

RCTs for Poverty Reduction

Spring 2020

Department of Economics, College of William and Mary

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OFFICE HOURS: Wed: 10 -11 am

Fri: 2 - 3 pm

Course Description

Randomized controlled trials (RCT's) have increasingly become a common tool used by researchers and policy makers alike, to evaluate governmental and non-governmental programs to better understand which policies work and which do not. This course introduces students to the use and scope of randomized controlled trials (RCT's) for tackling poverty, and related issues around the world. The challenges for scaling up such policies, and subsequent implications for using RCT's to evaluate these policies are further explored.

Prerequisites

The main prerequisites for this course are Introductory Microeconomics and Introductory Macroeconomics. A background in econometrics is also useful but not required. An outline of the techniques will be taught at the beginning of the semester (and elsewhere as required). You should also take advantage of office hours if you need additional help with methods.

Grading Policy

Grades in this course will be based on the following:

1. The top 3 grades out of four problem sets (30%). Problem sets will be due in class. **No late problem sets will be accepted**, including problem sets turned in after class on the due date. It is important to note that a written response based on each of the three COLL 300 public lectures, will be a part of these problem sets (more on the COLL 300 requirements in point 3 below)

2. Research Project (70%). You will form a research question in economic development that can be answered using an RCT, and write a proposal that describes the question, the context, and the methods that you would use if you were to implement the study in an actual field setting. Note that this project may be individually, or in groups of up to two students. Grading for this project will be based on three activities:
 - (a) Preliminary proposal (10%). Students will present their preliminary ideas in class in early March (before Spring break) and obtain feedback from each other and from me. This will involve presenting the idea in class (a few minutes).
 - (b) A presentation (40%) in class at the end of the semester, that summarizes the research question, and the research design for the proposed RCT. A brief version of this presentation will become a part of the COLL 300 Academic Festival at the end of the semester.
 - (c) A write-up (20%) of about 5 pages or less, that summarizes your research question and research design.

You are encouraged to come and discuss your ideas with me before any of the presentations and deadlines. I will share more detailed information on the components of the presentation and write-up during the semester.

3. COLL 300 Requirements. Please note that attendance at the COLL 300 activities are mandatory, and several of the assignments (point 1 above) will include materials based on these activities. This course ties in well with the theme of “Scale”.
 - Visitors: Students will attend three COLL 300 visitor public events and write short responses based on the talks and how they relate to the topics in this course (see point 1 above). This year’s visitors are Ana L. Moore, Andrew Farnsworth, and Daniel Hernández-Salazar. You can find information about the visitors here: <https://www.wm.edu/as/undergraduate/coll/300/campus-coll-300/bor-visitors/index.php>
 - Academic Festival: Please see point 2 above for how the final project ties into the academic festival.

Grading

While we take care to grade as fairly and consistently as possible, on rare occasions there may be grading mistakes. If you feel that your test has been graded incorrectly, you must submit it to

me, along with an explanation of the issue. You must do this within 2 weeks of the exam being returned (not the date you pick it up) for it to be regraded.

Blackboard

The blackboard site contains the most recent electronic version of this syllabus. Problem sets, problem set and exam solutions, and handouts will also be posted. Announcements will also be made via Blackboard. However, note that since instructions and smaller announcements are also made in class, it is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date on what is discussed in class.

Slides/Handouts

Most topics we cover in class will have accompanying slides. These slides will be posted on Blackboard about one week before we start each topic.

Readings / Outline

Poor Economics by Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo is required for this class. There are other readings and books that I will recommend in the reading list that will be provided in a separate document.

We will cover a number of journal articles. Some of these articles contain technical material beyond the scope of this course. I will summarize these articles in class, emphasizing the main research questions, the approach, and the main findings. You do not need to understand the statistical techniques not covered in lecture, but you should be able to read and understand the main results.

We will also watch relevant films, and documentaries, including the documentary “The Name of the Disease” in class. I will recommend several other documentary and fictional films that are related to the topics we will cover. Below are the main topics:

1. Introduction to Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)
2. The Use of RCTs for Poverty Reduction and Policy-Making
3. RCTs for Health Policy
4. RCTs for Education Policy
5. RCTs for Tackling Corruption
6. RCTs for understanding the role of Culture and Social Norms in Economic Development
7. Ethical concerns in RCTs, and other Critiques