

**iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Ahmed Rahman on Learning About Leadership from Military Academies**

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- JACK CROFT: 00:14 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is May 16th, 2025, and we're talking with [Ahmed Rahman](#) about his upcoming sabbatical, during which he plans to do a deep dive into one of his main research interests: the effects of peers and teachers on college student performance. Dr. Rahman is an associate professor of economics in Lehigh's [College of Business](#). He holds the Charlotte W and Robert L. Brown III '78 Summer Research Fellowship and is also program director for the [Lehigh Business PhD in Business and Economics](#) Program. In addition, Ahmed is a research fellow at the [Institute of Labor Economics](#), a nonprofit Research Institute and Research Network headquartered in Bonn, Germany. Welcome back to the iLLUminate Podcast, Ahmed.
- AHMED RAHMAN: 01:06 Thanks, Jack. It's great to be here.
- CROFT: 01:09 As I mentioned in my introduction, you're taking a sabbatical to focus on one of your main research interests, the effects of peers and teachers on college student performance. But I think it'd be helpful to start by explaining what a sabbatical is, and maybe what it isn't, and why it's important to not just faculty, but to universities and to research as a whole.
- RAHMAN: 01:33 Absolutely. So sabbatical coming from the term Sabbath, day of rest, seventh day. And actually in early days, agricultural Hebrew societies thought that seven-year mark was a good time to take a rest, lay your land fallow, suspend debt payments, and just relax for that year and rejuvenate. And so what's good for farmers, I think the academic community has glommed onto that and said, well, about seven years, a year of relax and reflection. Now, I have to push back a little bit and say it's not so much relaxation. And I have to remind many people, including my wife, regarding what it is that one does while on sabbatical. And so really, the objective is to step away from the chaos and confusion of the real world in order to properly understand it. It's a hard sell for my wife and others, maybe, but I'm committed to this. And so I think it's a really important thing that universities support. I'm really happy and honored that Lehigh is willing to support this work that I will be doing in this coming upcoming academic year.
- CROFT: 02:45 OK. Now, before joining Lehigh's College of Business faculty in 2018, you were an associate professor at the [United States Naval Academy](#). And you've done extensive research over the years since coming to Lehigh based on data from the Naval Academy. What are some of the advantages that the military service academies offer in research regarding education?
- RAHMAN: 03:07 Yeah, it took me a while to appreciate these opportunities. So I joined the Naval Academy in the fall of 2006, way back then, coming fresh off the University of California, Davis, trained in human capital economics. And I might just start by saying, "What is human capital?" It is the tools that you and I have sort of embedded within

us that makes us more productive and that leads richer, fuller lives. These things include health, include skills learned in college or school, skills learned in the workforce. These relate to grit and resilience and other various leadership roles and tasks and things that people actually demonstrate and seem to have in order for them to be more productive. So this is the area in which I was interested in teaching aspects of human capital. When I was at the Naval Academy, the very first day taught a class and said, "OK, our class is finished." And then a student suddenly shouted out, "Attention on deck," and suddenly everyone jumped up, backs stiff, arms straight, eyes glazed forward. And I was looking at them for a really long time, not knowing what quite to do.

RAHMAN: 04:25

And then finally, I said in this meek voice, "Dismissed," and they laughed and they said, "Yes, that's what you do." And I told the students, "Please don't do that ever again." And the reason I had to explain was-- well, first of all, it was really a little bit jarring to me. But also, I want you to be relaxed in this college environment so that we can contemplate and think about different ideas freely and without reserve. And right then and there was the eye opener of sort of, "What is my role here in the Naval Academy? What is the role of the Naval Academy in higher education? And what is the role of higher education in the economy?" It struck me as this really important two flavors here of, on the one hand, potential training and task-oriented kind of things that is necessary for your profession. But on the other hand, there's this exploration part of education like looking at things and asking questions in matters that maybe you didn't think about before. So sort of opening up horizons as opposed to closing them. And this sort of ambivalence, I feel, was part of my life at the Naval Academy. And as it turns out, there's a lot of that ambivalence in higher education overall.

