

Buffett Undergraduate Research Fellowship Opportunity

Best-Laid Plans: The Rise, Fall, and Return of National Development Planning

Faculty Mentor: Stephen Nelson, Associate Professor, Political Science (Evanston campus)

Project Synopsis: My project tackles three main questions about national development plans:

- Who are the key actors and what are the economic ideas that shaped the policy priorities expressed in national development plans?
- What explains variation in the ambitions and content of national development plans across countries and over time? (A related question follows: since, as I describe below, the bulk of development plans appear in Global Southern countries, how then does variation in the “policy space” afforded to those countries by more powerful, richer Northern countries and the international institutions they have controlled impact the priorities and capacities embodied by Southern countries’ development plans?)
- Do different types of development plans have different effects on measurable outcomes (such as economic growth, industrial upgrading, poverty and inequality, and state capacity)?

The number of countries with an active national development plan doubled between the mid-1990s and 2006, and then doubled again between 2006 and 2018 (reaching a total of 134 countries). Despite the resurgence of development planning, there is no systematic study of the evolving content and priorities in national development plans since the practice became widespread in the 1950s. My project fills that gap. I am in the process of obtaining the texts of all available national development plans between 1950 and 2020, with the goal of coding and quantifying the policy priorities contained in the plans. For the plans issued since the advent of the internet, I am collecting published plans from planning ministry’s websites. The textual corpus for the pre-internet period (1950 to 1999) in my project comes from a collection of national development plans from over 150 countries collected by a now-defunct publisher, IDC, and maintained on microfiches by the Center for Research Libraries (CRL). I used the complete universe of national development plans to generate a randomly selected set of 100 texts of development plans as a more manageable sample to digitize and begin analyzing. I am using the randomly selected texts of 100 national economic development plans as a training set before digitizing the remaining hundreds of thousands of additional pages of development plans in the collection. This is laborious work: with the assistance of graduate and undergraduate researchers, my goal is to scan and digitize each of the many hundreds of thousands of pages of development plans currently recorded on microfiche. The complete dataset of the content of national development plans will allow me to provide an answer to the second question animating the research project: What factors explain variation in the content and priorities of national development plans across countries and over time?

Project Term: Summer only

Project Location: The digitization component requires in-person presence on the Evanston campus. Other work can be completed remotely.

Ideal Applicant: The ideal applicant will be interested in policies that spur or inhibit economic development, will have interest and experience in data collection and data cleaning, and may have prior exposure to and interest in digitization and automated text analysis.

Number of Available Positions: One

