Motaz Al-Chanati

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Academic

Education

Columbia University	2022 (exp)	PhD Economics
	2018	MA Economics
Brown University	2015	ScB Applied Math-Economics, *magna cum laude*

Fields

Health Economics, Economics of Education, Industrial Organization

PhD Courses

Field	IO I (A+), IO II (A), IO III (A), Health (A), Education (A), Macro-Econometrics (A-)
Core	Micro I (A+), Macro I (A-), Econometrics I (A-), Math Methods (A) Micro II (A-), Macro II (A), Econometrics II (A), Perspectives (B+)

Research

Work In Progress

"In the Zone: The Valuation and Exclusivity of School Catchment Areas"

Experience

Research Assistant

2017	Columbia University	Douglas Almond
2015-2016	Brown University & RIIPL	Emily Oster (full-time)
2014-2015	Brown University	Nathaniel Hilger
2014-2015	Brown University	Matthew Kraft

Teaching Assistant

Fall 2018	Columbia University	Intermediate Microeconomics, Ingmar Nyman
Spring 2018	Columbia University	Intermediate Microeconomics, Anna Caterina Musatti
Fall 2017	Columbia University	PhD Microeconomics, B. Salanié and P.A. Chiappori
Spring 2015	Brown University	Public Economics, Nathaniel Hilger
Fall 2014	Brown University	Environmental Economics, Sriniketh Nagavarapu
Fall 2014	Brown University	Intermediate Microeconomics, Pedro Dal Bó

Honors & Awards

2018	Wueller Teaching Award, Best TA for PhD Courses
2018	Wueller Teaching Award, Best TA for Undergraduate Core Courses
2015	Phi Beta Kappa, Brown University

Personal

Computer	Stata, Python, MATLAB, QGIS, R (basic knowledge), SQL (basic knowlege)
Languages	English (native), Arabic (conversational)
Citizenship	New Zealand

Last Updated: September 2018

September 21, 2018

Ms. Elisa Pepe
National Bureau of Economic Research
Cambridge, MA

Dear Ms. Pepe,

We are writing to recommend **Motaz Al Chanati** for the NBER Health Economics Research Boot Camp. Motaz was an undergraduate Brown and is starting his second year in the PhD program in Economics at Columbia. Because Motaz is still early in his PhD, we thought our combined perspectives might be most informative.

Anna Aizer (Brown)

I recommend Motaz in the highest terms. I taught Motaz in my undergraduate health economics course. This is an upper level seminar that is limited to senior economics concentrators. It is a difficult course that doesn't follow a textbook but rather requires students to read and discuss economics papers published in top journals. It also requires knowledge of statistics and involves reading many difficult articles (some of which I also assign in my PhD-level class). There are four technical data assignments in which students are asked, for example, to estimate the impact of schooling on health as measured by disability rates using compulsory schooling laws as instruments. Overall, it's a course that I believe provides a good signal of how a student will do in graduate school as it is very similar to a second year PhD course in health economics, though the treatment is less technical.

All the students in the class are positively selected, but even among this selected group, one or two students usually distinguish themselves. This year Motaz was one of them. Previous outstanding students have included Bryce Steinberg, now graduating with a PhD in economics from Harvard and a job market paper that's forthcoming in the JPE. Motaz could always be counted on to make smart, insightful comments. He would often ask questions that would move the discussion in new and interesting ways. He is extremely intelligent, thoughtful and hardworking. I think he's also very creative. Unfortunately, he did not write an undergraduate thesis (something he tells me he regrets), but I believe that's because he came to economic research a bit late. He has made up for it by working as a research assistant to Professors Nate Hilger and Emily Oster. In sum, I have no doubt that Motaz belongs in a top Economics department.

Doug Almond (Columbia)

Anna flagged Motaz to me in a March 2017 email: " I think very highly of Motaz and recommend you snag him as a student and/or RA." This was terrific advice! Motaz took my PhD Health Econ Course in his first year, TA'd from PhD Micro I, and even managed to find time to RA for me. I have been throughly impressed at every interaction with Motaz.

