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Our Academic Productivity After the Council of Economic Advisers

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The topic of academic productivity of economists after government service is of interest to economists considering serving in the future and perhaps also university administrators involved with preparing academic leaves of absence for their faculty. Here, we offer ourselves as data points which suggest that academic productivity need not suffer and may even be enhanced. Perhaps our academic productivity after government service is not representative; perhaps the organizational culture that we experienced was atypical or we were affected in atypical ways. But the present report suggests that academic productivity need not suffer after government service.

Our experience runs counter to impressions that government service is inconsistent with scholarly excellence. Gordon Tullock offered remarks that might be interpreted in that way:

Government economists are normally engaged in...a rather routine way...or doing fairly cut-and-dry statistical work... The second activity, firefighting, is the basic reason that most really influential government economists haven't read anything for the last twenty years. They find themselves in a government job and are asked to deal with some problem right now. They do so in terms of what they can remember. If they are successful, they are asked to do something else right now, and the process continues with the result that the higher ranks of government economic advisors aren't able to read. Furthermore, their work

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tends to be very hasty so that it is almost by definition of low quality. (Tullock 1989, 243–244)

This essay—necessarily and confessedly immodest—sticks narrowly to reporting and reflecting on the effect of government service on our own academic productivity; it does not take up other important questions about economists in government service (see, e.g., Allen 1977).

Our experience was in the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). The CEA was created to provide the President of the United States with confidential economic analysis and sound advice on the formulation of economic policy. It also prepares the annual *Economic Report of the President*, which is primarily an empirical analysis of economic conditions and their relationship to the President’s policies and goals. One source of CEA’s influence with the President is that, unlike many other offices in the Executive Office of the President, CEA was established by statute.⁴

Much of CEA is staffed by professors and assistant professors of economics, who were engaged in university teaching and research before serving at CEA. They typically serve for an academic year or two. Several other CEA staff economists are Ph.D. economists who were actively publishing but employed at think tanks or regulatory institutions.⁵

Our paper reflects on the effects of CEA service on our academic productivity after CEA. To some degree, we are a select sample regarding academic outcomes. All three of us graduated from the University of Chicago. We all served under President Trump, who was unusual among presidents.⁶ To name one of Trump’s rarities, his prior career was in business and entertainment rather than politics, government, or military, and his policy interests reflected that background. The first CEA chair under President Trump, Kevin Hassett, recruited the Council and the staff that later would become collaborators on academic endeavors. We came because of our confidence in Hassett’s ability as an economist, his leadership skills, courage, and Chicago approach to the evaluation of public policy. One of us (Mulligan), twice declined to serve under President George W. Bush because he guessed that Bush’s policy priorities were not sufficiently congruent with his research findings. University faculty, and presumably those involved in academic publishing, are now more left-leaning than they have been for generations. We

4. CEA was established by the Employment Act of 1946.

5. See also Burkhauser and Burkhauser’s (2024) study of the career backgrounds of the 42 persons first chosen by incoming presidents from Harry Truman in 1946 to Joe Biden in 2021.

6. Mulligan (2020) combines elements of a memoir of President Trump’s CEA with observations of the President’s unique approach to economic policy and political strategy. It also includes statistical comparisons of CEA work product across administrations.

acknowledge these possible selection effects, but do not claim to know their magnitude or direction.

Tullock mentions “firefighting,” and we know what he meant. Working at the CEA often seemed like that of a firefighter working and living at the fire station waiting for the fire bell to ring and not knowing whether the bell signaled a real fire or a false alarm, but ready to extinguish the fire as quickly as possible. In other respects, however, Tullock’s description does not fit our own experience. Our research and teaching background helped anticipate the hotspots before fires ignited. To name one, we expected that the prescription-drug consumer price index (CPI) would likely decline following deregulation, we knew what day and time we would receive the year-end CPI report (January 10, 2019, 4:30pm), and we anticipated what aspects of price-index formulas and regulatory background would need ‘explainers’ for the press. Indeed, one of our frustrations with academics who criticized administration policies was how frequently they failed to read the relevant statute or administrative rules, which were fundamentally different from the policy in their imaginations (see also below on CEA’s work leading up to Operation Warp Speed).

After leaving the CEA, each of us experienced a marked increase in research productivity. We attribute this result to greater awareness of policy-related research topics, enhanced partnerships, understanding of the operation of the public sector, as well as general work skills such as anticipating controversy and working on large teams. As for alternative explanations for our post-CEA productivity, perhaps journal editors like to feature, and hence more readily accept, work by former government economists. We are doubtful, in our case at least, due to President Trump’s extraordinarily low approval rate among academics. But, even if that is so, the work still has to be produced. At any rate, we hope that the present report adds some data points and stimulates thought about the effect of government work on research productivity.