RAHMAN: 05:38

So just being in that environment, working with these students, being fascinated with their lives and what they're going to ultimately be doing for this nation, I got very interested in studying the human capital of military personnel. Human capital is a lifelong process. And so in order to study it effectively, I came to the conclusion that really we need to track these individuals, not just when they graduate and are commissioned as officers, but their lives as officers. "What are they doing on the skills that they're accumulating throughout their time in service, and indeed, even after service?" So that's sort of some of the impetus of where the research comes from.

CROFT: 06:19

Now, I understand that you plan to tackle an array of different research projects over the next year, and we'll talk about some of them in a few minutes. But what's the overarching theme that ties them all together?

RAHMAN: 06:32

Yeah, so the overall project is the digitization and quantification of the lives of tens of thousands of naval officers across three centuries. So it's a big project. I work in the business college, so some might ask, "For the love of God, why are you studying this?" So the reason is we think there's a great deal of insight here in thinking about, I would call these X factors that shape human capital decisions. And the military is a great area to explore how these X factors shape human capital decisions. Let me explain a little bit more what I mean by X factors, because this is what a labor economist might think about. For a labor economist, there are two types of things that happen in your life. Things happen to you and you do things that affect your life. So we're being bombarded by stimuli all the time, and we respond to those stimuli in the best ways that we can. Now, the labor economist would really love to isolate a specific thing

that happens to you in order to understand how that thing influences a choice that you make. And those choices can range from, should I go to college? What college should I choose? Should I get married? Should I live in an urban or a rural environment? Should I switch my career? Should I end my career? All these are questions that the labor economists are deeply interested in.

RAHMAN: 07:57

But the real challenge here is to try to understand and isolate those X factors and then figure out what the causal impact is going to be. Now, there are two options for the labor economist here in dealing with the messy world of cause and effect. One is to just run experiments. And indeed, Jack, we're sitting in this building [the [Lehigh Business Innovation Building](#)], we have a behavioral lab right next door that my colleagues are doing these experiments all the time, and they're producing amazing research. There's another way to do it, and that is what we might call, instead of an experiment, it's a natural experiment. The natural experiment is simply something that is occurring in the real world. You don't control it, but it's random enough that you can study it and exploit it. And it turns out that the military, it's chock-full of these X factors, these natural experiments that are occurring all the time. And so their lives being simply not simple in any sense, but certain elements are simple relative to the chaos of our civilian lives that we can really learn from this idea of a factor X causing a certain decision that relates to a person's human capital, right? So could we play a quick game? I want to maybe say here's an X, and then you can think of what the Y is, what the actual outcome that we as a scholar might think about. OK. So here's an example of an X.

RAHMAN: 09:20

You're a freshman in college, and you're in calculus one, and the professor that you get assigned is Professor Rahman, an amazing, brilliant, super fun professor. All the students love this guy. He gives A's all the time. He seems like he cares about the students' performance. That's the X. What might be the Y? What might be the outcome that we want to think about when it comes to you as a freshman getting assigned that kind of instructor? Any thoughts?

CROFT: 09:54

Probably more enthusiasm for the class instead of making a choice at 8:00 in the morning to continue sleeping, to actually get up and go to class.

RAHMAN: 10:08

There you go. Absolutely.

CROFT: 10:08

Not that that was ever something I did, of course.

RAHMAN: 10:11

No, naturally. Yeah. 100%, right? That enthusiasm is instilled in terms of-- and Professor Rahman is a calc one instructor. That's great. What we find, the why that we're interested in is calc two. And it turns out that in calc two, on average, these kids do worse. So if you get Professor Rahman, fun guy in the classroom, the calc two performance goes down. There's different ways of paring that, but that's an example of a relatively surprising finding that we can look at from the context of the Naval Academy simply because you don't have a choice. Some students get assigned to Professor Rahman and some people get assigned someone else. And so that is a kind of X factor that we can look at and pull out an outcome, such as your human capital development going forward. So that's a real quick example. We can play this game throughout, but that's just an example of X's that we are looking at throughout the military landscape and figuring out what are the effects that we can think about that affects human capital development specifically.

CROFT: 11:18

And one of the things that you've talked about, and I believe some of your research has looked at, are these choices that are made for students at the Naval Academy and other service academies, ranging from, not just the professors they get, but their roommate. I mean, so what are some of the other things you've looked at that are interesting differences between a place like Lehigh.

