Essentials for Incoming Ph.D. Students 2015-2016

Department Of Economics
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Columbia University
New York, NY
Preface

Welcome to the Ph.D. program in Economics at Columbia. We, the Association of Graduate Economics Students (AGES), understand the challenges of transitioning to a completely new environment, and we hope this guide will help ease your transition as much as possible. We’re looking forward to having you join the family at Columbia Economics.

Please note, however, that this guide is not meant to be a comprehensive guide for the entire process of moving to Columbia; it is designed and written to be complementary to all the information you will be provided by the department, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) and the University in general. We’ve made a conscious effort not to duplicate any information that may be available elsewhere (such as registration procedures and University Apartment Housing application procedures). Instead, this guide contains additional information tailored to incoming Ph.D. students in the Department of Economics.

Furthermore, since a significant proportion of our entering class each year hails from abroad, some sections of this guide contain basic information about living in the U.S. These sections may not be pertinent to U.S. residents, who should feel free to skip them. For the convenience of the readers, we have tried to note this at the beginning of each of these sections.

If you have additional questions after reading the guide, please contact the AGES board or members of the department. Contact information is provided at the end of this booklet.

Welcome to Columbia!

Leo Lijun Wang  
Scott Elliot Weiner  
AGES Co-Presidents, 2015-2016
Transitioning into Graduate Academics

Math Camp and Prerequisites

In Economics, there is often a notable gap between undergraduate and graduate-level coursework. The department organizes a math camp in the summer before the fall semester to assure that incoming Ph.D. students are adequately prepared for the types of mathematical analysis required. Math camp covers a variety of topics including (in no particular order of significance) real analysis, basic set theory, convexity, correspondences, linear algebra, multivariate calculus, static optimization, Taylor expansion, and linearization.

There is an exam at the end of math camp. However, the grade is not recorded for evaluation. Consider the math camp exam as an opportunity to find out what skills you may want to work on more during the year to prepare for the certification exams.

There are certainly other skills you could develop in addition to the math camp depending on your personal interests and pursuits. For theorists, a grasp of measure theory is helpful, while empiricists can benefit from programming skills in various statistical softwares -- working knowledge of R, STATA and MATLAB is also a plus.

First-Year Core Sequence

The first-year experience at Columbia Economics Ph.D. is entirely course-based and problem-set intensive. All first-year students are required to take Microeconomics I, Macroeconomics I, Econometrics I and Math Methods in the fall, and Microeconomics II, Macroeconomics II, Econometrics II and Perspectives in the spring. As in previous years, the Microeconomics I/II, and Macroeconomics I/II sequences will be taught by four faculty members in total, two for each semester of the first year, while the Econometrics I/II sequence will be taught by two faculty members, one for each semester.

The Ph.D. Certifying examinations take place at the end of the first year (mid-late May) and cover all materials taught by these 10 faculty members. There are three written exams, one each for Micro, Macro and Metrics. Each professor will submit a question to be answered for the exam. The exact dates for the exams are set by the department and based on a number of different factors including feedback from AGES.
Some students do not pass a certification exam on their first try in May - this is not ideal, but certainly does not constitute the end of one’s time in the program! Every student in this situation is allowed to take a makeup exam again in September.

AGES has made an effort to compile all resources applicable to first-year core sequence courses through the years. These include old problem sets, old exams, and digital versions of certain popular textbooks. A link to the Dropbox folder will be sent to all incoming first-years before math camp begins. However, do use the resources with caution, since syllabi vary from year to year and from professor to professor. We also discourage copying any of your problem set solutions from the materials in Dropbox - they may not be 100% accurate, and won’t help you think through the problem.

TAs, and the recitations they hold, are some of the best resources you have in your first-year. We encourage you to approach your TAs with any questions you have - the earlier, the better!

You may be tempted to take audio recordings of certain lectures so that you can refer to them later on, and this can be incredibly helpful. Do ask for permission prior to recording any lectures.

We strongly recommend working together in groups to tackle problem sets and exam preparation. The parameters for working together vary by professor and course, so do keep those guidelines in mind while you write up your problem sets. For example, many professors allow students to consult each other and form study groups, but will ask that each student submits his or her own write-up of the problem set, which may not be a direct copy from any other group member’s write-up. A good study group can make getting through the first-year material much easier.

