

AREC 869J
Fall 2009

Purpose of Course:

The first and main purpose of this course is to help all second year PhD students take the steps that will lead to timely completion of a dissertation prospectus, and thus timely completion of the PhD program. If students focus on identifying and developing a dissertation topic during their second year, they will be on track to complete the prospectus in a timely fashion during the first semester of the third year and then complete the PhD program sometime between the beginning and ending of their fourth year. To reach that goal requires some very simple intermediate goals during the second year. These goals can be reached in the process of fulfilling term paper and other requirements of field courses:

1. **Formulate tentative dissertation topics.** Use as many of your six second-year field courses and their term paper writing assignments as possible as opportunities to formulate tentative dissertation topics. Approach each reading assignment considering whether your dissertation could focus on that or a related topic. Approach each term paper assignment as the exploration of a tentative dissertation topic. You may eliminate some topics as a result of doing a term paper on them, but can refine a topic by following up others by doing a second term paper in another course on a similar topic.
2. **Explore the latest journal articles relating to your tentative topics.** Browse the literature broadly and then study the more interesting papers in depth as you formulate your term papers. After you write several related term papers in an area that interests you, you may have much of the literature survey completed that is necessary for a prospectus.
3. **Develop ideas with preliminary theoretical or empirical work.** Explore your topic and your ability to contribute to knowledge on that topic. Approach these assignments as opportunities to develop your creative talents for economic research. And use these experiences as input in narrowing your focus and choosing among alternative potential dissertation topics as you go through your second year.
4. **Try to develop each term paper into a journal article.** The ability to be productive as a professional economist is best judged by a proven track record of competent and creative research. You will find selling your skills in the job market much easier if you have several journal articles listed on your resume when you complete your PhD. Try to develop each term paper into a journal article. Try to write concisely, with a well-focused purpose and result, modeling what you write after journal articles you read.

With this approach, by taking a full set of six field-level courses during the second year, you will be able to explore as many as six potential dissertation topics in some depth. Hopefully, you will end up with 2 or 3 term papers in a common area of focus that will begin to define your dissertation topic and possibly provide much of the literature review and technical development that will be needed for your prospectus.

Grading:

Grading for this course will be on the basis of three types of attendance and completion of milestones toward a prospectus.

1. **Occasional class meetings:** AREC 869J will meet as a separate class only two or three times during the semester to discuss student progress in topic identification and use of term paper assignments as a means of making progress toward your prospectus. You should not miss any of these few meetings without making advance arrangements with the instructor.
2. **Presentations of third year students:** You should plan on attending three meetings of the third-year AREC 869P course later in the semester when third-year students are making presentations relating to prospectus development. Further details will follow.
3. **Attendance at seminars:** You are expected to attend weekly departmental seminars (usually held on Wednesday afternoons at 2:00 PM) except that you may choose to substitute a seminar in the economics department up to seven times during the semester either when a departmental seminar is not held or in place of a scheduled departmental seminar. This is intended to provide some flexibility appropriate to exploring your specific areas of interest. Substitution of seminars at IFPRI, RFF, or other organizations requires advance approval because some of those are merely discussions or do not represent substantive economic research.
4. **Reports on seminar attendance:** Partially as motivation to listen to seminars analytically, and partially to verify seminar attendance, you should send the instructor by email (in the body of the email) **EACH WEEK** a short paragraph reporting the following:
 - a. Which seminar you attended (presenter and if in ECON which seminar series).
 - b. What was the unique contribution of the paper?
 - c. How did the author establish the result?
 - d. What were the weaknesses?

A few concise sentences should answer each of the latter three questions so that no more than a single-spaced half page is needed for this report. Please send the report in the body of an email (one report per email) to rjust@arec.umd.edu. Due dates for reports are September 11, 18, 25, October 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, November 6, 13, 20, 27, December 4, 11.

5. **Alternative participation in AREC 699:** In lieu of seminar attendance (items 3 and 4) you may choose to participate fully in Professor Nerlove's AREC 699 instead. If you choose this option, you remain registered for AREC 869J and do not register for AREC 699. You will be graded according to AREC 699 standards but are required to attend other class meetings of AREC 869J (items 1 and 2).
6. **Identification of tentative dissertation topics:** You are expected to determine at least two tentative dissertation topics during the semester, report on them informally during separate AREC 869J class meetings, and share your experience in trying to develop those ideas in terms papers you are writing for other courses.
7. **Journal publication:** You are expected to have at least one paper moving toward submission for publication in a refereed academic journal by the end of the semester. There should be evidence that you are pushing the paper past the term paper level by using feedback from faculty to refine the paper and make it worthy of publication. A copy of the paper should be submitted to the instructor of this course at the end of the semester.