



New York University

A private university in the public service

*Department of Applied Statistics, Social Sciences, and Humanities
Steinhardt: Culture, Education and Human Development
Kimball Hall, 3rd Floor
246 Greene Street
New York, NY 10003-6677*

January 28, 2017

To the selection committee:

I have known Zarni Htet since September 2016. He is a first-year graduate student in the Applied Statistics for Social Research program that I co-lead, with Jennifer Hill. He was a student in my Computational Statistics and Simulation class Fall 2016 and my Classification and Clustering class in the January 2017 session. Most recently, I invited him to join me during “internal consulting” (pro bono) I have been doing for a Pediatrics and Population Health research group at the NYU medical school. In all of these contexts Zarni has impressed me with his intelligence, commitment to scientific rigor and passion to use his skills to improve society.

The first time that I met Zarni, he said that he wanted to take all of his knowledge back to Myanmar to strengthen its democracy by improving statistical practice there. I have no doubt that he will do this. In every class he takes (and he seizes every spare moment to take classes in formal and informal settings), he finds a way to link projects to an idea he has for improving some aspect of his society back home. One example involves a transportation “flow” problem that he will explore in our Educational Data Science Practicum, Spring 2017. He immediately identified the link from a US urban bus crowding problem to public/private collaborations in civic analytics that could solve similar transportation overcrowding problems back home. The class had not started and he had already downloaded all available Open Data to evaluate the feasibility of his future project in Myanmar.

Zarni has a fairly diverse set of skills, but they complement each other well. Expertise in Economics, Information Technology, and Data Science is now being strengthened by our program's emphasis on statistical foundations, computational statistics, causal inference, and more complex data structures, such as those encountered in multilevel modeling. Data Science is his concentration, or track. I am impressed by his performance in my classes, but I am equally impressed by the intensity that he brings to each learning experience. I would be remiss not to mention his engaging personality and sociability. Our program is small (10-15 per cohort), and I often see him leading conversations between students in our lounge and conference room as they try to make sense of new concepts and technical challenges together. I recall quite fondly that after I posed a bootstrap “puzzle” involving a pivotal quantity in class this fall, Zarni and another student spent hours proving to each other what the appropriate method must be.

While it is somewhat early for me to assess Zarni's consulting skills, my recent experience working with him at the Medical School suggests that he has the interpersonal skills needed. He was a good listener and he made the necessary connections between data, research questions and methodology with minimal input from me. My plan with this project is to solve the immediate research problem of interest in this pediatric study and


then to have Zarni build an R package that will handle in a principled manner, medical data that are collected asynchronously (common in clinical studies).

Based on my interactions with Zarni in these different settings, and from what I know of this prior training, I strongly endorse him for the Data Science for Public Good Fellowship at Virginia Tech.

Zarni's goals for himself and for humanity are quite ambitious, but I believe them to be appropriate given his talents and commitment to the public good. I fully expect Zarni to take on important leadership roles in governmental or non-governmental organizations after he completes his graduate studies and related training.

In sum, Zarni Htet possesses all of the important qualities needed to make significant society impacts while here in the U.S. and upon his return to Myanmar. Training with your program in Data Science for Public Good will strengthen his already excellent skill set. I highly recommend Zarni for your program without hesitation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marc Scott', with a stylized, flowing script.

Marc Scott
Professor, Applied Statistics
Co-Director, PRIISM Applied Statistics Center
Co-Director, Master's Program in Applied Statistics for Social Research