Overall, it is helpful to keep in mind that the first year is a marathon, and not a sprint, so working consistently is the key to getting through all the material. Good luck!

Preparing for Second-Year Fields

Students begin the specialization process in Year Two with the selection of two fields. To assist in this process, first-year students are encouraged to attend the various field colloquia and seminars. If you cannot attend every week, that is completely fine - your first priority should be coursework. The full list of respective colloquia and seminars is sent weekly via email.
AGES will work with professors who teach the second-year field courses and students who are doing research in the various fields to arrange sessions in which you can find out more about each field, discuss the kinds of cutting-edge work in those fields, and make an informed choice about the fields you will select in your second year. We will send you more information about Field Week in the Spring.
Life at Columbia and Beyond

Housing

In general, there are both on-campus and off-campus housing options. Since we are not affiliated with any external agencies, there is little that we can say about off-campus housing. Among the various off-campus housing options, we would recommend looking for apartments through the Columbia Facebook Housing group, Craigslist, or a broker.

We strongly recommend on-campus housing. It saves you the hassle of finding a broker and generally works out to be less expensive. Most of Columbia's off-campus housing is within a ten-block radius of the Morningside campus. Most Columbia-owned housing units are subsidized to provide discounted rates and also renovated regularly. Utilities may be included in the bill, or they may be paid separately. Every apartment has Internet access which is billed on a monthly basis and included in your total rent amount. You will have to purchase a router for Wi-Fi, or an Ethernet cable to connect your computer directly to the Internet.

You can choose to live in either a furnished or an unfurnished apartment. It is well-worth the time and effort to furnish your apartment to your personal taste, given that you will be in the city for 5-6 years. If you choose an unfurnished place, you may want to move in earlier to give you some time to do so. Brand-new and quality furniture can be purchased from IKEA Brooklyn (they offer same-day delivery of all your furniture to any apartment in Manhattan for $99, and some help with assembly for an additional fee); and you can also buy or even inherit second-hand furniture from students who are leaving Columbia. Regardless of how new it may look, don’t take any furniture (particularly mattresses, couches and upholstered chairs) left out on sidewalks. They may have bedbugs and/or other pest problems. Beware!

If you are planning to install an air conditioner in your room (particularly useful in the hottest months of the year - July and August), you can hire professionals at Clinton Supply Co on 122nd Street & Amsterdam Ave. We recommend that you use this service to avoid any safety hazards.

Dining

On-campus dining options have been omitted here since full information can be found online at http://dining.columbia.edu. This option is, in general, not applicable to graduate students since we are not on a meal plan with the university.
Off-campus dining options are abundant. We couldn’t possibly comment on all that Manhattan has to offer, but a brief description of options around Columbia is included below.

There are many food carts along Broadway just outside the Columbia campus gate on 116 Street & Broadway, especially during lunch. If you have limited time, the food carts are a good option. However, you should note the length of the queue and remember that these carts are almost all cash-only.

Another quick option is Subsconscious on 120th & Amsterdam, which is very popular among Columbia students. Salads and sandwiches are available all day. They also offer breakfast bagels, coffee, tea and snacks. Take advantage of their loyalty program by supplying them with your cell number every time you make a purchase, and they will give you $7.50 credit for every $75.00 spent.

For sit-down dining, popular options include:

- Ollie’s (Chinese)
- Vine Sushi (Japanese) (both Ollie’s and Vine are temporarily closed due to a fire accident that occurred earlier this year)
- Nikko (Asian Fusion)
- Flat Top (American)
- Max Soha (Italian), which is cash-only
- Massawa (Ethiopian)
- Community (American, brunch)
- Pisticci (Italian)
- Deluxe (American, diner)
- Thai Market (Thai)

For at-home cooks, there are also many grocery stores around Columbia. A helpful list is provided below:

- Morton Williams University Supermarket (115th and Broadway)
- West Side Market (113th and Broadway)
- M2M (115th and Broadway)
- Trader Joe’s (72nd and Broadway)
- Fairway (125th and Riverside, and 72nd and Broadway)
- Met Market (124th and Amsterdam)
- Whole Foods (96th and Columbus)

For those who require caffeine on a regular basis (and there are many of us!):

- Joe’s Coffee in the Northwest Corner building (120th and Broadway)
- Flattop (Blue Bottle Coffee, 122nd and Amsterdam)
- Graduate Students’ Lounge (Philosophy building, requires your ID card to access)
- Max Caffe (122nd and Amsterdam)
- Alice’s Cafe (6th floor of the International Affairs Building on 118th and Amsterdam)

All of the above are within walking distance to the Morningside Campus.

