

RPAD 725: Quantitative Methods of Causal Inference

Lucy C. Sorensen – Fall 2024

Time: Wednesday 4:30 - 8:10 PM
Room: Husted Hall 012

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Course Description

This course addresses the ubiquitous challenge in empirical research of navigating the path from cause to effect. Students will learn the theory and application of techniques such as: matching, difference-in-differences, instrumental variables, experiments, and regression discontinuity. However, the primary goal of this course is not to provide a ready-to-use “toolbox” of statistical methods. It is to study the more generalizable process of developing identification strategies to answer critical questions in the social sciences. Students will become critical consumers of empirical research, and in doing so, learn how to both harness the full power, and recognize the limitations, of their own research designs.

Required Materials

We will use the following (freely available online) texts:

- Huntington-Klein, N. (2021). *The Effect: An Introduction to Research Design and Causality*
- Cunningham, S. (2020). *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*
- Journal articles available through [UAlbany library](#)

Paperback versions of these books are also available for purchase, if students prefer reading hard copies. Students should use one of the following statistical software programs:

- Stata (IC or SE). Available in the Dewey Library or for purchase at student discount.
- R and RStudio. Available for free download with [tutorial](#).

If you already have expertise in different statistical software such as SAS or SPSS, you may use that software, but the textbooks only provide sample code in Stata, R, and Python, and the instructor primarily has expertise in Stata.

Prerequisites

- RPAD 705 Advanced Quantitative Analysis or equivalent coursework
- Proficiency in a statistical software, such as Stata or R

Students should know inside-and-out the methods and assumptions of ordinary least squares regression and basic probability theory and statistics. This course does not require any specific knowledge of matrix algebra or multivariable calculus, but does require confidence when approaching mathematical concepts.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Understand and articulate the underlying assumptions of regression-based quantitative research designs;
2. Read and critically assess methods and findings from sophisticated empirical research;
3. Implement a variety of statistical techniques with data to examine the causal impacts of a public policy, program, or practice; and
4. Complete an original empirical project using secondary data, moving from research question, to research design, to findings and interpretation.

Course Policies

Office hours. I welcome visits for any purpose, but want to especially encourage students to meet with me regularly about their empirical study. Office hour appointments will be available on Monday and Thursday afternoons from 3:00 to 6:00 PM. Please use the following link to make appointments: <https://lucysorensen.youcanbook.me/>. This automatically adds an appointment to my calendar. If you cannot find a time on the booking website that works for you, email me to find an alternative time to meet.

Attendance. Students should aim to attend and actively participate in every class. If you need to miss class, you should communicate with the instructor ahead of time, and coordinate with classmates to make up missed material.

Late work. Please speak to me if circumstances arise such that you need an extension. Most assignments are due at a specific time prior to class. Work turned in after this will receive a grade deduction of 5 percentage points, and then an extra 5 percentage points deducted for each additional day that passes after the original deadline.

Regrading. If you believe that an error has been made in the grading of your assignment, you may make a written appeal describing why you think the grade should be changed. To be considered, this appeal should be emailed to me within one week of receiving your assignment back. On review, your grade may be lowered, increased, or remain the same.

University Policies

Reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with documented physical, sensory, systemic, cognitive, learning and psychiatric disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring accommodation in this class, please notify the Director of the Disability Resource Center (Campus Center 130, 518-442-5490, DRC@albany.edu). That office will provide the course instructor with verification of your disability, and will recommend appropriate accommodations.

Absence due to religious observance. Students are excused, without penalty, to be absent because of religious beliefs, and will be provided equivalent opportunities for make-up examinations, study, or work requirements missed because of such absences. Students should notify the instructor of record in a timely manner, and the instructor will work directly with students to accommodate religious observances.

Academic integrity. The academic community needs to trust that its members do not misrepresent their data, take credit for another's ideas or labor, misrepresent or interfere with the work of other scholars, or present previous work as if it were new. Acts of academic dishonesty undermine the value and credibility of the institution as a whole, and may distract others from important scholarship or divert resources away from critical research. In particular, students who plagiarize or falsify their work not only fail to adhere to the principles of scholarly inquiry and fail their peers by taking undeserved credit or reward, but they also fail to demonstrate their learning. Please see the [University's Standards of Academic Integrity](#).

