Q13. The instructor presented contrasting points of view.	4.3	4.8	4.6	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.6	4.9	4.5	4.9	4.8
Q14. The instructor combined theory and practical applications.	4.7	4.9	4.7	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.9	5.0	5.0	4.9	5.0
Q15. This was an excellent course.	4.1	4.7	4.6	4.9	5.0	4.9	4.7	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.9
Responses	12	20	43	18	21	18	16	9	10	11	13
Students enrolled	28	39	59	42	42	44	49	14	14	21	27
Response rate	43%	51%	73%	43%	50%	41%	33%	64%	71%	52%	48%

Economics of Wages & Employment (undergraduate)

Economics of Wages & Employment is a required sophomore/junior level labor economics course for the ILR major. The course teaches theoretical concepts in labor demand and labor supply, as well as topics like discrimination, immigration, unions, and inequality. As with my other colleagues who teach this course, I use the *Modern Labor Economics* textbook by Ron Ehrenberg and Bob Smith, and I follow the book pretty closely.

My main pedagogical goal for ILR 2400 is to teach students to “think like an economist.” ILR students take labor-related courses in a variety of fields, including human resources, organizational behavior, and law. Thus many ILR students take only four economics courses during their undergraduate years (intro micro, intro macro, ILR 2400, and an elective). My goal for the course is to give students exposure to how economists evaluate policies like minimum wages and welfare programs, while acknowledging the pros and cons of the economic approach. For example, I spend time discussing the plausibility of the core assumptions of utility and profit maximization, and then show how these assumptions allow economists to make clear predictions.

Many ILR students find the course to be challenging because of its “math-y” nature, so my teaching approach is to go slowly through the most difficult material. I do most lectures on the chalkboard with the aim of lingering on the important concepts and derivations. I draw lots of graphs and define key terms in both notation and in words. I think I’ve gotten better at pacing the material each time that I’ve taught the course, and this improvement is reflected in the trend of my evaluation scores. I also try to break up some of the math/notation with class discussions, where appropriate. For example, I engage students by asking about potential mechanisms for wage gaps or the shapes of earnings profiles.

I give students lots of practice to support their learning of the material. I assign three problem sets and three exams to minimize the weight of any particular assignment in the overall grade. I do not hesitate to work through problem set questions in office hours, as I’ve found that students find it helpful to see a step-by-step example of how to solve the problems. As a result, I often have robust attendance in office hours. After my first semester of teaching, the most frequent comment that I received in my evaluations was to give more practice for the problem sets and exams. Since then I’ve provided more practice problems in each iteration of the course, and students seem to be appreciative of this.

A key objective of the course is to learn how to apply the theoretical concepts to real-world issues and policies. I frequently begin class with a contemporary news article or a motivational chart or graph to help bring the material to life. This works particularly well in the final third of the class when we discuss topics such as discrimination or immigration. I also assign a group paper that asks students to evaluate a policy or issue in labor economics using simple data visualization or analysis. I encourage students to pick a topic that they find particularly interesting, evaluate the topic using the theory from class, discuss one related economics journal article and their contribution relative to that article, and present some empirical results that inform their research question. I’m often quite impressed with the quality of the students’ papers and with their ability to apply the material from class.

Inequality in U.S. Higher Education (undergraduate)

Inequality in U.S. Higher Education is an upper-level undergraduate elective course that is cross-listed between ILR and economics. I was asked to design a course on a topic of my choosing that would satisfy ILR's economics elective requirement. I designed this course from scratch during the spring of my first year and have now taught it four times. The goal of the course is to introduce students to topics in the economics of higher education and to the theoretical and empirical methods that economists use to analyze these topics.

The core reading material is economics journal articles on topics in higher education. For example, we read Bettinger et al. (2012) on the FAFSA as a barrier to college enrollment, Sacerdote (2001) on peer effects for Dartmouth roommates, and Chetty et al. (2020) on the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility. I try to keep the readings current and topical; in 2023, I added new lectures to discuss recent papers on Harvard social clubs (Michelman et al., 2022) and the effects of student loan ability on long-run outcomes (Black et al., 2023).

To help students in reading and comprehending the journal articles, I begin the course with several methods lectures that give background on regressions and empirical strategies. One of the most challenging aspects of teaching this course is to make it work for both economics students—who are typically more comfortable with economic concepts and regressions—and also for ILR students—who have less familiarity with economics and econometrics. Thus I try to discuss the material at both more- and less-technical levels, and whenever possible I present empirical results using graphs in addition to regression tables.

Another key objective of the course is to learn how economists evaluate contemporary issues in higher education. For this I ask students to read periodicals or book chapters that were written by education economists. Most prominently, I spend three lectures on the Harvard and University of North Carolina affirmative action cases (which the Supreme Court issued rulings on in June 2023). We read parts of the expert reports that were written by Peter Arcidiacono, David Card, and Caroline Hoxby, and we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical evidence on each side. These reports are great teaching materials because they cover discrimination, inequality, and causal inference, and students find them to be engaging.

