Overview: The demand for the use of evidence in designing international development programs and policy continues to grow. However, policy makers’ often have questions about how to interpret and use the evidence generated. How generalizable are these results? How to interpret null results? Mixed outcomes? Short- and long-term effects? Are these results scalable? Additionally, what are the political barriers to using evidence? In this course, we will explore how to think about these issues and others in relation to designing policies and programs in the international development sphere. We will examine these questions through various development sectors: economic development, governance, food security, refugees, education and peacebuilding.

In this course we will cover various topics related to evidence-based policy making, including:

- Elements of Policy and Program Design
  - Theories of Change
- Combining Various Forms of Evidence
- Use of Descriptive Evidence
- Generalizability and Context Specificity
- External Validity
- Scale a programs
- Ethical Considerations
- Political Barriers

Most weeks, we will dive into at least one evaluation of a program or policy. We will ask ourselves if and how policy makers could and/or should use this evidence. I will bring in guest speakers occasionally, either those who worked on the evaluation or practitioners who are figuring out how to use the evidence.
Teaching Philosophy: I think much learning happens through direct feedback. Therefore, I have structured the course and assignments to allow for me to provide feedback to students. I will grade all assignments myself in a timely manner. If any of my feedback is unclear, I encourage you to talk with me about it. The point of feedback is to learn.

Course Structure: Class will be a combination of lectures, large group discussions and small group discussions and exercises. Since there are no clear-cut answers to many of these questions, my aim is to have you become more comfortable with the questions and provide some analytical frameworks for how to think through these dilemmas. The course also aims to help you think through why others may or may not accept evidence, and how to address those barriers.

Communication: Direct all administrative questions (e.g., finding a reading, Canvas issues, etc) to the TAs. They are very happy to help you. This also allows me to focus my time on the content of the course, grading and substantive questions.

In terms of replies, you can expect replies from me or the TAs during the hours of 8 AM to 6 PM CT. You may receive replies outside of these times. However, if you contact us after 6 PM, there is a good chance you will not receive a reply until the next day.

The TA will also set up a Slack channel for course discussions and announcements. This is also a good venue to ask questions about course materials and assignments so that everyone can see the answers. Others may have similar questions.

Office Hours: I will conduct offices hours between 10 M and 12 PM on Tuesdays. Please make an appointment with me in advance via the sign-up sheet. Other appointments can be made by email as necessary.

Note: If you are a no-show for an appointment, you will need to communicate with me before scheduling another one. If you do not speak with me first, I will cancel the meeting. Additionally, if you are unable to make an appointment and need to cancel, please also cancel the Google invite. This will open the slot for another student.

Assignments: 
Note: All written assignments are expected to be single-spaced, 12-point font, with one-inch margins. Those submitted that don’t follow these instructions will not be graded. All submissions through Canvas. For references, the only requirement is that you are consistent with the format.

The crux of your grade will be a three-part assignment that will combine individual and group elements. Over the course of the semester, you will work towards designing an intervention in a country in the Global South. Groups are self-selected with support from the TAs.
The first step is selecting an evaluation of an intervention you are interested in applying to a new context. This could be a program we discuss in class (education in Afghanistan; cash in Kenya; youth workforce development in Rwanda, etc). You will also have to select a context you want to apply it to. Groups and selected intervention and context are due October 10th before class (I likely will meet with each group in class to discuss intervention and context).

The first assignment will be an individual assignment, the second and third will be group assignments.

1. Individual Assignment: Collecting the Evidence (20%): Due October 21 at midnight, 2 pages (references do not count). The first building block is collecting the evidence for your intervention. This assignment has two parts.

   - **Context:** What is the important contextual information you need? This will differ depending on the intervention. For example, if you choose an education program, you likely will want basic information about literacy and school access rates. If it is an unconditional cash transfer program, you may want to document poverty levels and the lack of basic needs access (food insecurity, housing, etc). The point of this eventual section of your proposal is to justify the need for the intervention. In this section, you will be focused on descriptive evidence.
   - **Intervention:** How widely has the intervention you selected been evaluated? In similar contexts as the one you selected? With different target groups (ultra poor vs poor; women vs men)? In humanitarian vs development contexts? Or fragile vs places with more functioning institutions? Summarize the evidence.