Motaz's research sketch in my spring health econ class considered pharmaceutical advertising in the US and to what extent it is informative versus persuasive [Ackerberg, 2001]. As most know, the United States is one of the few countries to allow direct to consumer advertising (DTCA, over $20 billion per year). Using the crowd-out of pharma by political ads leading up to 2008 elections for identification, Sinkinson and Starc [2018] recently found high returns to DTCA expenditures in recruiting new pharmaceutical customers, which they argue also improve consumer welfare. Motaz proposed an analysis that would integrate both DTCA and direct to physician advertising (DTPA), thanks in part to newer data made available by the the Physician Payments Sunshine Act of 2010. Motaz proposed to deploy the Sinkinson and Starc [2018] instrument but in the 2015-2016 election cycle and with the newly available data on DTPA and DTCA, which primarily goes to meals with physicians! Motaz also toyed with using distance to corporate headquarters as an instrument for DTPA, as some previous papers have done, but found there was little responsive variation and this instrument is probably weak and instead proposed using weather-induced travel delays which might knock a physician off a pharma reps highly-choreographed meal schedule. All in all, Motaz proposed a highly worthwhile and feasible project, which is no small feat at the very beginning of the PhD program.

Motaz has also been working with classmates on restaurant health inspection in New York City, which they presented just this Monday in the applied micro colloquium. While this project is at an early stage, it shows considerable promise and upside potential. Since 2010, New York City's health department has been giving restaurants letter grades summarizing results of their health inspections. Within each letter grade are 13 gradations which are not disclosed publicly. Motaz & Co. have obtained detailed microdata on the health inspections, including even a unique identifier for the health inspector. They document massive bunching in grades just above the threshold for receiving a A or B. They are exploring the source of bunching, whether from restaurant behavior (some precise control over the running variable and incentive to minimize cost/effort of compliance) or inspector discretion (less work, including need to follow up with restaurants and hearings that do not receive an A). At least for restaurant inspections not prompted by complaints, the assignment of inspectors to restaurants is apparently random, and Motaz and Co. are in the process of assessing this empirically. Ultimately, their goal is to see how health outcomes are affected by the stringency of inspections, making use at first of 311 data on complaints to the City as an outcome. This project seems to have a lot of potential from a optimal regulation and forensic economics perspective [Zitzewitz, 2012], and indeed the City is eager for their help in improving perceived shortcomings in inspector effort and oversight.

Motaz has also presented a third project in colloquium earlier this month on the gerrymandering of school catchment districts in New Zealand that was very well received by faculty. He is absolutely bursting with interesting ideas and has the skills, curiosity, and drive to investigate them in a compelling ways. It would be real benefit to his development and advisor set to participate in the NBER boot camp: let's keep him a health economist! At this early stage of his career, he is the most impressive applied micro student I have met at Columbia since arriving in 2004.

References

Daniel A. Ackerberg. Empirically distinguishing informative and prestige effects of advertising. *The RAND Journal of Economics*, 32(2):316–333, 2001. ISSN 07416261. URL http://www.jstor.org/stable/2696412.

Michael Sinkinson and Amanda Starc. Ask your doctor? direct-to-consumer advertising of pharmaceuticals. *The Review of Economic Studies*, page rdy001, 2018. doi: 10.1093/restud/rdy001. URL http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdy001.

Eric Zitzewitz. Forensic economics. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(3):731–69, September 2012. doi: 10.1257/jel.50.3.731. URL http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/jel.50.3.731.

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To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing to express my interest in attending the NBER Health Economics Research Boot Camp for Graduate Students.

Currently, I am a third-year economics PhD student at Columbia University. My research interests are focused in health, education, and industrial organization. Prior to graduate school, I was a research assistant for Professor Emily Oster at Brown University. I have had a long-standing interest in health economics, specifically in studying the relationship between doctors and patients. I believe the Health Economics Research Boot Camp would be an exciting opportunity to deepen my understanding of research methods and topics in health economics by learning from both the top researchers in the field and like-minded peers.

Please find enclosed my CV and application essay. My recommendation letter was co-written by Doug Almond, my professor at graduate school, and Anna Aizer, my professor in college.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Motaz Al-Chanati

As a third-year PhD student, I believe the Health Economics Research Boot Camp will help in the transition from student to researcher. While I have been fortunate to learn from many excellent researchers so far, the field of health is so expansive that there is still a lot more I can learn to increase my understanding and help me find new topics on the frontier to explore. The topic in health that interests me most is studying the relationship between doctors and patients. One aspect that makes health so unique is that we often have to defer to doctors - not only to solve health issues but to also identify these issues in our own body to begin with. This reliance on experts brings about a number of important questions in terms of how people make decisions about their own health.

