

Sample Research Projects

**The following are primarily intended to illustrate the range of projects students might pursue, though applicants are also welcome to pursue one of these topics.

“Is Freedom Necessary for Economic Growth? The Experience in China, 1979-2009”

While freedom and secure property rights have been associated with economic success in many countries, China has been the fastest growing country in the world since 1979, and by many measures its citizens lack both political freedom and secure property rights. What factors account for the Chinese take-off? Does this example provide a counter-model to classical liberalism, or is the Chinese growth ultimately unsustainable?

“A Volunteer Army vs. the Draft: the United States vs. Israel”

A modern volunteer army supports the goals of both efficiency and freedom, yet critics argue it may be unsustainable during periods of protracted combat. In addition, a volunteer army is said to degrade the notion of civic participation and personal responsibility necessary for sustaining democracy, and has implications for income distribution. This study explores the theory and application of a volunteer army compared to a draft in Israel and the U.S.

“Financial Market Reforms of 2010: Behavioral Economics and Paternalism”

Do economic actors sometimes behave irrationally? If so, does this justify government intervention in financial markets? This study explores the recent empirical findings of experimental economics and seeks to examine the effects of this research in crafting financial market reforms. In particular, does the new field of behavior economics provide justification for paternalism in financial markets?

“Character-Based Management in the Johnson & Johnson and Whole Foods Companies”

While critics of capitalism sometimes argue that business people are immoral, a number of business leaders profess to run companies on the basis of character ethics. Economist Deirdre McCloskey, for example, argues in *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (2006) that the industrial revolution was grounded in Aristotelian and Christian moral principles operating within the institutional setting of markets. This study examines the arguments for virtue ethics in business and develops studies of J&J and Whole Foods.

“Do National Borders Violate Individual Rights to Freedom of Movement and to Contract?”

Like many countries, the United States prohibits non-citizens from entering its territory, or once there, from accepting paid employment, without its permission. Is it morally justified in doing so? In making it illegal for a Virginia tobacco grower to hire any Mexican farmhands willing to work under the conditions he offers them, does the U.S. government unjustifiably limit the tobacco-grower’s right to contract, and the farmhands’ property-right in their own labor? Are there also reasons of efficiency for rejecting the current system of closed borders (i.e. granting each state a right to admit only those it wishes)? What are the consequences of the current asymmetry between the free

movement of capital and restrictions on the movement of labor, and what changes (if any) should be made to it?

“Constitutional Theory and Human Nature”

The term ‘constitution’ refers to the basic normative principles that structure a particular society, including its political, economic, civil, and household (or familial) institutions. Normative constitutional theorists offer an account of the best way for a particular society to structure itself (sometimes in the guise of a defense of the existing constitutional arrangement). These theorists can be divided into two camps on the basis of the conception of human nature that informs the account of the good or just society they defend. Members of the first camp attribute to people a powerful concern with fair treatment, and they often employ the idea of a social contract to characterize a just society. Members of the second camp depict people as motivated largely by concern for themselves and their near and dear, and their account of (a just) society typically invokes the ideas of convention and coordination. This study explores and evaluates the two competing conceptions of human nature that underlie these different approaches to constitutional theory.

“Justice and Theories of Private Property”

This study evaluates competing historical theories of private property rights developed by philosophers such as Grotius, Locke, Hume, Smith, Mill, and Marx in light of the implications they have for contemporary questions such as: the just allocation of a right to emit carbon dioxide and other climate-change gases, the patenting of genes, the appropriate length of time for a copyright (see, e.g., the Mickey Mouse Protection Act), restrictions on the production of generic drugs (e.g. in the case of anti-AIDS treatments), and the ethics of peer-to-peer file sharing and the justice of specific private and public efforts to prevent it.