2. Group: Designing an Evidence-Based Theory of Change (15%): November 11 at midnight, 3 pages, including diagram (references do not count). For the second paper, you will begin thinking through how your intervention will have the impact you expect. In class, we will discuss how to diagram theories. You will adapt one of these examples, and then use the evidence you found in Assignment #1 to rate the strength of the evidence for the connections between different parts of the intervention and impacts. Specifically, you will identify:
   - Inputs
   - Outputs
   - Short term outcomes
   - Long term outcomes
   - Impacts
   - Risks
   While much of this will be part of the final assignment, I want to give you plenty of opportunity for feedback.
3. **Proposing the Intervention (40%)**: **Due December 9 at midnight.** For the final paper, your group will, in essence, write a proposal for the intervention. The paper will include the following sections:

- **Context and Problem Statement: (2 pages)**. This is a description of the context, and what is the problem the program will address. You need to write this section to justify why this is a critical issue in this country to solve. For example, in Afghanistan, there are a host of problems to solve: education, governance, poverty. And while they are all interrelated, focus your context analysis on the area of interest. (i.e., girls education lags behind in Afghanistan reducing economic prosperity, etc.). Much of this, if done well, should come from Assignment 1, incorporating feedback (30%)

- **Theory of Change (hypothesis) and Summary of Evidence (2 pages)**
  - The summary of evidence is to justify your Theory of Change. Why do you think this program will have desirable outcomes? This is mostly assignment 2, with adjustments based on feedback (40%)

- **Activities (1 page)**: What activities are necessary to operationalize the theory. What is the dosage for the program? (e.g., number of trainings) Do you want there to be spillover? Should cash be given in one large tranche or in smaller tranches? You can bullet point this section. (5%)

- **Evaluation Plan (1 page)**: How will the program generate further evidence? What type of evaluation will you try to conduct? What is the sampling strategy (e.g., individual, household, community, etc?) What are the main indicators? (20%)

The total page limit for this assignment is **7 pages, including the diagram** (references do not count). This may seem extremely short, but most donors are requiring shorter and shorter proposals. This will help you hone your writing skills.

**Group Participation (5%)**: **Due December 9 at midnight**. You will have an opportunity to provide feedback about your teammates, how they contributed well to your learning and any challenges you faced.

**Weekly Reading (10%)** It is expected students come to class prepared to discuss the topic and the readings. This is your opportunity to engage more with the material, ask me questions, and debate the thorny issues that are at the heart of evidence-based policy making. In your professional career, you will need to back your opinions with evidence (most of the time), and so use class as an opportunity to hone those skills.

To foster more engagement, both in class and online, please submit 2-3 bullet points on the readings by Wednesday morning at 8 AM CT on Canvas. These could be reflections, questions, etc. Quality is more important the quantity. This helps me develop a deeper understanding of where students are with the class material and helps me shift lectures and discussions
appropriately. Over the course of the term, you may take 1 “pass” and not submit the bullet points.

These will be graded on a 3-point scale. Thoughtful comments that incorporate multiple readings will receive a 2; submitting a reflection on one reading (particularly if it was the shortest of the week) will receive a 1; not submitting will receive a 0.

**Class Participation (10%):** As I stated above, this is discussion-based class. Most weeks, at least one class (likely Wednesdays), we will do a deep dive on an evaluation. I will run this like a case, asking you questions about the paper rather than reviewing the paper. Come prepared.

Zoom will be available for those who need to use it, and please do use it when you need to quarantine. **If you intend to use Zoom, please let the TA know before class.** That said, coming to class is a public good and a commons problem. For many of us, it’s easier to not come to class and just turn on our computers. However, it is a better experience when we all come (particularly for discussion). And it is hard to participate if you do not come to class. While I will not take attendance and won’t police the use of Zoom, regular use of Zoom rather than coming to class (without discussing it with me), will negatively affect your participation grade.