My interest in health economics has been consistent ever since I decided to pursue a PhD in economics. As a senior at Brown University, my first exposure was through Anna Aizer's class, where she emphasized the importance of health research and gave a broad overview of the existing literature. It was here that I first understood how health can touch on many other fields, such as education, labor, contracts, and even intellectual property. After graduating, I worked as a research assistant for Emily Oster. This was an invaluable experience as it allowed me to see first-hand how a health economist tackles their research. Moreover, through our work with the Rhode Island Innovative Policy Lab (RIIPL), we worked with the Rhode Island Department of Health to evaluate their programs and develop pilot studies. This highlighted the difference between the academic and policy side of health economics - but also the value of researchers (especially those in health) collaborating with and learning from the people who work in the field that they study. In graduate school, I continued my interest by taking health-related field classes with Doug Almond and Kate Ho. This provided important lessons about the different research methods in health, with the courses focusing on reduced form and structural estimation, respectively. I believe the above experiences show my long-standing interest in the field and emphasize why I feel the health boot camp would be incredibly beneficial. In particular, there are three reasons I would like to attend the boot camp. First, it is important to learn from experts in the field, who each have different specialties. Second, to learn more about methods used in health, especially structural estimation. Third, it would provide a prime opportunity to set up future collaborations with my peers.

Given my experience with health economics, I have grown to appreciate both the broadness and complexity of the field. Each of the professors I have been taught by has studied different topics and in different ways - and this still does not cover the full spectrum of topics that health economists study. In fact, one of the challenges that many face in health research is that there a relatively large initial hurdle in having background information on a topic, for example, understanding relevant medical knowledge or how health insurance markets work. The variety of researchers presenting at the boot camp will help me understand where the research frontier lies across different areas in health, as well as in bridging the gap in the background

knowledge needed to fully appreciate these topics.

It is not only important to learn more about the topics these experts research, but also to learn about the methods they use and how they can be applied to other settings. Specifically, I am interested in learning more about structural research and how to estimate the models. My undergraduate training and research assistant experience emphasized a reduced form approach. Consequently, it is my natural inclination to think about research in terms of reduced form evidence, and it was not until my second year of graduate school that I really saw structural work. While reading papers is an important way to learn more about methods, I have found that seeing a polished model is often quite daunting for a new researcher like myself. However, seeing someone present their work allows the audience to hear from the researcher the steps they took and decisions they made to get to the final model (details which are rarely included in a published article). This is often more illuminating than simply reading a paper, and would be helpful to know in the early stages of developing model.

Finally, I am also excited to meet and learn from the other participants in the boot camp. Health is certainly growing more popular, but I have often found it hard to find other students who are also interested in specializing in health, especially in the same sub-topics that I am interested in. Meeting other graduate students who are at a similar level in their education and have similar interests opens up the possibility for collaboration on future projects. Additionally, the fact that we are all coming from different universities means that we can each contribute different skills depending on our training.

In terms of my own research, my fields are applied micro-economics (focusing on health and education) and industrial organizations. While it is too early for me to decide on an exact research focus, the projects I tend to gravitate to have three common themes. First, how do people and institutions in power act in a way that works against the interests of those they are meant to serve? This ties directly in my interest in health focusing on the patient-doctor relationship. Second, what role do spatial effects play in the mechanisms studied? Rigorous spatial analysis is being increasingly used and I think it is an aspect that can add more depth to many questions that economists raise. Thirdly, I want to use a mix of reduced form evidence and structural model estimation in my projects. My third-year paper, for example, will be about the impact of pharmaceutical advertising on physician behavior. While in the early stages, I plan to test the impact using an instrumental variable regression to provide convincing reduced form evidence and motivate the construction of a model, followed by estimating this model to understand the mechanism that advertising works through in the decision-making of physicians. Given my research interests, it is clear that the health boot camp would help immensely in developing my own research. I would love the opportunity to learn from both the top researchers in the field and like-minded peers, and to deepen my understanding of research methods and topics in health economics.