

Dana J. Smith  
Teaching Statement

During my time at Cornell, I've had the opportunity to serve as a TA for seven courses, in which I have led small discussion sections and delivered lectures to large classes. I also taught four classes at Elmira College in the spring of 2023 as the instructor of record. At Elmira I taught three in-person classes with sizes ranging from eight to twenty-eight and also developed an asynchronous Intermediate Microeconomics class. For these classes, I contributed to updating the syllabi and wrote all new exams and assignments.

As an alumna of a Liberal Arts college, I know how valuable it is for students to have an approachable instructor and I really enjoy the small class environment. When I lead a class or discussion section, I take time to get to know the students and explain my expectations for the course. I replicate this atmosphere in large lecture classes by designing small-group activities and using a significant portion of class time to facilitate student-led discussions. I encourage students to come to office hours from the first week and provide both in-person and online office hours, which have been popular for my students in recent semesters. It is also important that the students get a chance to meet each other since I include a lot of small group work in class. I roam the classroom checking in with each group which helps the shy students share their ideas and it gives all students a chance to gather their thoughts before sharing with the larger class.

Economics, especially the introductory courses, can be alienating to students when the theory we teach doesn't match students' lived experiences and lacks vital nuances. One challenge I discovered when I taught students about unemployment, inflation, or the federal deficit, was that the class immediately had great questions and ideas about policy responses to these situations but we hadn't reached the part of the course where students would learn the skills they needed to analyze their ideas with economic tools. Students were most engaged when they were able to evaluate their own life experiences using economic theory. With that in mind, one goal of mine is to structure courses I teach so students have the tools to discuss these questions fully in the moment. For introductory classes I tended to follow the textbook rather than think more critically about the course as a whole and the best order to teach the material. I also began to incorporate other sources, such as extra reading and videos, beyond the textbook later in the course but would now include these from the start to diversify the perspectives I cover and show students how economic theory is used in the real world. As an applied economist, I also try to bring empirical research and data-based projects into even introductory classes so students can begin to think about testing theories and understanding where models are useful and where they fall short.

I expect students to read before class and have begun incorporating a few videos for students to watch before class. I spend class time lecturing through important and difficult concepts but leave plenty of time for in class questions, practice problems, discussion, and debates. In my first experience as the sole instructor, I initially would present the material then have the students launch into a practice problem. A lot of my students would get frustrated with the first problem and would end up deferring to the stronger and more confident students. Halfway through the semester I began doing an example on the board first so everyone could see one before I asked them to try on their own. This helped many of my students feel more confident attempting a problem on their own and actually was a more efficient use of class time as students were less frustrated working through new concepts.

To improve my teaching skills, I took a course through Cornell's Center for Teaching Innovation on Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom. As part of this course, undergraduates shared how important it was to them to discuss current events in class, whether that was relating world news to the course material or just acknowledging that the instructor was aware of what was happening and offering students space if they wanted to have a class discussion. Initially, I was nervous to bring anything outside of the textbook into class. I worried that by bringing current events into the classroom, student debates may get out of hand or that students would pose questions I didn't have a ready answer to. Through this course, I became more confident addressing important but potentially divisive events in the classroom. I also learned how to better facilitate discussion, especially when the topic was interesting but also personal for some students in class, such as immigration.

This experience was very useful when I began teaching at Elmira College in the winter of 2023. My students were much more engaged when we discussed real world problems and enjoyed exploring how economics related to their lives. When students posed new questions, I would use class time to figure out the answer alongside them, modeling research and problem-solving methods. I noticed my students were much more engaged during these moments and received feedback in my course evaluation that the students really enjoyed the current events and discussing how the topics related to their own lives. Most students encounter economic theory for the first time in introductory classes and it can seem complex and unrelated to their daily lives. By incorporating empirical research and discussing pressing issues through the lens of economics, students see how important the subject is and how economic decisions affect them. I also find these discussions enable structured debates in class, allowing students a chance to explore various perspectives and learn how to use economic data and theory to form an argument.

A number of Elmira college's students are first generation college students and many did not come with the same background and family support as the students at Cornell. One of the first things I did was check various textbook packages and prices, making sure that if I was asking students to purchase an expensive book it would actually benefit their education. I designed my class to meet students where they were and incorporated real world examples into each topic. I had to learn to be more flexible with my students who had family responsibilities, jobs, and other stressors that fewer of my Cornell students had to manage. Teaching a principles course, I also taught a number of first year students. I really introducing many of these students to economic concepts and watching them develop their skills and bring everything they learned together in a final project. Many of my students chose to discuss economic questions that impacted their lives for the project and I was impressed with their many creative approaches.

As a TA for a writing course, I gained experience guiding students through the writing process and took an additional pedagogy course, Writing in the Majors. I also won the Dyson Graduate Teaching Assistant Outstanding Service Award following my role in this class. Each week I led two discussion sections where I reviewed some concepts from lecture that week and facilitated in-depth discussions on the material and how it would relate to upcoming essay assignments. The professor had students fill out a shared document with potential arguments and sources for each essay topic. This was a great way to get students started on their essays and learn to bounce their ideas off classmates. During the discussion section, I moderated debates which gave students an opportunity to solidify their arguments. I now try to incorporate structured debates into class as often as possible as I have found students really enjoy this opportunity to lead the discussion and tend to think more thoroughly about a question when they need to actually build an argument. My students in

core classes enjoyed debating real world policy issues such as raising interest rates or the best way for a fictional country to promote long term economic growth.

I would be excited to design a course focused on the impact of policy on immigration and immigrants. I have existing research on how US labor policy impacts US citizens, documented immigrants, and undocumented immigrants differently. As an applied economist, I am also comfortable teaching classes on quantitative methods and using large datasets to study questions in the social sciences. I would also be excited to design a course focused on the economics of immigration with significant research and writing components. With a background in International Affairs, I am confident this could be an interdisciplinary course examining questions of migration. Many students have experience with migration either in their own histories or their parents or neighbors. Immigration is a timely topic in the news and with climate change increasingly forcing people out of coastal or hot areas I believe students passionate about the environment would also enjoy studying the impact of climate change through this lens. As an undergraduate at a liberal arts college, writing courses were an important part of my studies and I would enjoy using this experience and my time as a TA for a writing class at Cornell to development my own writing course in economics.

In addition to teaching, I have had a few opportunities to mentor undergraduate students. My department, the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, includes students interested in business, economics, and maintains a solid cohort of agricultural management students. Given this diversity, I know some students have had trouble finding a good mentor since the undergraduate classes are taught by faculty with similarly varied backgrounds. I've had students from classes I TA'd reach out to discuss development economics and my interest in migration specifically. I love talking students through the variety of paths they can pursue in economics. I also joined a mentoring meeting between a few graduate students and a group of undergraduate students from historically excluded backgrounds in economics. We were specifically there to discuss the research process, graduate school, and other jobs that involve economic research. One student came prepared with a whole list of questions while another was a sociology major convinced by a friend he should join just minutes before we began. It was great to talk with all these students and I am excited for more opportunities to work closely with and mentor students throughout their college careers.