

QSS Thesis Experience, 2020
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Hi I'm Aidan, and I was a '20 QSS major who wrote my Senior Thesis with Professor Houle.

What I did:

My thesis examined the impact of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program on intergenerational income mobility for disadvantaged youths. The LIHTC program is the primary means by which the federal government creates new affordable housing in America today. The program has been responsible for over 3 million new affordable housing units since its inception in 1987. In my thesis, I studied the effect of this program on upward income mobility at the neighborhood level, using census tracts as my unit of analysis. In assessing the effectiveness of LIHTCs, I measured both absolute mobility, the difference in mean household income between low-income children and their parents, as well as relative mobility, the difference in mean household income in adulthood between high and low-income children within a neighborhood.

Why I did it:

Throughout the courses I had taken going into Senior year, especially in my four course QSS social science sequence, I had become very interested in the notion of the American Dream and understanding the factors which led to divergent outcomes for individuals in contemporary American society. I wanted to better understand why individuals with seemingly similar backgrounds could end up with drastically different life outcomes.

Through my research, I quickly learned that mobility varied geographically across the U.S. and that neighborhood level mechanisms accounted for much of the variation in outcomes between individuals. While previous research had identified a variety of factors within neighborhoods that are associated with higher mobility, there is less of an understanding of the impact of local policies. As housing is the single largest annual expenditure of American families and affordable housing has been largely overlooked in recent upward mobility research, I chose to focus on the largest federal affordable housing program and examine its effect on upward income mobility.

What I found:

I found that increased affordable housing stock created by the LIHTC program had a modest positive impact on upward income mobility within neighborhoods. This effect is more substantial for relative mobility than it is for absolute mobility. While the positive association was far from groundbreaking, my research provides evidence that the LIHTC program has a sustained impact on the lives of children, lending support for the efficacy of the program and warranting an assessment of alternative government affordable housing policies going forward.

Lessons learned/advice:

- Come in to the fall term with a rough idea of what you want your research question to be and some ideas of potential faculty advisors. This will allow you to start the year on solid footing and will give you ample time to refine your topic and do a deep dive into the literature.
- Everything takes longer than expected. Start early and budget time for mistakes, road blocks, and messy data.
- Focus on a specific, refined topic and avoid getting too broad with your research. There are probably a number of experienced scholars in your field, so acknowledge that this is likely your first academic research paper and don't try to cover too much material in one paper.
- Recognize that a thesis is largely a self-directed process. You will have a variety of advisors and support along the way, but the thesis is much more independent than many of the projects or papers you are used to from Dartmouth classes. If you encounter conflicting guidance from different advisors, go with whatever you think makes the most sense as you are ultimately the expert on your topic.
- Lastly, make sure you choose a topic that you're truly interested in. You are going to be spending a lot of time studying and mulling over your topic, so you want to write about something that excites you.