Harvard Kennedy School
SUP-427: Analyzing Education Policy
(Also listed as HGSE A-142)

Instructor: Professor Joshua Goodman
Joshua_Goodman@hks.harvard.edu (subject: "SUP-427")

Teaching Fellow: Laura Quinby
lquinby@fas.harvard.edu (subject: “SUP-427”)

Classes: T/Th 1:10-2:30 PM, L280

Office hours: Prof. Goodman: TBD (sign up on my website)
Laura Quinby: TBD

Course overview

This course examines education policy issues in the United States and abroad, with an emphasis on rigorous quantitative evaluation of such policies. By the course’s end, students should have an analytical framework for thinking clearly about the impacts of education policies, as well as the ability to distinguish good quantitative research from bad. The course’s major units are the human capital model, private and social returns to schooling, resource quantity and quality, and school and individual incentives. Within each unit we will explore specific policy questions, with an emphasis on the methods used to best evaluate such policies.

Course goals

1) You will have an analytical framework for thinking about education policy.
2) You will be able to judge the quality of quantitative education research.
3) You will be able to communicate the central findings of such research to others.

Common questions

Should you take this course? - Yes, if you care about rigorous quantitative evaluation of education policies and if you have solid grounding in regression analysis (API-202 or equivalent).

How does this course differ from similar courses at HKS (and HGSE)? - My goal is for you to hone the tools you use to think rigorously about a wide range of educational policy issues. As such, we will only spend a few classes on each unit but will focus on the methods used to analyze policies more generally. You will become very practiced in critical analysis of empirical research.

What are your obligations as a student in this course? - Learn your econometrics. Read slowly and carefully, and come to class prepared for discussion and presentation. Be courteous to your classmates and use our time wisely. Write well.
Course structure and grading

The first part of the course will consist of nine classes that focus on the human capital model of educational investment decisions, as well as on evidence about the causal impact of education on earnings. I will lead these discussions and each class will focus on a single paper that illustrates a particular econometric technique, as well as a topic of policy interest. You will then take an in-class midterm exam covering those nine classes, with an emphasis on the econometric issues we’ve discussed. That midterm will count for 30% of your grade.

The second part of the course will consist of three classes in which I and other researchers will discuss current projects we’re working on. The goal here is to give you a sense of the research process as it unfolds in reality.

The third part of the course will consist of two six-class units, one focused on evidence for the efficacy of various school resource-based interventions and the other focused on evidence for the efficacy of various incentive-based interventions. Each of you, along with a partner (or two, depending on enrollment), will lead the first 40 minutes of discussion in one of these twelve classes. To do so, you will:

1) Starting with the single assigned reading, generate a larger literature review of the 5-10 best papers on the topic at hand. Also find one example of bad academic research or a poorly reasoned opinion piece about the topic.

2) Starting with a PowerPoint template I will give you, create a presentation that you will send to me 48 hours before the class. The presentation will address the central question being asked by the assigned reading, the empirical strategy used to answer it, the validity of the results, and your take on what those results and the wider literature you’ve identified imply for education policy.

3) You will then lead the first 40 minutes of class discussion on this topic. You will take questions from your classmates and me, so be prepared to answer them.

This presentation will count for 40% of your grade. You will be graded on how clearly you orally and visually communicate the most important aspects of this research area to the class. I will then lead the discussion of the topic in the second half of the class, in order to share my own take on these issues.

The final class of the semester will be a discussion of non-education based interventions, as well as of open questions in education policy. After that, you will complete a take-home final exam that will count for 30% of your grade. The final will focus on topics selected from the discussions you and your classmates have led.

Finally, a word about participation. Please help facilitate good discussion during class, or in office hours. Ask questions that matter, including those for help with tough concepts. I’ll notice and will take this into account should you be on the margin between two letter grades.
Required texts

All of the required readings will come from articles that are available online through Harvard's libraries. I've also listed three books here that address some of the most fundamental issues we'll discuss. Buy or borrow them should your interest in this topic run deep. They're worth it.


Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Skill Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/27</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Causal inference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/29</td>
<td></td>
<td>Labor markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>The human capital model</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>Returns to schooling</td>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2/12</td>
<td></td>
<td>College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2/17</td>
<td></td>
<td>College quality I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2/19</td>
<td></td>
<td>College quality II</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2/24</td>
<td></td>
<td>Earnings spillovers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2/26</td>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>The research process</td>
<td>Work in progress (TBD)</td>
<td>Production and dissemination of research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work in progress (TBD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>3/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work in progress (TBD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>3/12</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Class size</td>
<td>Oral and visual presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3/24</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3/26</td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>3/31</td>
<td></td>
<td>Financial resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>4/2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>4/7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>4/9</td>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>4/14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Charter schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>4/16</td>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>4/21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>4/23</td>
<td></td>
<td>Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>4/28</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>4/30</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Are schools enough?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Readings

Introduction

Causal inference


The human capital model

Labor markets (ordinary least squares)


Information (randomization)


Costs (difference-in-difference)


Returns to schooling

Early childhood (fixed effects)


College (instrumental variables)


College quality I (regression discontinuity)


College quality II (interpreting research)


Earnings spillovers

Resources

Class size

Technology

Instructional time

Financial resources

Teacher quality

Curriculum
Incentives

**Competition**


**Charter schools**


**Accountability**


**Teachers**


**Families**


**Students**


Conclusion

**Are schools enough?**