Our new research directions

CEA has a big job. It is expected to make sense of the latest economic data, assist the President and his advisers in formulating economic policy, and advise the administration on the economic consequences of regulations and statutes under its consideration. CEA employs only about a dozen Ph.D. economists to do this work, requiring them to step out of their comfort zone and quickly learn about and effectively analyze new policy areas. This is perhaps the most challenging part of working at CEA, and the most exciting. Also, it pays dividends upon departure by expanding the research directions of former staff. Each of us embarked on new

areas of research as a result of our CEA experience.

Opioid mortality

The clearest way for CEA experience to affect future research directions is through directed policy work on a topic that is turned into academic research post-departure. Mulligan's research into opioid mortality began with inquiries from the President and his senior staff during his tenure at CEA. The causes of the opioid epidemic had President Trump's attention, for example, in his inaugural address and his creation of the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis. Price theory has some important and surprising predictions about opioid policy, which are now described in "Prices and Policies in Opioid Markets" (Mulligan 2024a). The first 'seminar' describing this approach occurred in the office of the CEA Chief Economist. In some ways, that article is a generalization of the supply-demand analysis of opioid markets featured in a chapter of the *2020 Economic Report of the President*, but updated for the fentanyl era.

Business-to-business price controls

In 2018, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar proposed price controls on business-to-business transactions in pharmaceutical markets. With senior staff divided on the proposal, President Trump directed CEA to prepare its own regulatory impact analysis. The CEA analysis applied a chapter from *Chicago Price Theory* (Jaffe et al. 2019). Mulligan subsequently began several research papers on pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs), a pharmaceutical business model he had not heard of prior to arriving at CEA (Mulligan 2022a; 2023b; c). One of the papers generalized the core analysis to include externalities generally, which became a *Public Choice* article (Mulligan 2023a). This work also resulted in an article about business-to-business price regulation and their relation to price controls more generally (Mulligan 2024b).

Pharmaceutical deregulation

We and others in the senior staff believed that a better approach to lowering prescription-drug prices was deregulation, a key presidential campaign promise. CEA conducted much analysis of regulatory barriers to drug manufacturing, particularly generics, as well as various methods of measuring prescription drug price inflation. Half of Mulligan's *Journal of Law and Economics* article uses the Food and Drug Administration's Orange and Purple books to document manufacturer entry after the deregulatory actions taken in 2017 (Mulligan 2022b).

Housing deregulation

President Trump issued an executive order on June 25, 2019, establishing a White House Council on Eliminating Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing and designating the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers as a member. CEA staff advised the work of the Council and brought to bear new evidence on the consequences of excessive regulation. This led to preliminary research on the impact of regulatory barriers on the government cost of low-income rental assistance programs, work that was later fully developed into Corinth's *Journal of Urban Economics* article (Corinth and Irvine 2023).

Opportunity Zones

Near the end of his first year in office, President Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Part of the Act designated Opportunity Zones, designed to incentivize new investment into distressed areas. CEA was charged with helping the Administration track the impact of the policy in driving investment and improving the outcomes of residents. This work led to continued research on Opportunity Zones and a *Journal of Economic Perspectives* article (Corinth and Feldman 2024).

Evaluating the War on Poverty

Sometimes the path from CEA work to later research is less direct. In 2018, the Trump Administration was interested in extending work requirements to beneficiaries of in-kind transfer programs including food stamps, rental housing assistance, and Medicaid. We (Burkhauser and Corinth) were asked to estimate the number of non-disabled, working age recipients who were not working and thus potentially affected by expanded work requirements, analysis that eventually was turned into a public report (Council of Economic Advisers 2018).

We knew that political controversy and criticism would surround the topic of work requirements. What we didn't realize was that our attempt to put this specific proposal on work requirements in the broader context of the successes and failures of President Johnson's War on Poverty would turn out to be the most controversial statement in the report. That is: "*Based on historical standards and the terms of engagement [set by President Johnson], our War on Poverty is largely over and a success.*" See Table 1 for a selection of the newspaper headlines in response to the report and especially that statement.