**Staying Fit & Safe**

Dodge Fitness Center, the underground sports complex, is a great option if you are planning to exercise on a regular basis. Additionally, there are fee-based, group fitness classes (yoga, pilates, zumba, ballroom dance, etc.) and intramural sports clubs (badminton, tennis, etc.). Based on some scientific research as well as our past experience, exercise certainly helps with the stress of the first year.

There are many options for outdoor running and biking near campus, particularly in Riverside Park and Central Park. There are also public basketball and tennis courts in Riverside Park.

Just as in all big cities around the world, crime is a recurrent problem in New York City. The Morningside area is generally safe, and the on-campus security teams work tirelessly to prevent crime, but there are still things we can do to minimize risk. To exercise safely, here are some helpful guidelines.

- Avoid parks at night. They are gorgeous destinations during daytime hours, but unsafe after dark. Note that there have been several thefts in Morningside Park so it should be avoided if possible, even during the day.
- Try to walk on the major streets and avenues, not through alleys.
- Always attend to your personal belongings on campus.
- Keep cellphones in bags while on the street.
- Be aware of your surroundings, and the public safety officer booths. They are stationed around campus for assistance.

All the above is advice from our experience. It is always better to hear from the professionals so consider browsing through the Columbia Public Safety website for more information at [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/publicsafety/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/publicsafety/).

**Personal Finances (Primarily for International Students)**
Good personal finance is essential for living at Columbia and participating in all the activities that the campus and the city have to offer. We primarily discuss checking accounts and credit cards in this section.

Checking accounts are deposit accounts that carry almost no interest and serve mainly as personal liquid cash reserves. Many banks offer college checking accounts with no minimum balance requirement and some offer promotions for new account members. So consider shopping around for the best deal before making a decision. Furthermore, here are some general guidelines:

- Chase is said to have the most presence in all of New York City
- Citibank has a branch as well as various ATMs on Columbia campus (including an ATM on the 4th floor of IAB), and makes international transfers easy.
- Bank of America is one of the most convenient while traveling within the United States because of its multiple locations.

Besides checking accounts and debit cards, credit cards constitute the other major personal finance option in the U.S. America has a very extensive and established personal credit system, in which every individual has a credit profile with credit scores. Establishing and maintaining excellent credit scores is very useful for future loan applications and various other related matters. One good way to access your personal credit scores would be CreditKarma.com, for which there is also a smartphone app. Successful credit card applications depend heavily on good credit scores. Similarly, responsible use of credit cards enhances your personal credit profile. However, the more direct benefits of credit cards are still the cash back rewards, details of which vary from card to card.

Note: it’s generally very difficult for international students to successfully apply for a credit card due to the lack of prior credit history, though it’s not entirely impossible. The optimal strategy is to apply for a less stringent credit card and use it responsibly to build up your credit scores for future applications. Recommendations for your first credit card include Discover and Citi Thank You Preferred, both of which are known to be more accessible for first-time credit card applicants. Some credit cards require you to deposit one month’s credit line amount (e.g. $2000) into an interest-bearing account that the bank can draw on if you don’t make the payment. These are known as ‘secured’ credit cards, which are a good option if you don’t yet have a credit history.

**Cellular Services (Primarily for International Students)**

Obtaining a cellphone is the first step to staying in touch with friends and colleagues during your time in the program. Major carriers in the U.S. include AT&T, Verizon, T-
Mobile among others. You should choose a carrier based on the reception that you get with that carrier in your apartment and in the Columbia area (you can check with other students for their experiences with various cellphone carriers). In general, there are two options to consider: contract packages or prepaid service.

The first option, a contract package, is a good deal for those who use their phones a lot, and especially for those who are in need of a new phone. By signing a contract commitment for at least two years, you can purchase a brand-new phone at a significantly discounted price.

The second option, prepaid service, is better suited for people who don’t use their cellphones as much. This service involves pre-purchasing minutes with balance deductions for calls, texts or data. However, please note that some have usage expiration dates so plan accordingly.

No matter which option you choose, carriers require identification documents to open an account. In some cases, a security deposit is also required for international students who have just arrived in the U.S. Be sure to check online first to find out what is required.

