

INTERVIEW WITH MALCOLM KASS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “The “facts” of economics don’t speak for themselves any more than the data “speaks for itself.” We use our values to identify and adjudicate between costs and benefits. Toward this end, I ask students to write reflection papers each week where they work through their own analysis of the tradeoffs.”
- “More than often, the good that we value can have many different, even unpredictable forms. One of the best things about research has been such surprises, learning about interesting and new ways to manifest the values that many of us hold in common.”

You are an Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Dallas. Could you tell us a bit about the university?

The University of Dallas (UD) is a small liberal arts university in Irving, TX (just outside of Dallas proper) and has about 2500 students, where 60% are undergraduates. UD has a strong Catholic identity, given its history and student body. The Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur founded UD, and the school has a history and close connection with the Cistercian Order. Our students reflect this Catholic identity, as 74% of our undergraduates self-identify as Catholic.

What makes UD unique as a liberal arts university is "The Core". The Core is a sequence of classes, a sequence common to all undergrad students. It covers the great works that shaped Western civilization. These classes range from history to theology to English to economics. In economics, we teach classics such as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and the Papal Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Malcolm Kass, an Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Dallas, talks about his teaching and research. This interview is part of a series on Catholic economists in partnership with the Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO).

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What is your main area of research and what do you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

I currently research and teach Labor and Public economics topics. I also teach classes that complement these topics, Econometrics and UD's Core class, Fundamentals of Economics. Also, I have taught intermediate microeconomic and macroeconomic courses. As to "why" I chose public and labor economics; it starts with a desire to help local communities and students make better decisions or at least have a better understanding of the economic environment around them. In addition, these topics enhance my instruction of Catholic Social Teaching and the *Rerum Novarum* and *Centesimus Annus* encyclicals.

Are you able to share your values in your teaching? What seems to work and what does not?

I hope I convey to my students that to understand complex problems, you need to understand the stakeholders and their incentives and the constraints inherent in the situation. This complexity coupled with tradeoffs makes problem-solving difficult. And I am only looking at this from the economic point of view. Luckily, this approach matches the UD's mission statement, so yes, I can share my interests, which is encouraged by my school. When discussing the economics behind the public financing of facilities, there are many examples to use, such as public financing of new stadiums for professional sports teams. These sports examples work well for students.

It is a bit more challenging to teach labor economics and markets. The incentives behind guilds and unions are somewhat tricky for students, given their unfamiliarity with these economic structures. And while the idea of competitive pressures driving socially beneficial outcomes is readily apparent to me given my former engineering career, it is more challenging for students.

Do your values affect your research? If so, in what way? And what are some challenges you face?

UD encourages undergraduate research, and my policy research with undergraduates certainly reflects my desire to help local communities make better decisions. Last semester, I worked with a UD undergraduate designing a cost-benefit analysis of a new local professional sports team facility (that effectively guarantees the team's presence in the local community until 2045). The catch is that taxpayers will pay a large chunk of the bill, around \$500 million in increased taxes. Our project critiqued the community leaders' arguments supporting the stadium and the analysis from two consulting white papers about the economic activity generated by professional sports teams. After which, we designed an economically sound

cost-benefit study, similar to the work done at the US Office of Budget and Management. Ultimately, we found that it is unlikely that the community's benefits will outweigh the community's costs from the increased tax burden.

Some challenges I face are probably no different than any other university—lack of time, competing for attention, etc. But there is certainly nothing with the school's mission that conflicts with my interests.

Is being a Catholic economist easy or hard, and why is that?

Given how much Catholic social teaching involves discussions around economics and markets and the school's emphasis on The Core, there are always students interested in economic topics regardless of their actual major. While I freely admit that my interests do not seem to conflict with the Church's teachings (I realize this isn't always true), in general, teaching at a Catholic university like UD that believes that economics is part of a multidisciplinary approach to problem-solving has many benefits, including interested students, interested faculty from different areas, etc.

The only minor difficulty comes from the heterogeneity in analytical thinking that students have, especially in the Fundamentals of Economics Core class. Hence, I need to be cautious about popping the clutch on the abstract modeling concepts of economics. This "governor" helps me refine my skills as a teacher, for it requires the use of a wide array of instructional techniques to explain the economic toolkit. Sometimes I use analytical models, sometimes case studies.

What is your advice for graduates who may be Catholic or have an affinity with Catholic values and are contemplating doing a PhD?

One current issue in academia, economics included, is the near cultural homogeneity of its scholars. And this is not just for economics, but many academics, even those with varied interests, come from similar backgrounds. For instance, results from a new paper titled "Socioeconomic Roots of Academic Faculty" by Allison Morgan et al., show that faculty in US universities are 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D., and this proportion nearly doubles at more prestigious universities. I am a first-generation college kid (admittedly, I do have siblings who attended college before me), and my background was pretty unique overall. I think it hurts the field when only certain types self-select into a discipline. Scholars with a Catholic background would help.

A Ph.D. does take time, and a student should start that path when she is relatively young. But an Economics Ph.D. also provides opportunities, even beyond other disciplines. The economic toolkit is a mindset that trains individuals to think about how people would behave based on incentives, how markets can help or hurt, strategic thinking, etc. Therefore, it is advantageous overall. That is why there is a robust market for economics PhDs in academia and in the public and private sectors. In sum, there are worse ideas out there.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I decided to go down this path relatively late in life. In my 30s, taking MBA classes at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, I decided to teach in a university setting, especially in economics. However, my wife had already established her career in the Dallas area, so I went to the University of Texas at Dallas, considered the strongest program in the area. Then I worked, sometimes it went well, other times not so well. I first worked as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). But I knew that the UD was my primary goal. I started taking on adjunct positions there on top of my primary responsibilities at UTA. Eventually, by providence along with a large helping of stress, UD offered me an assistant professor position.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

What drives my teaching and research is helping students, and hopefully, the larger community, understand the ramifications of their decisions. Economics teaching is about analyzing situations, breaking a problem down into its smaller, inter-related parts, and then rebuilding it again to understand the issue in a more comprehensive manner. And this isn't to lead to a particular stance on an issue, but to help people attain a certain level of mental robustness, so they are not victimized by slant or groupthink or to accept a narrative because of a well-worded soundbite. That is why I worked with students on an evidence-based, legitimate cost-benefit analysis of public funding for the new Texas Ranger facility in Public Economics, and why I teach firms and unions' incentives in Labor Economics, and the distortions with government-backed price controls on food in Fundamentals of Economics. Armed with the economic toolkit, we all reflect on issues a bit more critically.



Photo: The new Texas Ranger stadium and its retractable roof.



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