I also encourage you to use Slack to share thoughts on the readings or share other relevant materials. We make this available for students who find other ways of participating more comfortable. The TAs and I will also contribute and moderate.

**Late policy:** Unless arrangements are made in advance, any assignment that is late will receive 10% penalty for each day late.

**Academic Integrity:** All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another’s work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade penalty of 0 on the assignment and cannot earn higher than a C in the course for students who have committed academic dishonesty. The Harris policy and procedures related to academic integrity can be found at [https://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-students/policies](https://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-students/policies). The University of Chicago Policy on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism can be found at [https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/](https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/)

**Pass/Fail Option:** Students who wish to take the course pass/fail rather than for a letter grade must use the Harris Pass/Fail request form ([https://harris.uchicago.edu/form/pass-fail](https://harris.uchicago.edu/form/pass-fail)) and
must meet the Harris deadline, which is generally 9am on the Monday of the 5th week of courses. Students who take the course pass/fail must attend class meetings and turn in all assignments, achieving marks on assignments that are overall commensurate with at least a C-letter grade.

**ADA student accommodations:** The University’s policies regarding students with disabilities are available [here](#). Students who have disability accommodations awarded by the University Student Disability Services Office should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will work with the student and instructor to coordinate the students’ accommodations implementation.

**Diversity and Inclusion:** The Harris School welcomes, values, and respects students, faculty, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and we believe that rigorous inquiry and effective public policy problem-solving requires the expression and understanding of diverse viewpoints, experiences, and traditions. The University and the Harris School have developed distinct but overlapping principles and guidelines to insure that we remain a place where difficult issues are discussed with kindness and respect for all.

- The University’s policies are available [here](#). Specifically, the University identifies the freedom of expression as being “vital to our shared goal of the pursuit of knowledge, as is the right of all members of the community to explore new ideas and learn from one another. To preserve an environment of spirited and open debate, we should all have the opportunity to contribute to intellectual exchanges and participate fully in the life of the University.”

- The Harris School’s commitments to lively, principled, and respectful engagement are available [here](#): “Consistent with the University of Chicago’s commitment to open discourse and free expression, Harris encourages members of the leadership, faculty, student body, and administrative staff to respect and engage with others of differing backgrounds or perspectives, even when the ideas or insights shared may be viewed as unpopular or controversial.” We foster thought-provoking discourse by encouraging community members not only to speak freely about all issues but also to listen carefully and respectfully to the views of others.

**Recorded material policy:** The University has developed specific policies and procedures regarding the use of video/audio recordings: these policies are explicitly described in the University’s [student manual](#) as well as in the guidelines for instructors available [here](#). A couple of points I want to highlight here:

*By attending course sessions, students acknowledge that:*

  i. *They will not:* (i) record, share, or disseminate University of Chicago course sessions, videos, transcripts, audio, or chats; (ii) retain such materials after the end of the course; or (iii) use such materials for any purpose other than in connection with participation in the course.

  ii. *They will not share links to University of Chicago course sessions with any persons not authorized to be in the course session. Sharing course*
materials with persons authorized to be in the relevant course is permitted. Syllabi, handouts, slides, and other documents may be shared at the discretion of the instructor.

iii. Course recordings, content, and materials may be covered by copyrights held by the University, the instructor, or third parties. Any unauthorized use of such recordings or course materials may violate such copyrights.

iv. Any violation of this policy will be referred to the Area Dean of Students.

Self Care: Sadly, this is still an uncertain time, and uncertainty elevates anxiety. I want to encourage you to take care of yourself (on Twitter, you may see pictures of my dog and elaborate meals). If you find yourself overwhelmed, please do not hesitate to reach out to Student Counseling Services.

Note: All SCS services are covered by the Student Life Fee, and there is no additional cost for students to access their services. See https://wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health/student-counseling-service-spring-quarter-faq/. Students seeking new services/resources can call 773.702.9800 during business hours (Monday–Friday 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.) and ask to speak with a clinician. Students needing urgent mental health care can speak with clinicians over the phone 24/7 by calling the SCS at 773.702.3625.
Course Schedule and Readings (or podcasts, videos)

Resource for the course: https://macartan.github.io/i/notes/rct_faqs.html
- Here is Macartan Humphrey’s take to help practitioners read RCTs. We’ll hit on a number of these points throughout the course.