I assign several problems sets that ask students to do simple data analysis in the statistical programming language *R*. One problem set gives students practice in interpreting regressions using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Another problem set gives students college-level data from Chetty et al. (2020) and asks them to compute college mobility rates under different assumptions. Since students in my course have different levels of exposure to statistical programming, I decided to write these program sets in *R* and assume no prior experience. I give students most of the commands and ask them to tweak a few lines. The idea is to expose students to a bit of coding and get them to think critically about some of the class topics. In my evaluations, students often write that they enjoyed getting some exposure to *R*.

The other main requirements are a final paper, a prelim, and a final exam. The paper asks students to propose an empirical design that would evaluate a policy or hypothesis in higher education. The goal is to have students apply the empirical methods from the papers we've

read to a topic of their choosing. The focus of the paper is on the research question, related literature, and empirical design. I don't require students to obtain data or present results since I think this is too much for one semester (although I give students the flexibility to include some data analysis if they like). Instead, I ask students to focus on developing a hypothetical experiment that would convincingly answer their research question. The exams contain short answer and essay questions that ask students to think critically about the readings and lectures.

Seminar in Labor Economics I (PhD)

Labor I is the first semester of the second-year PhD field course in labor economics. I designed the course to cover topics that were not taught in Labor II, which was ongoing when I arrived. These topics have changed slightly each year depending on who was teaching Labor II. In most years, my course has covered causal inference, empirical strategies, human capital, selection, local labor markets, school choice, matching & mechanism design, and a few other scattered topics like value added models and peer effects.

My teaching philosophy is to assign one seminal paper on each topic and give students an incentive to read it carefully. I typically give one lecture per week on a seminal paper that has an important theoretical or conceptual component. For example, I teach human capital using Card (2001), and I teach Roy selection using Willis and Rosen (1979). During this lecture, I call on students at random to answer assigned reading questions to stimulate discussion and to create a little pressure to do the reading. (I learned this trick from Kate Ho when I took her PhD course in Industrial Organization, and I've found that this incentive works quite well.) After we discuss the paper, I give an overview of the related literature and open questions. In the other class of each week, I have students give 30-minute presentations on new empirical papers that I (or the students) find exciting. I also begin the course with several "methods" lectures that discuss causal inference, regressions, empirical strategies, and the canonical CES model of labor supply and demand.

The other requirements for the class have changed over the four semesters that I've taught it. I used to assign several problem sets with the goal of introducing students to statistical software packages and computing techniques. But given the rising skill and experience of incoming PhD students, I've stopped assigning these problem sets, as I think they are now unnecessary for most students. (I still post them online as a resource for those who find them useful.) I also used to give an essay-based final exam, but I've also stopped requiring this since many of my students don't plan to work on labor economics as their main research area.

Thus the other main requirement for the course is a research proposal. The goal of the proposal is to help students get started on project that could become a future term paper, a second-year department paper, and/or a chapter of their dissertation. I do not expect students to write a complete paper with empirical results in the first semester of their second year, so the focus of the proposal is on the research question, related literature, and potential data sources. I try to be flexible on the structure of the proposal and the topics so that it is beneficial even to students for whom labor is not their primary interest. I ask students to turn in an outline

halfway through the semester, and then I meet with each student individually to give feedback. The final proposal (roughly 10 pages in length) is due by the end of the semester.

Workshop in Labor Economics (organizer)

I was the organizer of Cornell's Workshop in Labor Economics for five semesters (Fall 2019–Fall 2021), for which I received 0.5 teaching credits per semester. The workshop is a seminar series for visiting faculty speakers in labor economics. My work involved soliciting suggestions, inviting speakers, arranging co-sponsoring with other workshop organizers, and meeting with speakers during their visits.

Mentoring

At the PhD level, I've been a dissertation committee member for the following students:

- Samuel Dodini (2021 grad, Placement: Post-doc, Norwegian School of Economics);
- Nikolai Boboshko (2022 grad, Placement: Associate, Cornerstone Research);
- Martha Johnson (2022 grad, Placement: Economist, Anthem Health Insurance);
- Kevin Ng (2022 grad, Placement: Research Analyst, CNA);
- Christa Deneault (2023 grad, Placement: Economist, Federal Trade Commission);
- Germán Reyes (2023 grad, Placement: Assistant Professor, Middlebury College);
- Senan Hogan Hennessy (rising 4th year);
- Hyewon Kim (rising 4th year);
- Yaling Xu (rising 4th year).

In addition to this formal mentorship, I've made an effort to help other graduate students with their research through one-on-one meetings and by participating in our labor PhD student research seminar (LWIPS). I've also co-authored four papers with four different graduate students: Kevin Ng (Ng and Riehl, 2023), Germán Reyes (Machado, Reyes, and Riehl, 2023; Reyes, Riehl, and Xu, 2023), Meredith Welch (Riehl and Welch, 2023), and Ruqing Xu (Reyes, Riehl, and Xu, 2023).

At the undergraduate level, I've been an honors thesis advisor for the following students:

- Ludvig Cedemar (2020, economics, primary advisor) — Winner of Uri M. Possen Award for best undergraduate honors thesis in economics;
- Megan Shkolyar (2020, ILR, primary advisor);
- Alexandra Macdonald (2020, ILR, second reader);
- Richmond Addae (2023, ILR, primary advisor).

I supervised ILR credit internships for Yu An Chen (2021) and David Cytryn (2023). I've also written roughly 15 references letters for undergraduate students who were applying to jobs or graduate programs.

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