**Fun around Columbia and the Big Apple**

Throughout the year, there are many social events within our department and the Columbia community at large. Plan to attend these events to meet new people and make friends both within and outside Economics.

New York City has so much to offer for leisure, including Broadway shows (check out tix4students.com or our campus Arts Initiative for discounted tickets), movies (check out our campus TIC for discounted tickets), lectures, sports, parks, cafes, amazing restaurants and innumerable cultural events.

As Columbia students, the Arts Initiative grants you access to most museums in the city free of charge, with a validation sticker of registration on your Columbia ID. It also provides discounted tickets to Lincoln Center performances, Broadway musicals and cinemas so take advantage of them and have some fun.

**Family-Friendly Policies**

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences has recently announced new benefits for students with families. As quoted from an email from GSAS:

“Beginning in the fall 2015 semester, GSAS will offer:
1) A twelve-week period of Accommodation for Parental Responsibilities. Students who give birth, adopt, or become legal guardians or foster parents, as well as students whose spouse or partner gives birth, can have regular responsibilities associated with their doctoral program suspended for twelve calendar weeks. During that time, students will retain all of their funding privileges. Parental accommodation must begin within six months of the date of birth, adoption, or guardianship. (Please note: This policy supersedes the Policy on Suspension of Responsibilities.)

2) An optional semester of unpaid accommodation, in addition to the 12 weeks of paid accommodation. Students who elect to take a semester of unpaid accommodation after their Accommodation for Parental Responsibilities concludes will not receive their stipend, but will continue to have access to CU housing, campus facilities, and insurance. International students will have uninterrupted legal immigration status.

3) A $2,000 child-care subsidy per academic year for each child who is under the age of five and not yet attending kindergarten. If both parents are GSAS students, both of them may now apply individually for the child-care subsidy.

4) An Adoption Assistance Program that will provide a reimbursement of up to $5,000 to help with the costs incurred by a graduate student parent who adopts while in a doctoral program.

5) A new campus lactation room, located in Butler Library, that will provide a private and convenient space for graduate students, faculty, and staff this fall.”

You can get more information about this from GSAS - we would be happy to point you to people who can guide you.
About AGES

AGES is the Association of Graduate Economics Students at Columbia University, of which all Economics Ph.D. students are members by default. It is served by an elected board that is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Association.

AGES serves two purposes:

First, we represent the interests of students at both the departmental and graduate school level. We provide guidance to prospective students who attend our Open House in the spring in small group meetings. We mentor new students throughout their first year at Columbia. We also put together this informational booklet and a folder of resources for first-years to help you with your transition to Columbia and your first-year coursework. We provide consultation and guidance for student grievances, and we help with general problem-solving.

Second, we organize various social activities for our members. Our two largest events are the Welcome BBQ in the fall and our annual Skit Night in the spring. We also organize various social hours throughout the semester to help students meet each other and faculty members.

Every Columbia Economics Ph.D. student is a member of AGES. The Association has no political or other affiliation whatsoever.

Go to http://ages.econ.columbia.edu/ages to connect to the AGES website, which provides information about upcoming events and other resources.
Miscellaneous

Points of Contact

Although we have tried to cover the basics, you may still have unanswered questions. Please contact us so that we can help! The following are the points of contact for you:

Amy Devine
Ph.D. Program Coordinator
aed2152@columbia.edu
(212) 854-6881

Dan O'Flaherty
Director of Graduate Studies
bo2@columbia.edu
(212) 854-2449

Leo Lijun Wang
AGES Co-President, 2015-2016
lijun.wang@columbia.edu

Scott Elliot Weiner
AGES Co-President, 2015-2016
sew2169@columbia.edu
Notes from the Department

The department is open Monday-Friday from 9:00am-5:00pm. The office of the Ph.D. Coordinator, Amy Devine, is in Room 1007. She is available to respond to any departmental administrative questions.

Campus Resources

The Courseworks webpage (courseworks.columbia.edu) is a learning and sharing resource for faculty and students where one can find syllabi, assignments etc. In addition, it offers interactive components such as email, chat, wiki and discussion boards.

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) webpage (gsas.columbia.edu) can address questions regarding finances, degree conferrals, campus resources, etc.