TABLE 1. Media coverage of CEA poverty measurement

- “Declaring War on Poverty ‘Largely Over,’ White House Urges Work Requirements for Aid” (*New York Times*, 7/12/2018, Jim Tankersley and Margot Sanger-Katz)
- “White House Declares War on Poverty ‘Largely Over’ Amid Push to Revamp Social Programs” (*Washington Post*, 7/13/2018, Jeff Stein and Tracy Jan)
- “Trump Administration Calls ‘War on Poverty Over,’ Moves On to War on Poor People” (*Daily Kos*, 7/13/18, Joan McCarter)
- “The Trump Administration’s New Poverty Report Builds a Phony Rationale to Punish the Poor” (*Washington Post*, 7/16/2018, Jared Bernstein)
- “The White House Says America Has Defeated Poverty. That’s Absurd.” (*Slate*, 7/17/2018, Jordan Weissmann)
- “Cut Food Stamps Because We Already Won the War on Poverty, White House Says” (*Huffington Post*, 7/18/18, Arthur Delaney)

The pushback to our claim—which we had based on careful research from Bruce Meyer and James Sullivan on poverty trends in terms of consumption (Meyer and Sullivan 2012a; b)—led us to embark on our own original research evaluating progress in President Johnson’s War on Poverty. With coauthors James Elwell and Jeff Larrimore, we created a full income measure that accounted for taxes, in-kind transfers and the value of health insurance, and assessed progress in reducing poverty relative to the 20 percent poverty baseline that President Johnson established for 1963. This research was eventually published in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Burkhauser, Corinth, Elwell, and Larrimore 2024). We would never have written this article, nor written it with such insight with respect to how the original poverty thresholds were developed, without the insights into the way policy is formulated and manufactured inside the Beltway.

Evaluation of the top-income literature

CEA experience can also improve the researcher by illuminating current policy issues that relate to and motivate his research. This was the case for work by Burkhauser and his coauthors in the top-income literature (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2011). Prior to both Burkhauser and Larrimore coming to the CEA, they joined Gerald Auten and Philip Armour in a project to replicate the work of Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez (2003). In addition to simply measuring taxable market income of tax units, they would then supplement these tax record data with survey data to produce the full income measures they developed in their previous work using survey data. While this academic project was slowed, the experience Burkhauser and Larrimore gained while at the CEA allowed them to substantially improve their initial NBER working paper (Larrimore et al. 2017),

which was published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 2021. It showed that using tax records alone exaggerated the share of full income of the top 1 percent of tax units.

A course on socialism

CEA experience can reveal which topics are top of mind in Washington, or among voters. Socialism was more a slur than a topic of discussion in economics departments prior to 2020. But being on White House staff impressed upon us that the allure of socialism was growing, especially among younger people. Much reading at CEA helped develop an “Economics of Socialism” course to provide a solid information base for the President and his staff while advancing CEA’s statutory mission to “foster and promote free and competitive enterprise.” Subsequently taught by Mulligan at the University of Chicago, the course would pique the interest of undergraduates while offering new opportunities to engage with economic principles.

New partnerships with colleagues in the CEA and in other agencies

Productive collaborations among CEA economists are an essential component of producing confidential memos and CEA-approved external reports. The nature of CEA’s work requires working in teams on short timelines, often with economists in different fields or other areas of interest. This environment breeds strong working relationships and friendships that extend beyond CEA into future coauthored articles. In the case of Burkhauser and Corinth, who had not met before coming to the CEA, it also resulted in subsequent papers not related to specific topics they worked on together while at the CEA (Burkhauser, Corinth, and Holtz-Eakin 2021; Burkhauser and Corinth 2021; Burkhauser, Corinth, and Sabia forthcoming). And in the case of Burkhauser and Larrimore who were long time co-authors prior to coming to the CEA, it resulted in the completion of a paper they and their co-authors started prior to their CEA period but completed afterward (Larrimore et al. 2021). Burkhauser also collaborated with Don Kenkel, another Chicago Ph.D. who spent a year with him at CEA, and that work began after they both left the CEA (Blomquist, Burkhauser, and Kenkel 2023).