Incomplete grades. This is a temporary grade requested by the student and assigned by the instructor ONLY when the student has nearly completed the course requirements but because of circumstances beyond the student's control the work is not completed. Please see the [graduate bulletin](#) for university policies regarding incomplete grades.

Course Assignments

Grading

Below is the breakdown of graded items for the course. Rubrics will be provided to students to clarify the expectations for each graded component.

Component	Description	Points
Assignments	Problem Set 1 (10 pts.)	40
	Problem Set 2 (10 pts.)	
	Problem Set 3 (10 pts.)	
	Problem Set 4 (10 pts.)	
Empirical Paper	Paper proposal (10 pts.)	40
	Final paper (30 pts.)	
Participation	Paper critiques (16 pts.)	20
	Weekly questions (4 pts.)	
Total		100

A student's final grade will be calculated as the sum of the elements above. These numerical final grades will then be converted (*without rounding*) to a final letter grade as follows:

Percent Grade	Letter Grade
93-100	A
90-93	A-
87-90	B+
83-87	B
80-83	B-
77-80	C+
73-77	C
70-73	C-
67-70	D+
63-67	D
60-63	D-
Below 60	E

Problem Sets (40 points)

For this course you will complete a total of four assignments, which incorporate questions on:

- Conceptual understanding from readings,
- Mathematical understanding of methods, and
- Statistical programming and analysis.

Students are strongly encouraged to discuss and work closely with their classmates, provided that each student individually writes their own code, performs their own analysis, and creates their own written responses. Copying answers or code directly from another student will be considered academic dishonesty.

Empirical Paper (40 points)

One of the intended benefits of this course is that students will finish the semester with an empirical research paper that incorporates robust causal analysis of a question within the student's own area of interest. For students in the Public Administration and Policy department, this paper

could serve as the seed of the candidacy paper or potentially one chapter in a dissertation. For all students, this paper should move forward their research trajectories either formally (e.g. turn into a publishable article) or informally (e.g. provide practice with a relevant dataset).

A written paper proposal and presentation is due mid-semester (10 pts.) that should identify and motivate a research question, a dataset, and a proposed research design. During a classwide project workshop, students will have the opportunity to share their research project ideas with each other and provide peer feedback. The final research paper (30 pts.) will be due by the final class period, along with full replication materials adhering to the [TIER protocol](#).

Participation (20 points)

Students will benefit from regularly asking questions, engaging in friendly class debate, coming to class well prepared, consulting regularly about their empirical project, and contributing to the group's learning. For each of 9 weeks during the semester when applied papers are assigned, students will turn in an applied paper summary/analysis in a weekly journal, and then the team will discuss the paper together. Your participation in these critiques will be worth 2 points per paper, and you may skip one paper during the semester without any penalty. (2 points * (9 weeks - 1 week) = 16 points). Participation in class and submission of weekly questions about the readings will be worth 4 points. Students are welcome to speak with the instructor at any time regarding their current participation, or any concerns or challenges they are facing in meeting participation expectations.

Course Schedule

Check Blackboard regularly for changes to the schedule and readings. Please check the [UAlbany academic calendar](#) for dates regarding adding, dropping, and withdrawing from the course. Readings are classified throughout this document as follows:

- "(+)" methodological readings, for which you will submit weekly questions.
- "(*)" applied empirical papers, for which you will prepare paper critiques.
- "(◇)" optional supplemental methodological readings

Week of 8/28: Models of Causality I

- +Effect Chapter 4: Describing Relationships
- +Effect Chapter 5: Identification
- For fun: Carroll, Aaron E. 2016. "Sorry, There's Nothing Magical About Breakfast." *The New York Times*, May 23.

Week of 9/4: Models of Causality II

- +Effect Chapter 6: Causal Diagrams

- †Effect Chapter 7: Drawing Causal Diagrams
- †Effect Chapter 8: Causal Paths and Closing Back Doors
- For fun: Thurman, Walter N. and Mark E. Fisher. 1988. "Chickens, Eggs, and Causality, or Which Came First?" *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 70 (2): 237-238.
- For fun: Heckman, James J. 2010. "The Effect of Prayer on God's Attitude Toward Mankind." *Economic Inquiry* 48 (1): 234-235.

