

Students Explore Economic Reality of Slavery

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Students in Jonathan Pritchett's "Economics of Slavery" class are learning firsthand the power of the tools that economists have at their disposal for analyzing historical events.



Jonathan Pritchett, associate professor of economics, is a William L. Duren Professor this semester. He's teaching the course "Economics of Slavery," drawing on the tools of economics and resources at Tulane and in New Orleans to investigate the topic. (Photo by George Long)

The institution of slavery in the United States "was horrid," says Pritchett, associate professor of economics, but "we need to study it in order to learn about our history."

New Orleans was the largest market for slaves during the antebellum period.

"We still are coming up with new ideas about slavery," says [Pritchett](#). "And we can use data to test these ideas."

Pritchett holds a [William L. Duren Professorship](#) this semester. In the class ? a capstone course for economics majors ? which he's teaching through the Duren program coordinated by [Newcomb-Tulane College](#) ? students are doing original research and using data from resources such as the Notarial Archives which has invoices for slaves sold in New Orleans.

The students also are modeling data from the decennial census and plantation records, as well as looking at advertisements about runaway slaves.

Among the topics researched by the students are the productivity of "term slaves" (slaves promised their freedom at a specified date in the future), testing for the presence of adverse selection in the slave market, and the frequency of intact families sold in New Orleans.

The class has discussed other economists' work on slavery and speakers from other universities have addressed the class. Richard Steckel, from Ohio State University, discussed his work on the health of enslaved children and Jenny Wahl, from Carleton College, presented her paper on the economic impact of the Dred Scott decision.

"The general consensus is that slavery was profitable in that slave owners earned a market rate of return on their investment," says Pritchett.

Economists have shown that slaves were efficient. "They tended to produce a lot of output for the amount of work they put in," Pritchett says.