Tushar Kundu

PhD Candidate | Columbia University, Department of Economics

tk2859@columbia.edu | tusharkundu.github.io | tusharkunduinca@gmail.com

Last updated: September 4, 2025

EDUCATION

Columbia University, New York, NY   August 2019 – Present
PhD in Economics (expected May 2026)

Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA   August 2013 – June 2017
Bachelor of Arts, Honors in Economics and Mathematics (Emphasis on Statistics)

FIELDS OF INTEREST

Education, Labor, Development, Gender

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, Columbia University, New York, NY

- Introduction to Econometrics (Undergraduate)   Fall 2020, Fall 2021
- Intermediate Microeconomics (Undergraduate)   Spring 2022, Fall 2023, Spring 2025
- Public Economics (Undergraduate/Graduate)   Fall 2022, Spring 2023

Instructor, Columbia University, New York, NY

- Public Economics (Undergraduate/Graduate)   Summer 2023

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Costs or Returns? Why Students Specialize in Cognitive vs Socio-Emotional Skills

(Job Market Paper)

Teachers allocate scarce resources across multiple cognitive and non-cognitive skills. When a student is weak in a given skill, a key question is *why*: is it primarily because it's not valued, or is it because it's hard to learn? I develop a model where parents choose inputs to produce skills, maximizing utility over the child's resulting skill bundle. The model delivers a simple diagnostic—the *rank-level slope*—that links skill levels to marginal returns for improvement. I implement the diagnostic using new data from 3,404 parents across five Indian private schools. Parents rate their child's level (0-100) across nine skills covering academic, emotional, and social traits, and then rank the skills by which they most want improved, at the margin. I regress ranks on levels to estimate the rank-level slope (i) within each skill across students and (ii) within each student across skills. The slope is negative when parents most value improving weaknesses, and positive when they value improving strengths. I find slopes are negative on average, implying parents desire well-rounded children, and, through the lens of the model, that relative production costs are more uneven than returns. To test the model's predictions, I run a teacher-facing information experiment that randomizes access to a web portal displaying parent-reported levels and priority ranks for students in their class. In the framework, this acts as a *production-side shock*—teachers reduce the effective cost of inputs (e.g., materials) and tailor pedagogy toward parent-prioritized dimensions. Consistent with the model, treatment increases endline achievement and lowers priority ranks for the parent's top-ranked skill, shifting the rank-level slope upward. This framework provides a low-cost way to guide personalizing education beyond level-based grouping and helps choose policy levers when supporting weak skills: moving the production frontier versus shifting perceived returns.

What do People Want?

with Daniel Benjamin, Kristen Cooper, Ori Heffetz, and Miles Kimball

Philosophical perspectives on human desires and values vary; economic theory-driven measurement techniques can provide relevant empirical evidence. We elicited over half a million stated preference choices over 126 dimensions or "aspects" of well-being from a sample of 896 online respondents. We also elicited, via self-reported well-being (SWB) questions, respondents' current levels of the aspects. From the stated preference data, we estimate for each aspect its relative marginal utility per point on our 0-100 response scale. We validate

these estimates by comparing them to alternative methods for estimating preferences, and we offer a range of estimates between those that take self-reports at face value and those that (over-)correct for potential social-desirability reporting bias. Our findings suggest that our respondents want, first and foremost, three basic things: family, money, and health (not necessarily in this order). While commonly studied concepts such as happiness, life satisfaction, where life ranks on a ladder, and meaning, are all important, respondents place the highest marginal utilities on aspects related to family well-being and health, and financial freedom and security. We document substantial heterogeneity in preferences across respondents within (but not between) demographic groups, with current SWB levels accounting for a significant portion of the variation.

Explainable AI and Human Decision Making: Preferences, Beliefs, and Biases
with Peter Bergman and Kadeem Noray

Increasingly, AI is being used as a gatekeeper to key areas that affect economic mobility. AI is screening applicants for jobs, loans, healthcare and housing. Generative AI has accelerated this trend; its pre-trained models can readily be deployed across a variety of contexts. However, there are concerns that these models discriminate against protected groups. We construct a model of applicant selection that distinguishes between different forms of discrimination – taste-based discrimination, statistical discrimination, and biased beliefs – at the employer or recruiter level. We collect data that allow us to record resume review and hiring outcomes for applicant profiles and overcome the selection issue of observing hiring outcomes only for interviewed applicants. We compare AI decision making to the distribution of human decision makers and use the model to simulate policies such as blinding resume characteristics ("ban the box") and to build non-discriminatory screening algorithms.

Signaling in Female Education
with Akanksha Vardani

We study the role of labor market and marriage market considerations in motivating investment in female education. We replicate previous work contrasting the signaling and human capital accumulation models of educational attainment conducted on a US sample in the developing country contexts of India and Zambia. In India, we find that increased access to secondary school shifts the entire distribution of educational attainment upwards, with more ambiguous effects in Zambia. We extend the analysis to include marriage market considerations, and test to see if shifts in educational attainment depend on marriage payment norms. We find that shifts are attenuated among populations that practice marriage payments.

Community and Household Networks and Women's Workforce Entry
with Akanksha Vardani

Seniority and the Gender Wage Gap
with DongIk Kang

Empowering Youth with Digital Skills: A Large-Scale Clustered Randomized Intervention in Kenya
with Palaash Bhargava, Daniel Chen, Tommaso Batistoni, Ken Maina

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- Dissertation Fellowship, Columbia University — 2024-2025
- Wueller Award for Best T.A. for Undergraduate Electives (Runner Up) — 2022-2023
- Dean's Fellowship, Columbia University — 2019–2020

RESEARCH GRANTS

- Columbia PER Field & Experimental Research Award ($10,000) — 2024 – Present
- Columbia CDEP Student Research Grant — 2023, 2024
- Weiss Fund — 2023

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Refereeing

- *Quarterly Journal of Economics*

SELECTED CONFERENCES AND SEMINARS

- Advances with Field Experiments   2024, 2025
- ASSA Annual Meeting   2025

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

- Clean Energy Research Assistant, Planet Reimagined   October 2024 - Present
- Research Assistant for Daniel Benjamin, USC and NBER   July 2017 – July 2019
- Global Attitudes Summer Intern, Pew Research Center   June 2016 – Aug 2016
- Associate Business Analyst, American International Group (AIG)   June 2015 – Aug 2015
- Research Assistant for Steve Wang, Swarthmore Mathematics Department   June 2014 – June 2017

SKILLS & INTERESTS

- **Technical:** Stan, R, Python, Latex, Qualtrics
- **Languages:** Fluent in English, Proficient in Spanish and Bengali