

## INTERVIEW WITH DOUG NORTON, ASSISTANT TEACHING PROFESSOR AT FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon  
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### EXCERPTS:

- “In the classroom, I can share my values in teaching. For example, in health economics we talk about “quality adjusted life years” or “value of a statistical life”. How those quality adjustments are done, or the value of a life is determined, often leads to moral conversations.”
- “For new graduates my suggestion is two-fold: sample and backward induct. Most people don’t know what they want to do. The best way to figure that out is to sample different paths through coursework, undergraduate research, jobs, internships, volunteering, etc. Once you think you know, talk to someone who works in that area to help backward induct. Where you want to be in the future should help determine the kinds of investments you need to make now.”

**You are an Assistant Teaching Professor of Economics at Florida State University. Could you tell us a bit about the University?**

Florida State University (FSU) is a large flagship public institution in Florida’s capital city of Tallahassee. There are over 30,000 students at FSU but there are many pockets of more close-knit communities on campus too.

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

As a teaching faculty, my primary responsibility is in the classroom. I teach a rotation of classes including public finance, health, intermediate micro, and special topics courses like economics of the family and religion. When I do research I include undergraduates in the process and the projects are often related to poverty, charitable action, education, and religion. For example, I just submitted a paper on the 1960s religious exercise cases (school prayer and Bible reading in schools) and how those rulings affected public school enrollment.

#### 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, Doug Norton, Assistant Teaching Professor at Florida State University, 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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Later this year, I will be conducting field experiments with undergraduates at FSU to understand how low income individuals make labor market decisions when those choices lead to large losses in public assistance.

I also have a research agenda on behavioral insights into New Testament parables. This work starts with the premise that Jesus had excellent insight into human behavior, parables are timeless stories that speak to us today, and lab experiments can help highlight important facets of the stories. For example, Mark Isaac and I wrote a paper on the Parable of the Great Banquet. If we are modern day invitees to this banquet, what factors cause us to accept or reject an invitation? We posit opportunity costs like wealth, power, etc. (how people value outside options) lead people to turn down this valuable invitation as well as ambiguity over the value of the banquet. We show both of these factors matter and other factors matter too.

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

In the classroom, I can share my values in teaching. For example, in health economics we talk about “quality adjusted life years” or “value of a statistical life”. How those quality adjustments are done, or the value of a life is determined, often leads to moral conversations. In other classes, we can talk about Aquinas and the theory of just price when we discuss moral intuitions about price ceilings. Students have been open to these conversations. However, there are many times I will hold back in the classroom in ways I wouldn't if I were teaching at a different institution. But, some students have wanted to have these conversations during office hours and I have been open to that.

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

Without a doubt my values affect my research. My work on religious exercise and parent decisions to exit public schools reflects how parents care about much more than test scores when choosing the school for their children. The field experiment on labor market decisions and public assistance represents a desire to understand and remove obstacles to economic mobility through charitable action and economic policy. Some of my work is mainstream and some is outside the box. The more outside the box work presents some challenges like people asking, “how is this economics?” One thing I like about being a teaching faculty is there isn't pressure to do what other people think is interesting or important. I have more freedom to choose topics.

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

Being a Catholic economist is not hard. I am able to integrate insights from my faith into research and teaching. However, the extent to which those insights can be incorporated is less deep than it would be if I were teaching at a religious school. Sometimes this makes coverage of a topic feel incomplete.

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

For new graduates my suggestion is two-fold: sample and backward induct. Most people don't know what they want to do. The best way to figure that out is to sample different paths through coursework, undergraduate research, jobs, internships, volunteering, etc. Once you think you know, talk to someone who works in that area to help backward induct. Where you want to be in the future should help determine the kinds of investments you need to make now. Throughout the process, pray and talk to a trusted mentor. If you decide to pursue a Ph.D., don't just do what you think others are interested in, do the things that also interest you. It will unleash your curiosity and productivity.

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

This is going to be a long answer! Any story about my personal journey to this position should begin with my first year being an undergraduate at Florida State University because I was going nowhere fast. When I enrolled at FSU, I lived a typical undergraduate lifestyle until a profound conversion experience following my first year. I started attending the United Methodist campus ministry at FSU. Because I didn't grow up in the church, there was some intimidation with Sunday services and Bible studies. Everyone knew more than me. By God's grace I pressed on, discovered a generous community, and devoured everything I could about my newfound Christian faith. At this campus ministry, I also met my wife.

