

## Aparna Howlader - Teaching Statement

As a teacher, I believe that my main responsibilities are to inspire and foster students' curiosity and passion for learning economics, ensure equal access to available resources and information, and help students to grow and develop their independent critical thinking and writing. Being an applied economist who extensively studies historical events in research, I also believe that our students need to learn how to use economic theories within broader historical contexts.

### In-Class Teaching Method

Designing a class to achieve my goals requires determination and continuous effort as well as a scientific understanding of teaching. I am thankful for my own mentors and professors at the University of Illinois, who provided me opportunities to think independently and to implement new methods in my classroom.

- Classroom participation and activities

The class I primarily taught at the University of Illinois was a freshman year course, "Principles of Microeconomics." This is the largest class in the department, and we have the most diverse population. When I started to teach the course in 2014, it was not a discussion-based tutorial class. I requested and implemented a participation-dependent class system. In 2015, we changed the system at different stages to take into account and incorporate students' needs. The group discussions remain popular to this day, and TAs for that class continue to follow the methods and structure I designed.

- Cumulative thinking about class

Sometimes in the rush of the semester, we forget the big picture. In my TA sessions, I ask my students to write a one-page essay at the end of the class to show what they have learned and what they think can be improved on weekly. To put learning in perspective, I compare production theory with consumer theory, individual agents with game theories, etc. throughout the semester. This comparison, along with students' weekly evaluations, keeps the course process on track and provides perspective.

- Finding interesting examples and contexts

To ensure that students learn and find an interest in economics, I work to generate lots of new examples relevant to the students' lives. For example, the pricing of food in the dorms became a fun example of price discrimination. I also relate course material with historical experiences from agricultural and environmental policies. I also use my own research projects to show how theories from textbooks can be used in studying public policies.

- Non-textbook material and research articles

Non-textbook economics material including Freakonomics or "A Beautiful Mind" served to inspire me as a student when I was growing up. I learned, imagined, and aspired to be a real-world policy economist as a result, and I tried to communicate these ideas to my students too. For example, I suggested they watch "A Beautiful Mind" in game theory classes, and students seemed to respond positively to these references.

I worked as a TA for the Economics of Crime with Professor Stephen Easton, which was a writing-based class. For writing classes, apart from focusing on the writing quality, I try to generate discussions about how creative answers can be developed through reading and learning practices. I share my own experiences of learning how to write.

- One-to-one Office Hours

I realize that students often find it easier to share their struggles when they meet with me. I started to do this at UIUC, and I continue to do it in my current lab to help junior colleagues.

### **Mentoring and Advising**

I am excited and motivated by sharing my knowledge and experience with people who love to learn. This interest leads me to mentor junior graduate students. Informally, I mentored many junior graduate students in my graduate school, and I also help to mentor some of my junior lab colleagues on their own research projects.

I look forward to creating mutually respectful relationships with my mentees and advisees to maintain healthy academic and personal relationships. I set boundaries, and I make sure that they are the same for all students. I like to demonstrate a path and to work with their diverse backgrounds to understand them better.

My role as a mentor is to cultivate students' own research agendas and let them grow. I read their drafts and give them feedback, but I do not want to dictate to them, nor do I want them to do what I do. From my own Ph.D. experience, I know that the most important aspect is to own the decisions you make as a researcher. I aim to encourage my mentees toward independence and self-esteem so that they also feel confident in the long run.

### **Teaching-Related Service**

Given that Illinois is a very diverse community, and that we had students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, I worked to be extra careful in processing information. I came from a non-native English speaker background from a developing country. I know the importance of access to information if a student is from a different background and a first-generation graduate student. I maintain a personal academic blog, and I am a contributor to different public platforms that share information on higher studies with the next generation. I was affiliated with the I-Promise Mentoring program at UIUC, aiming to understand the needs of people of diverse backgrounds. I also try to help students develop networks with my friends of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds to find role models.

Additionally, I organized multiple conferences and student seminars to stimulate the knowledge generating process inside the department. I was also part of the leadership of the AAEEA Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics as a secretary and treasurer. In this role, I worked to enhance the experience of minorities and women in agricultural economics. I have also helped Alex Winter-Nelson at UIUC to develop online classes, and I appreciate digital platforms that can generate a more equitable education system.

### **Conclusion**

I conclude with a personal story. I was determined to major in Mass Communication and Journalism in my undergrad course of study. Due to circumstances somewhat beyond my control, I had to transfer to economics. I had no real interest in doing so at first. Still, two professors in my undergrad university, S. M. Ashiquzzaman, and M. M. Akash, sparked a passion for learning economics, asking relevant questions, and used economic tools to answer them. I think teaching should be like that: engaging, passionate, and helping to raise questions. This is what I have been trying to implement in my classes. I did not find learning easy in my early days, and I try to draw on my own experience as a student to be empathetic toward current students. I enjoyed teaching upper-level undergrad courses, but entry and introductory level course design are key to the success of the programs. These classes can change the mindset of students and show them how to think about the real world.