The International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) webpage (columbia.edu/cu/iso) is a fantastic resource developed specifically to meet the needs of the international community. Please consult for questions related to visas, driving permits, temporary accommodations, etc.

Go to the Registrar’s webpage (registrar.columbia.edu/event/academic-calendar) to find the academic calendar, register for courses, request transcripts, etc.

Go to the Student Services Online (SSOL) webpage (ssol.columbia.edu) to see schedules, grades, academic profiles, holds, etc.

For departmental information regarding upcoming conferences, job opportunities, calls-for-papers, etc. please consult econ.columbia.edu/graduate-announcements.

Faculty Advisors

By the end of Year Two, students must select and request that a faculty member agree to serve as an advisor. Advisors help guide research and academic pursuits and are instrumental in the job market process. Occasionally students may change advisors throughout the course of their Ph.D. career depending on research interests.

Fellowships
Awards are presented throughout the year to recognize outstanding achievement in both research and teaching. For more information, consult the following: econ.columbia.edu/academic-awards.

**PER and ISERP**

The Program for Economic Research is a valuable resource for Ph.D. students. Consult with them about outside funding sources, student data matching grants, public programs, and more.

The Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy is Columbia’s research institute dedicated to social sciences. They can provide support in obtaining external funding, offer statistical consulting services, and they offer a variety of public programming events.

**Printer Access & Printing Quota**

There is a 100 page print quota available per semester from Print Services. To obtain access, log into the CUIT site and select the printing section and select the increase allocation option to $35.00. This amount will be added to your student account and reimbursed later. There are printers in every library. You should sign up for the option that allows you to increase your printing quota as early in the semester as possible. If you are on a fellowship from the university, the department will cover this fee. Please note that the computers and printers on the 6th floor of IAB outside the cafe area are exclusively for SIPA access only - we cannot use any of these computers and printers.

There are printers on the 10th and 11th floors that you can use during business hours and even after (as long as someone is around in the cubicle area to let you in). Amy and AGES board members can direct you about how to install the relevant printer drivers.

Many students choose to read on tablets or laptops instead of printing papers. If you are reading a number of papers on the iPad, apps like iAnnotate and Evernote can be incredibly useful, and cost a nominal fee (typically $4.99 or $9.99 from the App store).

**Security**
Because Columbia is an open campus, valuables such as laptops, cell phones, handbags, clothing, etc. should not be left unattended, even for a few minutes.

**Teaching**

All students must teach at least two semesters before the end of their fourth year. There are many courses available ranging from introductory survey courses to more advanced, specialized ones. Excelling in coursework and teaching can potentially lead to great research opportunities.

**Typesetting and Presentations**

There is a trend in the profession to use the LaTex program for typesetting documents (everything from problem sets to research papers and grant proposals). LaTex is open source, and is an incredibly useful resource.

Some of your professors may even require that your problem sets be submitted in this format so it is a good time to download the software and start familiarizing yourself with it.

LaTex also offers the option to create Beamer presentations (which output as a PDF files). They are commonly used in colloquia and in seminars in Economics.

**Useful Software Access**

For campus licensed MATLAB access, please follow instructions at portal.seas.columbia.edu/matlab. You will need MATLAB for some of your first-year core courses.

Other useful software licensed for Columbia students can be accessed at cuit.columbia.edu/cuit/software-downloads.

**Cluster Access**

The following Computing Wiki has been compiled especially for the Economics department by Professor W. Bentley MacLeod, Evan Riehl and Eric Vlach (who also provides incredible computing support when necessary), and other graduate students who volunteered for the task.
It provides details about accessing software and other computing resources. It also
provides step-by-step instructions to access and use the Yeti Cluster, a high-performancce computing cluster for working with data that exceeds the capacity of a standard PC.

Do use the guide and request a Yeti account when you start working with large datasets.
(wikis.cuit.columbia.edu/confluence/display/econ/CU+Economics+Computing+Wiki)

**Work**

To work in the department on a part-time basis (often referred to as Casual RA) you must fill out an application and submit to the Department Coordinator before you begin. During the semester, U.S. citizens can work a maximum of 25 hours/week. International students can work a maximum of 20 hours/week. Please direct any questions to the Graduate Coordinator.
Acknowledgements

This guide has been drafted and prepared by Leo Wang, Ph.D. Candidate in the entering Class of 2014, and then subsequently edited by AGES colleagues and the Department of Economics.