A High-Yield Investment in Students

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By Jaime Caliendo

Dr. Sepideh Raei

“Every behavior in daily life involves a kind of tradeoff,” says Dr. Sepideh Raei, Assistant Professor of Economics. “If I can help students borrow this economic model and somehow apply it to everything throughout their lives, it can help them see their way better around the world.”

In fact, the tradeoffs she’s made in her own life are what brought Dr. Raei to the Huntsman School of Business. Drawn to Biomedical Engineering as an undergraduate student for the programming and mathematical rigor, Dr. Raei felt like an essential component for her was missing. After graduating, she made a major life change and pursued an MBA at Sharif University (2011) where a finance professor helped her realize that the economy is the backbone of everything. Eager for more hands-on experience, Raei and her husband, Dr. Pedram Jahangiry, also a new hire in the Department of Economics and Finance at USU, started a successful and fast-paced trading business. But after two years of trading, she was still deeply curious about economics and also missed the dynamic nature of the academic environment. She exchanged her trading desk for graduate school and earned an MA in Economics from Simon Fraser University (2013), and a PhD in Economics from Arizona State University (2018).

She considers the tradeoffs she’s made to be trade-ups. “One benefit of working in the academic environment is the flexibility to pursue a wide variety of research topics,” says Dr. Raei, whose research interests include macroeconomics and public policy with an emphasis on the relationship between tax policies and behavior.
Another trade-up is being able to work with students. “To have the feeling that you’re actually guiding students, this mentorship feeling that I have sometimes with my students—that’s really satisfying. And it’s hard to get such a thing in nonacademic work,” says Dr. Raei, who makes the success of her students a priority. She helps her students understand the placement of concepts within a bigger picture and encourages them to apply this practice to all areas of their lives to learn to think more critically and gain a deeper world view. And because many of these students are first or second-year students and from non-economic disciplines, she believes that helping them understand expectations and establish structured study habits is a crucial investment in their academic success.

Even though she’s only been at USU for one year, many of Dr. Raei’s students rate her as their favorite professor. Several students have switched their majors to economics after being surprised and delighted by her Principles of Macroeconomics course. She’s happy to be able to recruit bright young minds to the field she loves. “I had my share of bad and good teachers. I know how that affects a student’s feelings about a subject. Teaching is how we leave our mark on the world.”

**Dr. Pedram Jahangiry**

As a fresh PhD graduate, Dr. Pedram Jahangiry landed his dream job heading up a research team in the Financial Modeling Group at BlackRock in New York City. That is, until he joined the Huntsman School of Business in 2018 as a Visiting Professor in the Department of Economics and Finance and experienced the fulfillment of helping students develop the skills to pursue their passions and change the course of their lives.

“Working in academia gives me the opportunity to implement industry knowledge and transfer it to students as well, and that brings a lot of opportunities,” says Dr. Jahangiry.

One opportunity is how much he can learn from students’ unexpected questions and fresh perspectives. These challenge him to further explore and apply new ideas in his personal research and continuing industry practice, and any new discoveries he makes in his trading strategies are in turn shared back to his students. He has found this process both constantly engaging and deeply satisfying.
Because of his trading experience, Dr. Jahangiry knows what employers are looking for and welcomes the opportunity to help his students prepare for the professional demands of the finance industry. A key aspect of helping students appear attractive to prospective employers is giving them the tools that top employers value most. “Fintech is the future of the industry,” says Dr. Jahangiry. Because coding and the ability to work comfortably with data and technology are considered essential skills, he insists that students in his Introduction to Econometrics classes learn basic computer coding language. He has also designed an advanced Applications in Machine Learning course as a more in-depth study of coding and analysis of large financial data sets. He believes this will help ensure that students interested in financial trading are immediately prepared to embrace their responsibilities as new hires in modern finance.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of the job for Dr. Jahangiry is the opportunity to shape students’ lives by exposing them to professional possibilities and challenging them to invest in their learning to prepare for the future. “The fact that I can help students now is priceless. I worked with a student who presented his final project from our class to Wells Fargo and then was offered a job there. He told me he’s the first member of his family to have such an opportunity. This is what motivates me to push more, to put forth more effort—the ability to make an impact on students’ lives.”

Dr. Jahangiry and his wife, Dr. Sepideh Raei, also a new hire in the Department of Economics and Finance at USU, are impressed by the support and encouragement of their colleagues, the maturity and work ethic of the students, and the notable focus on building people and students within the Huntsman School.

Dr. Jahangiry holds a PhD in Economics from Arizona State University (2017), an MA in Economics from Simon Fraser University (2013), and an MBA from Sharif University (2012). His research interests include mortgage modeling, empirical asset pricing, and factor models.