

Rachel Rodgers
Summer 2016

Research Assistantship

I came to Sewanee thinking that I would major in environmental studies. I had no clue what economics was, other than that the subject sounded quite boring. However, I ended up taking Introduction to Economics the fall of my sophomore year. To my surprise, the course turned out to be my favorite that semester. The next semester I declared an economics major, and took my first math course at Sewanee, which I enjoyed. That summer I decided that I wanted to pursue economics in graduate school after I graduated from Sewanee. I got advice from my professors about how to prepare for graduate school – to take as many math courses as I could and to work with a professor on their research activities. This past school year I filled up extra slots in my schedule with math courses; the only thing left to do was to approach a professor about working with them over the summer.

Choosing a professor to ask was the easy part. I had retained my earlier interest in the environment and knew I eventually wanted to focus my studies on environmental economics. I approached Dr. Elrod towards the beginning of this past spring semester and expressed my interest in working with him over the summer. To my great relief, he was not only receptive, but also excited to have student research assistants working with him, Dr. Theyson, and Dr. Karadas on a new project of theirs. At that point, I had no idea how economics research was conducted, but was eager to find out.

Prof. Elrod outlined the project and my work responsibilities to me at the end of the school year. We met a few times then because he would not be in his office much during the summer. However, he would be accessible by email. I was comfortable with

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this arrangement, as I had a similar one previously with another professor on a history research assistantship. I was to work on the project titled, “The Effect of Election Cycles and Politician Stock Holdings on Enforcement of the Clean Water Act.” The literature concerning enforcement of the Clean Water Act at the state level is sparse, and establishing a causal link between Clean Water Act inspections - which are primarily conducted by the state - and election cycles (or stock holdings of politicians) could have major policy implications - more federal oversight may be necessary.

I started off the summer by conducting a literature review. I found and summarized journal articles that focused on if incumbent governors make different decisions in election versus non-election years. I rarely had ever been required to read journal articles in my economics courses, so I was surprised that I found reading them to be quite fun. I was also glad that I understood more of the math in the articles after all the higher-level math courses I had taken.

I next worked on gathering data from government and other websites. I found county-level data on unemployment rates and per-capita income, employee wages for state government workers, state budget allocations towards Clean Water Act enforcement, data on environmental organizations’ memberships, and term limits of governors by state. I was happily surprised to discover that this kind of work was similar to history research I had previously done; the same sorts of thought processes were involved. It was comforting to know that I could bring prior knowledge to my work, and that I was not new at everything I was doing.

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Sometimes I could just download in Excel format the data that I needed; other times I had to convert pdf files into Excel format. The employee wages data for state government workers was difficult to find, teaching me that sometimes you need to reevaluate what data you exactly need. The state budget allocations towards Clean Water Act enforcement were also difficult to find; I learned that sometimes you are forced to use a proxy for data that can't be found.

I enjoyed the flexibility of work hours, as well as the flexibility of work environments. I was used to this way of work from my previous research assistantships, and had no problem with the self-discipline involved. In fact, these research assistantships have helped me to improve my self-discipline during the school year. Being part of this summer project exposed me to a field I plan to concentrate on in graduate school. It also introduced me to economic research methods that help prepare me for graduate level work, especially working with big data. In addition, I was able to narrow down topics within environmental economics that I am interested in.