



RICE ECON

News and Views from the Economics Department at Rice

WELCOME BACK!

We hope you had a wonderful spring break – and have returned invigorated and ready to put the finishing touches on a great semester.

A couple of items to keep in mind when you register for your Fall 2017 classes (registration begins April 12):

- Our MTEC capstone course (ECON 496, Research in Economic Theory) will be offered in the Fall 2017 semester, in conjunction with ECON 470, Market Design. It will be taught by Professor Mallesh Pai, who joined the Rice faculty last year and is rapidly developing a well-deserved reputation as an outstanding instructor.
- We have added labs to several of our core courses to help insure that students fully master the material introduced in these essential courses. The new labs will be offered in ECON 200 (Microeconomics), ECON 308 (Mathematical Economics), and ECON 310 (Econometrics). Students taking these core courses will receive four credit hours for each course.
- Our course in Economic Modeling and Public Policy (ECON 479) will be taught by Dr. Jorge Barro who is a recently appointed research fellow at the new Center for Public Finance in the Baker Institute. Jorge is an expert on computable general equilibrium economic models and comes to Rice from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

Calvi wins the UWIN Best Paper Award

Professor Rossella Calvi recently won the 2016 UWIN Best Paper award for her paper [“Why Are Older Women Missing in India? The Age Profile of Bargaining Power and Poverty.”](#) Sponsored by UniCredit & Universities, Foundation, in cooperation with the UniCredit Women’s International Network (UWIN), the award highlights the work of young economists working in the field of gender economics. Professor Calvi received her award and presented her paper at a conference sponsored by UniCredit in Milan, Italy in June 2016. Professor Calvi, whose research focuses on issues related to gender inequality, poverty, health, and education in developing countries, joined the Economics Department last Fall after earning her Ph.D. at Boston College. To read more about the award see [here](#).



We hope the rest of the spring semester goes well for all of you – and to all of our graduating seniors, we wish you the best of luck as you re-enter life beyond the hedges. Live long and prosper!

George Zodrow
Director of Undergraduate Studies

Advising Corner

Spring 2017 Advising Office Hours

Monday
12:30–2 p.m.
George Zodrow, BKH 260

Tuesday
12:45–2:15 p.m.
Maria Bejan, BKH 251

Wednesday
3:30–5 p.m.
James Brown, BKH 250

Thursday
11 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
Mahmoud El-Gamal, BKH 240

Friday
1–2:30 p.m.
Peter Hartley, BKH 262



Rossella Calvi (third from right) pictured with representatives from UniCredit and fellow award winners, including co-winner of the Best Paper award, Felix Weinhardt (fourth from right).

Meet our new department chair



Kenneth Wolpin, Distinguished Research Professor, Lay Family Professor of Economics and Economics Department Chair

Research Interests: Labor Markets, Education and Demographic Decisions of Individuals in Dynamic Settings

Kenneth Wolpin is the Distinguished Research Professor and Lay Family Professor of Economics at Rice University as well as chair of the department. In addition to faculty appointments at Penn, NYU, Minnesota, Ohio State and Yale, he has served as the Principal Investigator of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience. He has authored or co-authored over 60 professional papers. His contributions span labor economics, economic demography, development economics, health economics and empirical methodology. He is perhaps best known for his work on the development and application of tools for estimating discrete choice dynamic programming models. The methodological approach he has adopted recognizes the critical interplay between economic theory, data and econometrics.

Dr. Wolpin became chair of the Economics Department last Fall after serving briefly as the interim chair.

How did you first get interested in economics?

This year will mark my 50th since graduating from college. The experience that drew me to economics might, with such a long passing of time, seem less relevant to today's undergraduate, but I suspect not. I was a math major and did not take my first economics course until my junior year. I had already decided that pursuing post-graduate work in math was not for me (I enjoyed it, but simply didn't excel at it). Taking the introductory course in microeconomics was a revelation. I saw immediately how I could put my mathematics skills to work in understanding real-life issues. Economics was not a default choice, but a budding passion. I remained a math major, but took a bunch more economics courses which only solidified my decision to go to graduate school in economics.

In layman's terms, tell us about your current research and the impact you hope it achieves.

