Henry Downes

Teaching Statement

While at Notre Dame, I have gained valuable experience as both a teaching assistant and an instructor of record at the undergraduate level. In Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, I served as a teaching assistant for Statistics for Economics, a foundational course in probability and statistics. I led a weekly tutorial that enriched students' understanding of lecture material and exposed them to the basics of programming in Stata. During these semesters, I earned median composite evaluation scores of 4.9/5 and 5/5, respectively. In the summer of 2023, I was the instructor of record for Principles of Microeconomics. This course was part of the Summer Bridge program, which invites incoming students to begin taking classes on campus prior to their first fall semester. The program is targeted to provide additional support for students who may need a longer on-ramp in their transition to college. The vast majority of my students were student-athletes, many of whom came to Notre Dame from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds relative to the average ND student. I received a median composite evaluation score of 5/5 as the instructor for this course. In Spring 2024, I won the University's "Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award."

I also have served as an instructor and faculty mentor through the Moreau College Initiative (MCI), a joint program of Notre Dame and Holy Cross College. MCI provides opportunities for men incarcerated at Westville Correctional Facility to earn AA and BA degrees. In this capacity, I designed an independent study course that tasked students with conducting a review of academic literature, and I also provided one-on-one advising to students working on their thesis projects.

Based on my past experience and research expertise, I am qualified to teach a variety of courses at the undergraduate level, including: Applied Statistics, Econometrics, Principles of Micro, Intermediate Micro, and field courses in Labor Economics, Public Economics, Economic History, and Economic Demography. I also am confident in my ability to instruct Causal Inference and field courses at the graduate level. I am proficient in teaching students how to manage, clean, and analyze data for applied projects using various programming languages, including Stata, R, Matlab, and Python.

Teaching Philosophy and Methods

My teaching philosophy is defined by three core tenets: (1) demonstrate care and concern for students as human beings, (2) create a learning environment that engages all students, regardless of learning style and background, and (3) stimulate interest in economics by connecting course material to real-world applications.

I believe that students respond best to instructors who demonstrate a deep investment in their personal and academic development. For me, this starts before the beginning of each semester – I memorize the names of all my students, so I can engage them personally on Day 1. On Day 1, I provide a clear blueprint for success in the class. My goal is to make the path to success obvious (but not easy!), which builds mutual respect through transparency and accountability. As the semester progresses, I use interactive polling to get a sense for how students are feeling about the class, and incorporate feedback to better meet their needs. At the midterm, I send each student an individualized email that identifies areas in which they are excelling, have made large improvements, or need to focus more attention going forward. I also do my best to offer bonus office hours and personal appointments to students who are struggling, since I believe that once students see my own commitment to their success, they will match that commitment with their own efforts.

In order to make economics accessible and relevant for all students, I employ a variety of methods that combine technological elements with more traditional and established teaching techniques. In every lecture, I incorporate in-class polling (or "clicker") questions. I find that in-class polling enhances engagement by breaking up lectures, allows me to assess students' understanding of key concepts in real-time, and provides a useful measure of in-class participation. The clicker questions supplement my lectures, which rely on a combination of slides, board work for exposition, group discussion, and in-class activities. Since some students do their best learning outside of class, I always provide the lecture slides – as well as video recordings of all lectures – for them to reference later. I also use games and in-class exercises, which can help some students grasp concepts through active learning that they could not understand from lecture.