Week 1: September 28

Overview of Course and Types of Evidence


CGD: Breakthrough to Policy Use: https://pubs.cgdev.org/evidence-to-impact/index.html (we will come back to this repeatedly)

Optional:

Week 2: October 4 & 6

What is (Good Enough) Evidence? Whose evidence? Ethics?

Case: Deworming & Water Sanitation


Kabeer, N. https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/naila-kabeer-on-why-randomized-controlled-trials-need-to-include-human-agency/ (includes podcast)


Other criticisms of RCTs (optional): https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/impoverished-economicsunpacking-economics-nobel-prize/


Summary: https://voxeu.org/article/limitations-randomised-controlled-trials (Links to an external site.)

Week 3: October 11 & 13

**Elements of Program and Policy Design**

Theories of Change Readings:

Brown, A. (May 2016). What is this thing called “Theory of Change”
https://www.annmurraybrown.com/post/2016/03/09/what-is-this-thing-called-theory-of-change

Examples from DFID:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a66ed915d622c000703/Appendix_3_ToC_Examples.pdf

**Case:** Contact Theory and Peacebuilding
  • Read Chapters 1 and 8

  o Podcast: https://www.scopeconditionspodcast.com/episodes/episode-01salmamousa

Week 4: October 18 & 20

Use of Descriptive Evidence
Case: Education in Afghanistan


  • Summary: https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/projects/alse/findings/reports
  • Other summaries of findings (optional): https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/projects/alse/findings/research-briefs


Week 5: October 25 & 27

Mixed Results, Null Results and Operationalization of Concepts
Case: Cash and CDD

Skim to compare with academic article: 


https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/567/communitydrivenlowresfinalshereeanalyoscia0.pdf


Humphrey’s commentary: http://macartan.nyc/posts/cdd-what-is-it-good-for/

Week 6: November 1 & 3

Scaling: Issues of Implementation
https://voxdev.org/topic/methods-measurement/path-scale-randomised-control-trial-scalable-programme


Optional Readings:
DellaVigna, S. & Linos, E. (2020) "RCTs to Scale: Comprehensive Evidence from Two Nudge Units"
Summary: https://www.bi.team/blogs/do-nudges-actually-work/

https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25848/w25848.pdf

Case: Community Health

https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20150027

Summary of study: https://voxdev.org/topic/health-education/does-bottom-accountability-work-evidence-uganda

Week 7: November 8 & 10

Generalizability, Context Specificity and Aggregation
Case: Information and Elections, plus a return to Community Health and Contact Theory


Murdoch, J. 


Return to Community Health: 

Week 8: November 15 & 17

**Systems Thinking and Adaptive Management**

Case: Training vs Cash in Rwanda

  - [Summary] Benchmarking Cash to an Employment Program in Rwanda https://www.poverty-action.org/study/benchmarking-cash-employment-program-rwanda (Links to an external site.)

  ▪ Harold, Jacob (2020). *A whole greater than the sum of its parts: What philanthropy can learn from complex systems theory*. [https://www.issuelab.org/resources/35980/35980.pdf](https://www.issuelab.org/resources/35980/35980.pdf) (Links to an external site.)

Week 9: Thanksgiving week (no classes)

Week 10: November 29 & December 1

**Political Barriers to Evidence Use**


• Michael Callen, Adnan Khan, Asim I. Khwaja, Asad Liaqat and Emily Myers (2017). *These 3 barriers make it hard for policymakers to use the evidence that development researchers produce* [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/13/these-3-barriers-make-it-hard-for-policymakers-to-use-the-evidence-that-development-researchers-produce/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/13/these-3-barriers-make-it-hard-for-policymakers-to-use-the-evidence-that-development-researchers-produce/) (Links to an external site.)


**Optional**

Week 11: Final Paper Due December 10 at midnight