When I completed my undergraduate degree at FSU I planned to enter into the Peace Corps. I was set to do small business development in Nicaragua, but there was a last minute problem. Of all things, the Peace Corps was concerned about my teeth! Strange, I know. During winter break I received an unexpected email from a professor Mark Isaac who asked if I would be interested in being his research assistant during Spring 2007. That spring we wrote the start of two papers and a book together. We even designed a course called the “Economics of Compassion” which was a historical and contemporary look at poverty related issues at both domestic and international levels. It was an unbelievable collaboration, but at that time it felt temporary.

I wanted to work with the poor. I applied to Teach for America. But, when I interviewed, I said some things that were different from what they wanted to hear. I wasn't offered. I didn't know what I wanted to do. Many of my friends were going to seminary. I could see becoming a pastor too. But, I wasn't sure. Mark Isaac convinced me I should at least earn an M.S. in economics. That's what I did and I continued to work with Mark for the next few years until I finally decided to take the necessary math courses to enter into a Ph.D. program in Economics. It was an easy decision about where to apply. My wife was in the College of Medicine at FSU and I wanted to continue to work with Mark.

Graduate school was hard. Before graduate school, I don't think I knew what it meant to work hard. Those courses completely changed my reference point. I left Tallahassee a couple years into my program and completed my dissertation in Greenville, SC away from the nest. That was where my wife was completing her pediatric residency. It was during that period we converted to Catholicism and I became a father to three lovely little girls.

Going into the job market, I felt great about my prospects. I checked all the boxes to be a good candidate for an academic position. There were many interviews but I didn't convert those to campus visits at the rate I wanted. At one place I visited that seemed like a great fit, the position fell apart. At another place, I was at the top of the list until a snowstorm delayed deliberations, a faculty member left, and their ranking of candidates was shuffled. Those were both let downs. But, I still had a couple more campus visits lined up. Then, the row of apartments my wife and I lived in was consumed in flames! Nobody was hurt. But living out of a hotel with my wife who was pregnant with twins, working long hours at residency, and taking care of our 1.5 year old daughter while giving job talks seemed like too tall an order. I canceled the job talks and accepted a position with an educational technology start-up called MobLab. While there was an obvious "push" to take the job at MobLab, there was also a "pull". I am an experimental economist which means I create decision situations that are meant to mirror economic models. Then, I populate those models with real people and ask how those individuals make decisions. MobLab was bringing experiments to classrooms to help teach different economic concepts the way you might have a lab in physics or chemistry (Moblab is a mash-up of mobile laboratory). But, almost two years away from the classroom helped me understand how much I love teaching. I missed the classroom.

I wanted to go back onto the academic job market but I needed some time to publish papers and build a new research agenda. A position as a post-doctoral scholar opened at FSU! It would be easier to restart research in a

place where I already had connections, especially with family responsibilities. Then, some months after we moved to Tallahassee my wife was offered a faculty position in the College of Medicine to teach medical students pediatrics and help start a clinic in a low-income part of Tallahassee. When the post-doctoral position was about finished, I went on the academic market again but leadership at FSU initiated a spousal hire for me to retain my wife. That is how I was hired as a teaching faculty at my alma mater FSU. I love teaching and interacting with students. Increasingly, I am also getting involved in the Tallahassee community joining in efforts to help engage the community, lift people out of poverty, and more. This position also has allowed me greater freedom to pursue different research projects I wouldn't have been able to do if I were tenure track. Importantly, it has also helped me achieve a happier balance with supporting my wife and children (we are expecting our fourth daughter in July 2021). To me these twists and turns represent God's grace and providence. I did not expect to be in Tallahassee in 2021 - 17 years after I arrived here as an undergraduate. But, this circuitous and barely believable path is beautiful. I feel blessed to be in this position and pray I become the best teacher, researcher, and leader I can be.

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

I am passionate about excellence in teaching. I want to help students see the power of economics to explain the world around them and I pray I can be the kind of mentor to students that Mark Isaac was to me. Once the pandemic subsides I am also hopeful to return to being a catechist at our local parish - something I haven't done consistently for a few years. I am excited about the opportunity to volunteer with more organizations in Tallahassee and help expose my daughters to more opportunities to serve. On a different note, I love sports. In particular, you can frequently find me attending and watching FSU Football and Basketball games. Go Noles!

