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TEL: 209.228.4400

Zerin Dong
Ph.D. Candidate in Economics
University of California, Merced
Email: zdong12@ucmerced.edu

Dear NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp Selection Committee,

I am writing to apply to the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp 2026. I am a 4th year PhD candidate in Economics at the University of California, Merced, with research interests in the economics of science, innovation, and leadership. I have completed more than two years of PhD coursework and am actively developing my dissertation research.

My primary research agenda focuses on how institutions, incentives, and leadership shape innovation and knowledge production. My job market paper studies how leadership appointments in U.S. R1 universities affect research productivity and the direction of innovative activity. To this end, I have constructed a novel historical dataset on presidents of R1 universities since 1900, documenting their academic backgrounds and career trajectories and linking these data to department-level measures of research output. This project examines how leadership characteristics influence the allocation of resources and research effort across academic fields.

In addition, I am developing a joint project with my advisor, Dr. Christian Fons-Rosen, that studies innovation among populations that are historically less represented in innovation outcomes, with India as the primary empirical setting. Rather than focusing exclusively on rural areas, this project examines how institutional constraints, resource availability, and local environments shape innovative activity across groups that differ by gender, location, and social background. This work aims to contribute to the literature on innovation in developing economies by clarifying how institutional design and incentives influence knowledge creation and diffusion beyond traditional innovation hubs.

I am particularly interested in attending the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp because its focus closely aligns with my current and future research. This alignment is further strengthened by my upcoming participation in the IFP Economics of Ideas, Science, and Innovation, a PhD-level course scheduled for February–April 2026, where many of the Boot Camp faculty are also instructors. I expect this course to provide core conceptual frameworks in the economics of innovation and organizational incentives, and the Boot Camp would offer an ideal opportunity to complement this training through intensive lectures, discussion, and feedback on my research at a critical stage of my doctoral studies.

My recommendation letter will be submitted by **Dr. Christian Fons-Rosen**, my primary advisor at the University of California, Merced.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp and to engage with its faculty and participants.

Sincerely,



Zerin Dong

Zerin Dong

(415)-969-1185 | zdong12@ucmerced.edu

Education

University of California, Merced | ***PhD in Economics*** — Aug 2022 – May 2028 (expected)
Research Interests: Applied Microeconomics, Labor, Innovation, and Politics — Merced, CA
Committee: Christian Fons-Rosen (Advisor); Greg Wright; Sukhun Kang

University of San Francisco | ***MA in Economics*** — Aug 2015 – May 2017
Concentration: Financial Economics — San Francisco, CA

Tianjin University of Finance and Economics | ***BS in Statistics*** — Sep 2011 – July 2015
Tianjin, China

Research Experience

Research Assistant, Dr. Christian Fons-Rosen | ***Python, Stata, AWS, Claude Code*** — 2022-Present
University of California, Merced

Research Assistant, Dr. Matt Monnot | ***Stata, Excel*** — 2016-2017
University of San Francisco

Industry Experience

Data Analyst — Sep 2017 – Jan 2021
BlueJay Mobile Health (Somatic Health) — Pleasanton, CA

- Integrated, processed, and analyzed medical data using SQL, Excel, and Python
- Created statistical models to access usage for the management
- Developed and statistically evaluated data tables for agreed-upon metrics
- Delivered KPI reports for CS team performance evaluation on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis
- Trained new hire and junior employee (20 trainees)
- **Achievement**: User Growth 188%, facilitated 200+ clinics including 3,988 health providers and 45,444 patients during Covid-19 lockdown period; 2019-2020 Employee of The Year Award

PR Manager — Feb 2017 – Sep 2017
Ambisafe (B2B blockchain solution) — San Francisco, CA

- Worked with client to design token mechanism and write white paper
- Facilitated the marketing team to launch multi-channel campaigns
- **Achievement**: TAAS Fund (raised $8M), Propy (raised $15M)

Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant for Undergraduate Level Econometrics — Fall 2024, Fall 2022
University of California, Merced — Merced, CA

Teaching Assistant for Undergraduate Level Intermediate Microeconomics — Fall 2023, Spring 2024
University of California, Merced — Merced, CA

Teaching Assistant for Undergraduate Level Statistical Inference — Spring 2023, Spring 2025, Fall 2025
University of California, Merced — Merced, CA

Teaching Assistant for Undergraduate Level Microeconomics — Fall 2016
University of San Francisco — San Francisco, CA

Working Papers

Down To Countryside, Up To The Party (solo)
Received Best 3rd Year Paper Award

Working In Progress

The Making of a University President: Evolving Profiles, Favoritism and Knowledge Production (solo, JMP)
Draft available in S26

Innovation in Rural India (with Christian Fons-Rosen)

Invited Presentations & Conferences

Guest Lecture: Economics of Innovation (UC Merced) July 2025
Innovation in Practice and Research Merced, CA

18th Annual All-California Labor Economics Conference (Stanford) Sep 2025
The Making of a University President: Evolving Profiles, Favoritism, and Knowledge Production Stanford, CA

Awards and Honors

IFP Economics of Ideas, Science, and Innovation PhD Course 2026
PhD Course; Selected Fellow

3^{rd} Year Paper Award 2024
Awarded after 3^{rd} year research presentation to the best in cohort

Professional Development Award Summer 2024
$1,000 University of California, Merced