Week of 9/11: Randomized Experiments

Assignment #1 Due

- †Effect Chapter 9: Finding a Front Door
- †Effect Chapter 10: Treatment Effects
- *Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz. 2016. "The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment." *American Economic Review* 106 (4): 855-902.

Week of 9/18: Matching

- †Effect Chapter 13: Regression
- †Effect Chapter 14: Matching
- *Grissom, Jason A. and Lael R. Keiser. 2011. "A Supervisor Like Me: Race, Representation, and the Satisfaction and Turnover Decisions of Public Sector Employees." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 30 (3): 557-580.

Week of 9/25: Instrumental Variables I

- †Effect Chapter 19: Instrumental Variables
- *Hoxby, Caroline M. 2000. "Does Competition Among Public Schools Benefit Students and Taxpayers?." *American Economic Review* 90: 1209-1238.

Week of 10/2: Instrumental Variables II

Assignment #2 Due

- †Sovey, Allison J. and Donald P. Green. 2011. "Instrumental Variables Estimation in Political Science: A Readers' Guide." *American Journal of Political Science* 90(430): 443-450.
- *Kling, Jeffrey R. 2006. "Incarceration Length, Employment, and Earnings." *American Economic Review* 96(3): 863-876.

Week of 10/9: Regression Discontinuity I

- † Effect Chapter 20: Regression Discontinuity
- * Tuttle, Cody. 2019. Snapping Back: Food Stamp Bans and Criminal Recidivism. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 11(2): 301-327.

Week of 10/16: "Fall Break"

Meet with Lucy about your final paper!

Week of 10/23: Regression Discontinuity II

- † Jacob, Robin, Pei Zhu, Marie-Andree Somers, and Howard Bloom. A Practical Guide to Regression Discontinuity.
- † Skim: Lee, David S. and Thomas Lemieux. 2010. "Regression Discontinuity Designs in Economics." *Journal of Economic Literature* 48: 281-355.
- * Lee, David S. 2008. "Randomized Experiments from Non-Random Selection in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Econometrics* 142(2): 675-697.

Week of 10/30: Panel Data Methods**Assignment #3 Due**

- † Effect Chapter 16: Fixed Effects
- † Effect Chapter 17: Event Studies
- * Wen, Hefei, Jason M. Hockenberry, and Janet R. Cummings. 2015. "The Effect of Medical Marijuana Laws on Adolescent and Adult Use of Marijuana, Alcohol, and Other Substances." *Journal of Health Economics* 42: 64-80.

Week of 11/6: Student Project Workshop I**Paper Proposal Due**

- † Christensen, Garret and Edward Miguel. 2018. "Transparency, Reproducibility, and the Credibility of Economics Research." *Journal of Economic Literature* 56(3): 920-980.
- † Project TIER. TIER Protocol.
 - Read "Process" and "Specifications" sections.
 - Download the Demo Project.
 - Create an Open Science Framework account.

Week of 11/13: Difference-in-Differences I

- †Effect Chapter 18: Difference-in-Differences
- * Kearney, Melissa S. and Phillip B. Levine. 2015. "Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV's 16 and Pregnant on Teen Childbearing." *American Economic Review* 105 (12): 3597-3632.

Week of 11/20: Difference-in-Differences II

Assignment #4 Due

- †Baker, Andrew C., David F. Larcker, and Charles C.Y. Wang. 2022. How much should we trust staggered difference-in-differences estimates?. *Journal of Financial Economics* 44 (2): 370-395.
- †Schmidheiny, Kurt and Sebastian Siegloch. 2019. On Event Study Designs and Distributed-Lag Models: Equivalence, Generalization and Practical Implications. IZA Discussion Paper No. 12079.
- *Wolfers, Justin. 2006. "Did Universal Divorce Laws Raise Divorce Rates? A Reconciliation and New Results." *American Economic Review* 96 (5): 1802-1820.

Week of 11/27: No Class (Thanksgiving Break)

Week of 12/4: Synthetic Control

Final Paper Due

- †Mixtape Chapter 10: Synthetic Control
- †Abadie, Alberto, Alexis Diamond, and Jens Hainmueller. 2015. "Comparative Politics and the Synthetic Control Method." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2): 495-510.
- *Eren, Ozkan and Serkan Ozbeklik. 2016. "What Do Right-to-Work Laws Do? Evidence from a Synthetic Control Method Analysis." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 35(1): 173-194.