To whom it may concern:

I enthusiastically recommend Vikas PD Gawai for faculty positions in economics, applied economics, public policy, and related fields. He is a proficient scholar specializing in the intersection of technology, health, human capital, and social well-being, with a unique research agenda spanning the US and India.

I have had the privilege of knowing Vikas since he joined as a Research Assistant for my co-author (Valentina Duque) and me in September 2020. Our longstanding collaboration has allowed me to assess his work and research path confidently. I am pleased that he has remained a dedicated contributor, initially as a Research Assistant and later as a co-author on multiple projects. I anticipate our ongoing collaboration in future endeavors as well.

He initiated his involvement in one of our projects, which entailed analyzing early-life exposure to the Great Depression's impact on later-life mortality in the US. In this role, he undertook the critical tasks of cleaning and analyzing data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) coupled with 1940 Census data in the US. Furthermore, he tackled the cleaning and analysis of the 1% Census data spanning from 1940 to 1980 for the same research endeavor. Vikas quickly acquired expertise in handling intricate and extensive datasets, particularly within the context of HRS and US Census data. His meticulous attention to detail and precision in data work, combined with his effective communication and thoughtful approach, greatly contributed to the project's success.

To enhance the depth of our research into the Great Depression's impact, Vikas uncovered a distinctive dataset containing yearly county-level bank deposit data in the US, spanning both pre- and post-Great Depression periods. His analysis revealed intriguing statistics within this dataset, highlighting geographic and temporal variations in bank deposits. Valentina and I were genuinely enthusiastic upon discovering this unique data source. We firmly believed that it held the potential to make a significant contribution to the literature, shedding light on the long-term consequences of the Great Depression. Subsequently, we collaborated with others, including Jason Fletcher and Hamid N., leading to the joint submission of our work for review in a health economics journal.

While working on this, Vikas mentioned to me that he is interested in evaluating the largest agricultural technology shock in the developing world (Green Revolution) to understand the long-term outcomes. To our surprise, the long-term outcomes of such a massive shock have not been well understood, specifically at the micro-level, primarily due to the lack of data. I was familiar with the data for India that could be useful in answering these types of questions. We further translated this broad idea into a research question: whether early life exposure to the Green Revolution affects later-life health and aging-related outcomes. We decided that Vikas would lead this project, and Valentina and I would support Vikas in all possible ways.

Vikas has a deep understanding of the societal dynamic in India that helped us to narrow down some of the heterogeneity in this context. Vikas told us that he was born and grew up in a village in India and in a low-caste household lacking basic social capital. That helped him to closely experience the societal problems, including caste disparities and poverty. We gained a lot of such detailed societal contextual knowledge from Vikas’s experiences.

When we started working on the project, we encountered various problems. For instance, the district boundaries of India changed over several decades, and there was no readily available official data on this crosswalk. Vikas spent a remarkable amount of time compiling this data, which is also one of the contributions we make to the research community. We later collaborated with the team at the University of Southern California (Jinkook Lee and Hunter Green) for restricted access to the data. Vikas presented this work at the APPAM conference in 2022 and various interdepartmental seminars at UW-Madison. This paper is near completion, and we are hoping to publish this in a top economics journal. This work has been supported by the CDHA, UW-Madison (NIA) grants.

While working on the above Green Revolution and aging project, we realized that the intergenerational effects of the Green Revolution have also not been studied well. So, we started thinking about this in detail. Vikas had experience working with the largest education quality data from India (ASER). After discussion, we decided we could merge the Green Revolution data with ASER to evaluate whether the parental early-life exposure to the Green Revolution affects their children's human capital using the test score data from ASER. By merging these two datasets, we hope to get the test-score data of over 2 million children. Vikas has presented this work at the PAA conference in 2022. This work has been supported by the CDHA-UW-Madison (NIA) grants. We continue working on this project and will submit this work to the top economics journal.

Working with HRS and aging data from India exposed Vikas to several intriguing research questions about the older population in the US and India. In recent years, Vikas developed a keen interest in the expansion of high-speed internet (broadband) in the US. He observed that assessing the impact of broadband on various economic outcomes is a relatively newer field within economics, primarily focusing on a younger demographic. Furthermore, after discussions with a representative from the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), Vikas noted that the commonly used measure of broadband is at the county or zip code level in the US, which may pose measurement challenges, especially for years before 2010. Additionally, Vikas identified that the potential mechanisms through which the internet could impact health remained unclear.

Vikas's job market paper addresses these gaps in the literature and contributes to our understanding of how broadband may affect the mental health of one of the most vulnerable populations (older adults) by using advanced difference-in-differences (DID) methods and exploring unique mechanisms that are understudied. He uses the staggered introduction of fiber broadband as a treatment and the commonly used CES-D score as a mental health outcome. The first main contribution of this paper is Vikas's ability to provide an answer to a unique research question that was understudied. Vikas found that high-speed internet positively affects older adults' mental health, and the magnitude is comparable to other important life events such as job loss or the death of a spouse. The positive effects are driven by Whites and men, highlighting the barriers for African Americans and women. However, older adults in rural areas benefited significantly more than those in urban areas. Secondly, his paper contributes by exploring the unique mechanisms through which the positive effects may be translated. For instance, he found an increase in social connectedness and a decline in social isolation, both of which were at the forefront during and after COVID-19.

Vikas's job market paper also uncovers some other interesting and understudied channels. For instance, Vikas found that internet speed positively affects the likelihood that a hospital offers telehealth services, an essential component for older adults with limited mobility. Similarly, Vikas's paper also answers the unique question of how broadband technology can affect older adults' cognitive function. I believe that there is a huge potential for future work in studying these channels in detail, and Vikas has suggested that he will work on them in the near future. I see that his job market paper has the potential to be published in a reputable journal.

I was glad when Vikas told me that he had been selected as a Diversity Scholar at American University's Public Policy Department. He spent a week with other diverse scholars and presented his job market paper to get different perspectives from public policy to political scientists. I should highlight that Vikas works very comfortably with interdisciplinary collaborators and audiences. He is also a part of the CDE and CDHA at UW-Madison, which comprises scholars from different departments at UW-Madison.

Vikas also won a competitive research award from the Center for Financial Security, working closely with the SSA, where he was selected as a junior scholar. In this research, Vikas is expanding his work on broadband to understand whether the expansion of broadband also improved Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) enrollment. His initial analysis found that the expansion of broadband positively and significantly increased SSDI enrollment. I believe this work has important policy implications for understanding the structural barriers to one of the most vulnerable populations.

Similarly, recently, Kanika Arora (University of Iowa), myself, Vikas, and Shubhashita Basu (Grinnell College) have been working on an interdisciplinary collaboration to document the spatially varying gender and caste inequalities in cognitive function among older adults in India and understand the individual and environmental factors. Vikas has been contributing to this project with data analysis and providing important contextual knowledge to understand the cognitive health of older adults from a developing country. We are hoping to potentially apply for the NIA (R01) grant in the near future.

Let me conclude with some overall thoughts. First, Vikas has an amazing work ethic and commitment to learning. He already has a paper under revise and resubmit and another paper under review. Second, I see a bright future for him in terms of his research career. I think he will continue to contribute very important pieces of research to the fields of health, aging, and development economics, and I look forward to collaborating with him. Third, he seems like the type of colleague who will be present and provide a lot of public goods in the workplace and be an "excellent citizen" for the department.

Please feel free to contact me with any further questions you might have. I unequivocally and enthusiastically recommend Vikas for this position.