

Honors student hopes to publish her mortgage research

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Cathy Balfe, a senior in the School of Liberal Arts, is working on her honors thesis, which studies the extent of sexual orientation discrimination in the U.S. mortgage market. The study has the potential to be published in the future. (Photo by Arielle Pentes)

Cathy Balfe may see her honors thesis turn into published research some day.

Balfe, a senior majoring in economics in the School of Liberal Arts, is developing a study that will examine discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the U.S. mortgage market.

"My professor, Patrick Button, has pushed this paper into something that was a lot larger than I had expected. It's been really cool having that experience and having someone believe in me."

“Access to a mortgage is incredibly important for wealth accumulation and upward social mobility. However, I haven’t seen a lot of research testing for discrimination in the mortgage approval process,” Balfe said of the project, which originated in an economics class she took last year.

With guidance from her professor and adviser, [Patrick Button](#), who is an assistant professor of economics, she is taking the project from the classroom to the thesis committee. After graduation, she will probably keep working on the study, she said, because it may take a couple years to reach actual publication stage.

The study will use email correspondence to assess the extent of discrimination based on sexual orientation in the mortgage market. Though anecdotal evidence suggests that such discrimination happens, there are currently no empirical studies focusing on it. Moreover, there are no federal protections against that kind of discrimination, although a few states do have their own laws.

Launching a study has presented both opportunities and challenges, some unexpected. For instance, Balfe is still awaiting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which will allow the actual data collection to take place. IRB approval is required for thesis projects that involve human subjects and ensures that these projects follow certain ethical standards that protect the rights of their participants.

“The IRB approval process has been the main hurdle in this, but that’s been a good learning experience in itself,” Balfe said.

Since the summer, Balfe has refined the research framework that she designed last spring, run data simulations and even written grants for the research assistants who will eventually work on the project.

“My professor, Patrick Button, has pushed this paper into something that was a lot larger than I had expected,” Balfe said. “It’s been really cool having that experience and having someone believe in me. It’s exciting to see what goes into publishing a paper.”

—*With additional reporting by Faith Dawson*