General Information for Prospective Honors Thesis Writers

Application and Admission to the Honors Seminar

- Prospective thesis writers should speak with me during the advising period in April of their junior year. At that time, we will discuss your proposed topic, possible faculty advisor and in some cases, relevant summer reading. Students studying abroad should send to me their proposed topic as well as the names of faculty members that they believe will be interested in working with them. The office hours for students interested in writing a senior thesis in the 2014-15 academic year are listed at the end of this memo.

- There is no registration for the honors seminar during the April registration period.

- Formally, you will apply for admission via email to the honors seminar in August of your senior year. The exact date will be sent out on the listserv, as well as, included in the summer mailing. In the email, you must include a one paragraph description of the proposed topic and the paragraph must contain at least one economics question that you would like to address in your thesis. In a second paragraph, you will outline your relevant class work or work experience as it pertains to your proposed topic (e.g. if your topic is Russian exchange rate movements you might want to tell me that you have taken international monetary theory). Finally, you must include in your email the name(s) of faculty members that you believe would be interested in working with you. If you do not know a faculty member who would be interested, then you should look at the department’s website for information on their research interests.

- Students will be notified during the first week of classes whether or not their proposal was accepted (i.e. whether or not you are admitted to the honors seminar).

- Admission to the honors seminar is based on several criteria. The first is the overall strength of the student’s academic program to date. The minimum GPA for admission to the honors seminar is 3.7 in courses taken for the major. Students must have completed their core courses in economics, and it is expected that they have also completed 2 or more elective courses in economics. In general, one or more of these elective courses will be relevant to the thesis topic. A second criteria is the strength and feasibility of the proposed research topic. The vast majority of senior theses address one or more empirical questions. The proposed topic must be one where relevant data is easily available, and it must be clear from your proposal that you have thought about the data issue (although you may not have identified the data set yet). The type of questions that you include in your proposal should be ones that can be addressed empirically and ones that can be answered in a relatively short time frame. You are not asked to include a bibliography in your proposal. However, your proposal will be vastly improved if you have read economics research related to your proposed topic. Finally, the committee will consider whether or not you have worked as an RA in the past (either here at Columbia or at another institution) or if you have previously written a research paper in economics (as part of a seminar or a lecture course at Columbia). The decision to admit a student to the
honors seminar is made by a committee of faculty members and the committee's decision is final.

- All economics, financial economics and joint majors are eligible for departmental honors in economics. Successful completion of the honors seminar will satisfy the seminar requirement in economics for the major. If you are a joint major with statistics, political science or philosophy the honors seminar replaces the seminar for the joint major (ECON W4918, ECPS 4921 or ECPH 4950).

How to Develop a Proposed Thesis Topic

- The inspiration for a proposed thesis topic can come from anywhere. The difficulty is translating your inspiration into a set of economics questions that you can address in a relatively short time frame. Over the summer between junior and senior year, you should read some economics research relevant to your topic. This will help you to formulate the types of questions that you will propose, as well as, familiarize you with some of the data sets and issues in your topic area.

- The courses that you have taken are a good starting point for a summer reading list. It is assumed that when you select courses, you do so to explore your interests. Thus, your coursework should help you develop and address specific questions that interest you. Readings from the class may have addressed your specific question or include in their bibliographies, papers that are relevant to your topic. If your specific questions did not come up in the class or its readings, then speak with the instructor or the TAs from the class and ask for suggestions for further readings. In general, they will be able to provide you with several references or tell you that your particular questions may be infeasible given your skill set and time frame for research.

- If you have worked as an RA and your proposed topic is similar to your RA work then speak with that person about possible readings and also potential problems with your topic.

- If you have taken a senior seminar (or a lecture course that required a paper) and that paper is your starting point for a possible thesis, then speak with the course instructor about the feasibility of expanding on that work.

- You can also explore the Journal of Economics Perspectives which is available free online at http://www.aeaweb.org/jep/index.php. The JEP is a general interest journal written for economists. Journal articles are surveys of current research in a wide variety of topics and are written for knowledgeable non-specialists in a given field. For example recent issues contain symposia on gender and test scores and another on financial markets. The archive is searchable back to 2002.

- A list of titles of theses written over the past several years is available on the department website.
Finding an Advisor

- Each student will work on his or her thesis under the supervision of a single faculty member. The assignment of the faculty member is done by the honors seminar selection committee.
- If you have a prior relationship with a faculty member who is a good match for your proposed topic, then you should speak with him or her about the possibility of being your faculty advisor. A prior relationship includes working as an RA or taking a course with the faculty member. If you do not have a prior relationship with someone who is a good match for your topic, then do not contact faculty members to discuss being your advisor.
- All students are asked to submit the names of one or more faculty members that may be interested in working with them. If you do not know the names of any faculty members that would be interested in your topic then consult the faculty pages of the economics department website. You can see faculty listed by fields of interest to narrow down your search. You may work with faculty not in the department of economics provided 1) the individual has a PhD in economics and 2) there is a faculty member in the department of economics that is willing to co-sponsor your thesis.
- The faculty committee that admits students to the honors thesis will formally assign the individual advisors. You might be asked to meet with prospective advisors at the beginning of the school year in order to find the best match for your topic.

What to expect in the honors seminar

- The honors seminar meets on a semi regular basis beginning in the third week of school. The day and time of the honors seminar is listed in the directory of classes. You must not have a conflict with that day and time in order to be registered for the honors seminar.
- In the honors seminar, you present progress reports on your research at several points during the fall semester and the beginning of the spring semester. You will give a final presentation of your thesis in late March or early April. The thesis is due in mid-April. You will also be expected to actively participate in class discussions of other students' research.
- The instructor of the honors seminar will distribute a schedule for presentations and submissions of written work (progress reports, drafts and the final version of the thesis). The instructor will also meet with you on occasion to discuss your work.
- Several sessions will be scheduled in the fall semester to discuss data work and the use of STATA.
Your honors thesis will be graded by a committee consisting of your individual faculty advisor(s), the instructor of the honors seminar and the director of undergraduate studies. You must receive a grade of A- or higher to receive departmental honors.

If you choose to drop out of the honors seminar after the fall semester, then a grade of R will be recorded on your transcript for the honors seminar in the fall. You will have to complete a senior seminar to complete the seminar requirement.

Office Hours for April 2014

Students interested in writing a thesis in the 2014-15 academic year should stop by my office (1006 IAB) and speak with me during one of the following office hours:

April 10 11:30AM-1PM
April 11 11AM-1PM
April 14 6PM-7PM

If you are studying abroad in the spring of 2014, then you send me an email outlining your proposed topic (or topics).