I came to Rice two and a half years ago from the University of Pennsylvania along with three other Penn colleagues. During the 19 years I was on the Penn faculty, and the years before, my research, although policy-relevant, had been geared primarily to an academic audience. I moved to Rice in part because I was aware of the strong connections Rice has built within the Houston-area community and I wanted

to become involved in bringing rigorous program evaluation to policy discussions at the local and state level. In short, my expectations have, if anything, been exceeded. Together with my colleague, Flavio Cunha, we have implemented evaluations, based on randomized controlled trials, to assess the impact of a food scholarship program on retention and completion rates in local colleges sponsored by the Houston Food Bank and of a center-based school-readiness program for 3-year old children and parents in a local school district. In addition, we are in discussions to evaluate the impact of a prisoner rehabilitation program, a housing program for the homeless, and an expansion of patient-care responsibilities of nurse-practitioners. All of these projects present interesting intellectual challenges and have the potential to directly impact policy.

As Chair of the Economics Department, do you have any advice for undergraduate students?

The most important advice I could give to undergraduates is to sample widely from as many disciplines as possible. Take advantage of the great liberal arts education that Rice affords. Put aside whatever predispositions you may have about your interests and talents. You may be surprised on both of these dimensions.

For more information on Professor Wolpin's research projects, including his current working papers and his C.V., see the [Faculty Page](#) on the Economics Department website.



Spotlight on our faculty



Robin Sickles, Reginald Henry Hargrove Professor of Economics and Statistics

Research Interests: Applied Econometrics

Robin Sickles is the Reginald Henry Hargrove Professor of Economics, and a Joint Professor at the Department of Statistics at Rice. Professor Sickles was the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Productivity Analysis, and has served as Associate Editor of Journal of Applied Econometrics, Communications in Statistics, Theory and Methods, Southern Economic Journal, Journal of Econometrics, Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies, and Empirical Economics. His research interests center around applied economics with special focus on panel data econometrics and productivity and efficiency measurement.

How did you first get interested in economics?

I began my undergraduate training in aerospace engineering at Georgia Tech. I was a co-op student and worked at what was then Martin-Marietta (now Martin-Lockheed) in Orlando where I grew up. I took an economics course in the new School of Economics (I ended up in their second graduating class) whose Dean was Ferdinand Levy. Professor Levy had been the Reginald Henry Hargrove Professor of Economics at Rice. The course I took was the History of Economic Thought, taught by a former Jesuit priest, Professor Carl Bivens. I was hooked and changed majors. By the way, I am the Reginald Henry Hargrove Professor of Economics at Rice. What goes around comes around.

What drew you to applied econometrics as an area of research?

With a strong quantitative preparation from my engineering courses, I found that using statistics and economic theory to better understand how to square the empirical record with what theory suggests was fascinating, intellectually challenging, and fulfilling. I had acquired substantial programming and analytical skills and these were much in demand in the 1970's as the field of econometrics was beginning its rapid integration into the economics profession.

Do you have any advice for undergraduate students? Or anything you would like to highlight about the current program/classes in the Economics department?

The reason I chose to be an academic was a decision I made early on that I wanted to live a life where I would always be challenged to learn. My parents stressed education and I understood that as a fairly competitive person I would do what it took to take myself out of my comfort zone to learn and to develop my academic capabilities. If you want to develop in whatever career you chose you must be willing to leave your comfort zone behind you.

As for the current classes I teach in the Economics Department, this would be a good time to highlight the Honors Program that I teach in which students write honors theses that I either oversee or help coordinate with other economics faculty. The Rice Honors Program in Economics, which began in 2014, is a two-semester research program that selected students take in their senior year; details on the program are available at on the undergraduate page on the [departmental website](#). The 8 students who have completed or are enrolled in the Senior Honors Program have accepted or been offered graduate fellowships at the University of Chicago, Rochester, Columbia, Cornell, Virginia, and the University of Texas, among others. One student is currently working in the Center for Human Development at the University of Chicago, whose director is James J. Heckman, the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2000.

What do you enjoy the most about Rice?

I have taught at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, George Washington University, University Pennsylvania, and Rice University. The students at Rice are remarkable and by far the best students I have taught. They are of course quite talented in addition the legacy of the times when middle class families with children who were willing to work hard for the free tuition Rice once provided is still apparent in the work ethic and the absence of a sense of entitlement in the Rice students I have been lucky enough to teach.

Any ideas for possible research topics for undergrads, including those who might be interested in the Economics Department Honors Program?