Productive collaborations are also formed with non-economist colleagues outside of CEA, collaborations which can help CEA economists build a stronger base of institutional and scientific knowledge. Across the hall from CEA was the

National Security Council. In 2018, its Director for Medical & Biodefense Preparedness Luciana Borio asked CEA member Philipson that CEA undertake an economic analysis of pandemic vaccine innovation. Others involved included CEA’s general counsel (and medical doctor) Joel Zinberg, who also collaborates with Mulligan on PBM research. CEA concluded that “improving the speed of vaccine production is more important for decreasing the number of infections than improving vaccine efficacy” and emphasized the need for large-scale manufacturing and the possible advantages of “public-private partnerships” (Council of Economic Advisers 2019). Borio and the CEA vaccine report prompted a 2019 President’s Executive Order, also before the pandemic, noting that “viruses emerge from animals...that can spread efficiently and have sustained transmission among humans” and concluding, for better or worse, that “vaccination is the most effective defense” (U.S. President 2019). The insights developed in this collaboration were eventually published in Mulligan’s *Journal of Law and Economics* article evaluating the benefits of covid vaccination and treatment deregulation. Other aspects are analyzed in two articles in the *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis* (Mulligan 2021; McLaughlin and Mulligan 2022).

Mulligan also collaborates with the former Director of the Domestic Policy Council (Joe Grogan) on various topics. One of these is race differences in opioid mortality, which became a key part of his *Journal of Political Economy* article “Prices and Policies in Opioid Markets.”

Understanding the operation of the public sector

The Federal government is a massive organization. Although no single person can understand all of what it is doing, those who have worked there have a head start. This is especially true for those equipped with a good conceptual framework and big-data tools. Mulligan applied his experience particularly to rigorously summarizing the thousands of federal regulations promulgated by each administration and to keeping up to date with death-certificate data during and after the pandemic. An example is a dispute he had in the summer of 2020 with Princeton Professors Angus Deaton and Anne Case, who asserted that “a wave of deaths of despair is highly unlikely” (Case and Deaton 2020). Apparently, they were unaware of the more timely data sources showing historic spikes in drug and alcohol mortality already in May 2020.

Sometimes the inner workings of the Federal government can have major public-policy consequences not recognized by other academic economists, and

former CEA economists can shed light on these hidden connections. As one example, the federal poverty line determines eligibility for some of the most important means-tested programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps, and the premium subsidies of the Affordable Care Act. Despite its importance for determining the scope of the safety net and its associated budgetary implications, the poverty line can be unilaterally changed by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget via a Statistical Policy Directive. Corinth learned about this process at CEA and later published an article in the *B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy* that estimated the impact of changing the official poverty line on the number of benefit recipients and federal spending.

Working at CEA also acquaints economists with the federal statistical agencies and their staff. CEA receives a number of official data releases ahead of their public release in order to brief the President and other senior staff on the state of the economy. CEA economists may also participate in interagency technical working groups to improve statistical methodologies and products. This experience provides academic economists with a greater appreciation for the importance of rigor and political independence in the statistical agencies. It can deepen their expertise on how statistical measures are created. And it can provide new avenues for access to confidential data for future academic research. This can be particularly helpful for economists joining CEA relatively early in their careers, both by spurring new research and opening up a broad spectrum of employment opportunities. For example, immediately after his CEA tenure Corinth worked at Bruce Meyer's Comprehensive Income Dataset Project housed at the University of Chicago (which links confidential data across the Census Bureau and other agencies to produce more accurate measures of income and poverty) and then as staff director at the Joint Economic Committee in the United States Congress, and as a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Work habits

CEA work proceeds at a faster pace and with larger teams than is typical in economics departments. Publications of the administration are often attacked by critics (recall our Table 1). This experience can help strengthen research-production systems such as fact checking, clarity, and establishing research boundaries.

The White House includes an Office of the Staff Secretary, which manages documents for the President and public releases issued by the White House. Its tasks include distributing draft reports to relevant agencies who return comments

and concerns. The process is much like the editor-referee process in academic publishing, except that the rounds take days or hours rather than months. CEA reports are often ‘refereed’ by Ph.D. economists at the relevant agencies. The staff-secretary process provides ample opportunity to enhance one’s skill at communicating with, and learning from, referees. This has paid off post-CEA.

Data points ‘R’ us

Collectively, since departing CEA in 2019 (Burkhauser), 2020 (Mulligan), and 2021 (Corinth), to date we have published three *Journal of Political Economy* articles, two articles in each of the *Journal of Urban Economics*, *Public Choice*, and the *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, as well as single articles in the *Journal of Law and Economics*, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *Review of Income and Wealth*, the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, the *B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy*, and the *American Economic Association Papers and Proceedings*. These articles were initiated or had major additions after leaving CEA. One of the *Public Choice* articles won the Duncan Black prize. In addition, Mulligan developed a course at CEA—“The Economics of Socialism”—which was initially written material for the President and his staff and became an undergraduate course at the University of Chicago.

At CEA we participated in firefighting, but in our case, the notion that research life after government work is permanently disabled has not been borne out. We still are able to read.

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