Department Scholarship Award for Academic Excellence Spring 2016, Spring 2017, Fall 2017
Recognition for the Top 3 students in academics at the University of San Francisco

Professional Services

EBM Graduate Student Brown Bag Series Spring 2026
Co-organizer

AOM (OMT) Annual Meeting 2026
Reviewer

Skills

Languages: English, Chinese (Mandarin)
Programming: Python, Stata, R, SQL
Document Creation: Microsoft Office Suite, LaTeX

Graduate Coursework (PhD in Economics, UC Merced)

Core Economic Theory

- Microeconomic Theory I (ECON 201A)
- Microeconomic Theory II (ECON 201B)
- Macroeconomics: Topics in International Trade (ECON 269)

Econometrics & Data Methods

- Intro to Graduate Statistics (ECON 290)
- Econometrics II (ECON 230B)
- Metrics III: Applied Methods (ECON 270)
- Advanced Applied Research Methods (ECON 210)
- Economics and Data Science (ECON 271)

Field Courses

- Methods in Economic History (ECON 204)
- Advanced Labor Economics I (ECON 240)
- Political Economy (ECON 255)
- Immigration Economics & Policy (ECON 245)

External & Specialized Training (Current)

IFP Program: Economics of Ideas, Science and Innovation (Feb -April 2026)

https://ifp.org/economics-of-ideas/syllabus/

Research Agenda & Motivation for Attending the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp

My research examines how institutions, incentives, and leadership shape innovation and knowledge production. Using tools from applied microeconomics, econometrics, and machine learning, I study how organizational structures and institutional environments affect the allocation of talent, research effort, and innovative activity across different settings.

My job market paper focuses on leadership and innovation within U.S. research universities. I have constructed a novel historical dataset on R1 university presidents since 1900, documenting their academic backgrounds, career trajectories, and demographic characteristics, and linked these data to department-level measures of research productivity. This project investigates how leadership appointments influence the direction and intensity of research activity across academic fields, and whether departments benefit when university leadership shares disciplinary expertise. Through this work, I aim to contribute to the literature on innovation by clarifying how organizational leadership and incentive structures affect knowledge creation.

This project also provides a platform for several extensions. First, I plan to link university-level research output to USPTO patent data to study how leadership affects the diffusion of knowledge from basic science to applied innovation. Second, I plan to link my leadership dataset to historical U.S. Census data to examine whether social mobility and family background predict pathways into academic leadership. This extension will support additional research on leadership selection and mobility, while also creating a data source that can be used for future work. Finally, I plan to expand the dataset to include newly designated R1 and R2 universities, allowing me to study innovation dynamics across a broader set of research institutions.

In ongoing joint work with my advisor, Dr. Christian Fons-Rosen, we study innovation among underrepresented groups in developing economies, using India as a primary setting. Rather than focusing exclusively on rural areas, this project examines how institutional constraints, resource availability, and local environments shape innovative activity across groups that are historically less represented in innovation outcomes, including differences by gender, location, and social background. This work contributes to the literature on innovation in developing economies by improving our understanding of how institutional design and incentives influence knowledge creation and diffusion beyond traditional innovation hubs.

I am eager to attend the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp because it directly complements my core research agenda. The Boot Camp's emphasis on innovation, organizational incentives, and research design closely aligns with my work on leadership in academic institutions and innovation in developing economies. This alignment is further strengthened by my upcoming participation in the IFP Economics of Ideas, Science, and Innovation, a PhD-level course scheduled for February–April 2026, where many of the Boot Camp faculty are also instructors. I expect this course to provide foundational conceptual frameworks in the economics of innovation, and the Boot Camp would offer a valuable opportunity to complement this training through intensive lectures, discussion, and feedback from leading scholars.

At this stage of my doctoral studies, the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp would be particularly valuable in helping me refine my empirical strategies, sharpen the contribution of my job market paper, and develop my broader research agenda into a set of publishable studies in innovation economics. I expect the Boot Camp to play an important role in shaping the next phase of my dissertation and my long-term research program.

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January 29th, 2026

Christian Fons-Rosen
Associate Professor at the Department of Economics
University of California in Merced
cfons-rosen@ucmerced.edu

To Whom It May Concern:

This is a letter in support of Zerin Dong to participate in the *NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp 2026*. Zerin is currently a fourth year economics PhD student at UC Merced, where he is interested in the economics of science and innovation. He is currently working on two projects in the field of innovation and he is at ideal stage of his career to experience firsthand in the boot camp how the top scholars in our field work.

Regarding my experience supervising Zerin's PhD thesis, the positive trend in terms of generation of ideas and efficient implementation is remarkable. In particular, I want to describe a bit his very novel work linking Machine Learning and the economics of innovation. Zerin examines in a single-authored paper how university leadership impacts the development of U.S. research universities. He is creating a unique dataset that compiles detailed background information on university presidents and chancellors for the last 100 years, using sources such as institutional archives, Wikipedia, and public records. By applying natural language processing, Zerin analyzes these leaders' connections to politics and business. Currently, he is integrating this data with university performance records from IPEDS and innovation metrics from Web of Science. The ultimate goal is to assess how leadership changes in basic science shape the quantity and the direction of science.

Overall, Zerin is a highly motivated scholar with great computational skills and a vision for relevant questions. He definitely would benefit by having more exposure to other scholars in the field, and for this reason I support his application in the strongest terms.

Yours sincerely,

Christian Fons-Rosen