I think that anyone conducting research that adds to the empirical record addressing income inequality and its political ramifications in our and other societies would be doing fascinating work as well as research that would benefit those for whom reasoned and fact-based arguments are important. Thorough analyses costs and benefits of migration and the historical momentum that has characterized economic, social, and political integration and the push-back by many who fear it would add significantly to what is needed in our conversations – objective facts and reasoned disagreements we may have on priorities and the values we attach to them.

Back to the Future: An Interview with Kisoo Kim '16



Kisoo Kim graduated last year with an MTEC degree and is currently in his first year in the Ph.D. program in economics at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena, CA

How have you enjoyed your first year at Caltech? What can you tell prospective students about the first year of economics graduate school??

It has been six months since I began the Ph.D. program last September. The first year has been tough so far and I expect it will be getting even tougher as we get closer to the preliminary exams in June. I am accumulating a wide range of knowledge at an extremely fast pace. Sometimes it is demanding both physically and emotionally, but at the same time I find it very satisfying as I am on my way to becoming a professional economist.

How did your classes at Rice as well as your overall student experience help prepare you for graduate study? In what ways do you feel you could have been better prepared?

The most helpful thing was getting a solid mathematical background. When I first became interested in applying for a Ph.D. program in economics, my advisors told me to take as many mathematics and analytical courses as possible so that I could more easily learn formal economic constructs. I think that was the correct advice. Many concepts in economics are defined and developed mathematically, and to work with them it is crucial to have the ability to think analytically and abstractly.

Before joining Rice, I was an undergraduate in Japan, majoring in business management. When I first arrived at Rice, I hadn't taken much math. I still remember how much trouble I had the first few days in Professor Frank Jones's Calculus course in the first semester trying to understand what a vector was. But I ended up taking many mathematics courses, including

honors calculus, analysis, linear analysis, topology, statistics, and probability, all of which are extremely helpful now.

One thing I would like to add is that a large portion of the sophisticated, advanced economic theories I am learning now are fundamentally based on the simple models and basic intuition that is taught in the undergraduate economics courses at Rice. Looking back, I confess that I was fairly obsessed with getting good grades and finishing problem sets in college, but now I think it would have been more helpful if I had tried to understand those basic theories more deeply to digest and internalize their essential insights

Are there other things that you would recommend that our students do to prepare themselves for graduate study in economics?

I would recommend taking classes and participating in extracurricular activities that can help improve communications and interpersonal skills. A widespread misconception among students pursuing an academic career is that it does not require as much social ability as other fields. According to what I have seen thus far, that is not true. Of course it is of foremost importance that a successful scholar have a scientific and analytical mind, but it is also crucial to be able to effectively communicate ideas to colleagues and others. Academics is basically about searching for new findings and then presenting them to the public. You will often be required to express your ideas and the logic behind them coherently and concisely.

What are the best features of the Caltech Ph.D. program?

I have found that the curriculum fits my academic interests perfectly. I am particularly interested in the intersection of economics and politics, especially on the role of the media in transmitting information on democratic political processes and outcomes. In analyzing the dynamic interaction between economic agents and political institutions, it is important to be comfortable with game theoretic and econometric tools, and Caltech has many great professors in these fields. In addition, having many professors

who are interested in my research questions and willing to work with me has been a great motivation for me to complete my first year studies successfully.

How do you like living in beautiful sunny Southern California?

The first year has been so busy that I haven't really enjoyed the beautiful weather too much. What's more, the offices for first year students are in the basement. (I have to admit it's not much fun going down the stairs in the morning, leaving behind the sunny weather.) My goal this year is to pass the preliminary exams and make it to the second floor offices for the fall 2018 semester. Then I will be able to enjoy both enlightenment and more sunlight! ☺

We welcome eight new members to Omicron Delta Epsilon, the international honor society for economics students

New seniors:

Heller, Lauren M.
Liu, Sijia
Ma, Yichuan
Zhang, Shiyi

New juniors:

Deme, Palvasha R.
Kim, Seohee
Liu, Mengjia
Ren, Jenny L.
Yu, Tian

Current members:

Alexander, Alexander J.
Bennett, Thomas L.
Chen, Zinan
Coleman, Reid E.
Halm, Abby E.
Poh, Hee Zhi
Schmidt, Timothy S.
Song, Chen
Sun, Hanqing
Tang, Yimeng
Tour, Benaiah
Wang, Zhifeng
Zhao, Yize
Zhang, Yue