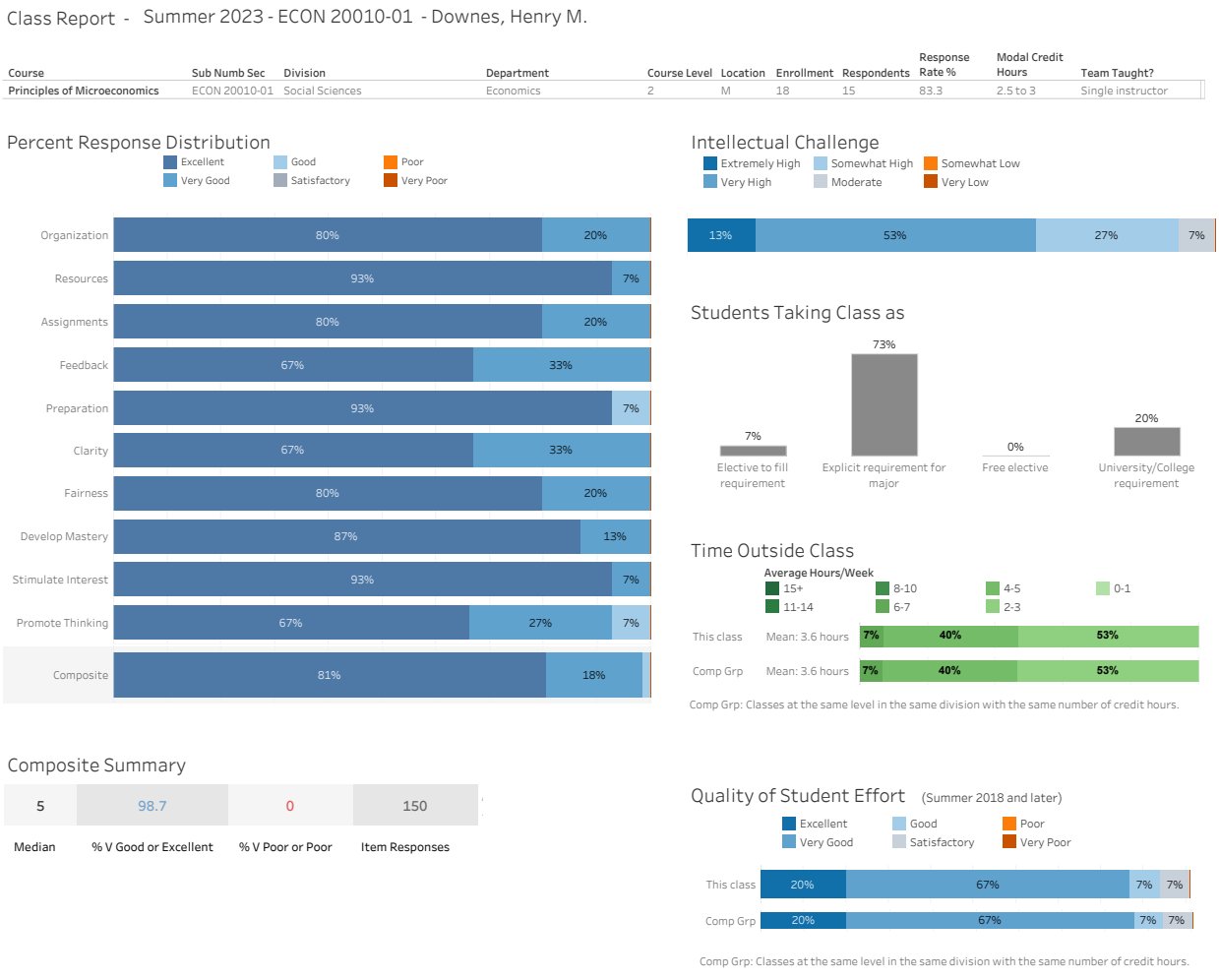
While not all students will go on to major in economics, I believe that every student can benefit from learning economic principles. However, each student will approach the subject from a slightly different perspective, depending on their background, academic interests, and career goals. I enjoy finding creative ways to help students understand how to apply economics to their own lives and to relevant real-world problems. For example, the majority of my Principles of Micro students were student-athletes, so we had a rich discussion on the monopolistic power of the NCAA in our section on monopolies. In the Principles class, I also assigned weekly "reaction statements" that required students to engage with some form of media (e.g., social media post, podcast, academic article) on a current issue, write about how the material connects to key concepts from lecture, and discuss their perspective with the class. As an instructor, I find that these exercises help to create an interdependence between my research and teaching while at the same time exposing students to the frontiers and applications of economic thinking.

Above all, I am committed to continuing my development as a teacher, advisor, and mentor. I constantly seek feedback to identify areas for improvement. For example, at Notre Dame, instructors only receive systematic feedback from students at the end of the semester. To ensure that I could correct major issues and improve key features of the Principles course before the semester was over, I deployed my own Google Form to collect feedback from students to that point. Also, immediately after every lecture, I take some time to write down notes on what went well (and not so well), so that I can give a better lecture the next time. I look forward to continuing this process of growth and learning as I advance in my teaching career.

Evaluations

My teaching evaluation scores for Principles of Microeconomics are below. I have also added a selection of student comments from that course. The full list of comments is available on my website.

- "This was his first time teaching a class by himself, but you would never know that. He was approachable, engaging, challenging yet very accepting. He slowed down when we needed more clarity and kept up the pace when he felt like the class understood a topic. Professor Henry is going places!"

- "He is one of the best instructors I have had. He was knowledgeable in the subject, and always made sure that we understood the material before moving on to the next content, but not unreasonably so. He was super helpful in the classroom and out of the classroom in office hours, where he clearly explained concepts and answered questions. He was positive, kind, and respectful. He made this material engaging, and now I find econ very interesting and clear when I was confused by it in high school. I understood econ in this class. He communicated clearly too. He also tried to find examples that we understood or at least had an understanding about so we could learn the material and have it be applied to real life examples. He adapted his lecture plans and activities to our class to make it better for us to learn. Basically, he was an amazing instructor."

- "Really loves what he teaches! Brings a lot of positive energy to the class and makes it fun and engaging"
- "Mr. Downes' biggest strengths in my opinion are making the class upbeat and interesting. He relates to his students very well and is excellent about applying the material to real world scenarios."
- "Great teacher made sure everyone understood the subject and made class fun and enjoyable. Nothing but good stuff from Henry, honestly one of my favorite teachers in my life.
- "He is extremely passionate about teaching and it keeps everyone engaged and ready to learn. Also, he is available practically 24/7 to help out students not because he has to but because he wants to."