RAHMAN: 11:48

So let me point to another X factor here in this context. And it actually relates to something that happened in my own alma mater as an undergraduate. A Greek building caught fire and was destroyed. So the students who lived in that Greek house were displaced and moved across the different dorms. So the X factor would be you are living in a Greek house with a lot of fellow members. You get displaced, and now you're living in the dormitory, and the dorm that you're assigned to are full of nerds, are full of really studious students different from, let's say, your Greek life. What is the Y factor here? What might be an outcome that be of interest in such a random shock of a displaced living situation?

CROFT: 12:41

Probably conflict between the personalities and maybe some anger over having made a choice of who you were going to live with, and everybody who's in a Greek setting makes that choice to be there. All of a sudden, now you're just thrown in with other people that you don't know and don't have anything necessarily in common with.

RAHMAN: 13:12

Exactly. And so some of this is, we're veering towards some leadership studies, and this relates maybe also towards things like grit, which is something unfortunate has befallen you. How do you respond? What we have found in some of our studies-- now, we don't study these buildings blowing up or whatever, but we have, at the Naval Academy, random reassignments, dorm assignments here and there for a variety of different reasons that really have nothing to do with academic performance. So that's another X factor that we can kind of point to. And what we find is, if you are, let's say an average student who's displaced into a dormitory with a lot of high academic achievers, if the academic achievement is moderately better, then you're going to perform better, arguably because you're still interacting with these kids, but their elevated academic performance helps you. But if they're too geeky, I guess, I would say, then your performance goes down. So this peer effect, this potential positive thing actually reverses. That might be, Jack, as you mentioned, the resentment factor, the fact that this is now a really weird environment, and now the person is struggling. So that's another situation where the context matters a lot. We know that it matters a lot, but we just don't know precisely in what manners. So the mechanisms of these things we can study more deeply in the context of the military.

CROFT: 14:34

Now, the overarching theme is digitization of records. So it'd be interesting to learn what some of the sources of information are that you're going to be digitizing and what they can tell us. And I'm also curious whether or how AI can help you gain more insight from the data, a tool that wasn't available when you first started looking at this.

RAHMAN: 14:59

That is sadly correct. So going all the way back to 2006 and walking around Nimitz Library, I was blown away by the collections at Nimitz Library when it came to the personnel that goes all the way back to the inception of the Naval Academy in 1845. Now, my colleagues and I started to do this by hand, and I think the technology now has caught up to our ambitions. Our data really is going to come in three flavors here, that we are doing this massive merge. The first is that stuff that has already been

digitized, and that includes the contemporary data that we have through the Naval Academy that we are going to link with census records to match, in fact, career outcomes and indeed post-Navy careers, which plenty of them have. But to connect that historically, then we need two other sources. One is the quantified sources that are in annual volumes, such as the Navy registers, Naval Academy registers, various log books, and so on, and it has lots of detailed numbers. The OCR [Optical Character Recognition] technology is now very strong, so that we can actually digitize much of this quite quickly.

RAHMAN: 16:04

And then there's the qualitative information, the writings, the ship logs, where the captain documents sort of day-to-day operations on the vessel, and other qualitative biographies and autobiographies written by the officers themselves. We are now in a position to quantify, digitize, and pull out sentiment from all the linguistic models that are currently available. So there is a lot of work to be done in that realm, but we are right at the cusp of sort of making this massive merge a reality so that we can actually ask these questions regarding these X factors. And the exciting part is we can look at these X factors in the 19th century context, 20th century context, and 21st century context, in all kinds of environments that we think is going to be very fruitful.

CROFT: 16:55

Now, one of the things that Lehigh's College of Business and other business schools obviously emphasize is leadership. And you've mentioned this, cultivating traits such as grit and resilience, the ability to deal with and, when necessary, rebound from setbacks. So how will your research help add to that knowledge?

RAHMAN: 17:16

Yeah, so in some ways, this is a revisiting the leadership literature, and we're doing it in a slightly unique manner. I would say, for example, my historian friends, when they focus on leadership, it's often, will quote, "the great men", quote-unquote, studies, right, and increasingly, of course, importantly, the great women. But it's usually a sort of biographical, "These are the things that this individual had to overcome." And then you learn, oh, well, they obviously made it to the highest echelons of society. That's why you're having a biography written about them. And then you have the business college, such as Lehigh here, studying leadership in different approaches, case study. And then economists will focus on their approach of leadership, which is much more quantitative and econometric-oriented. So we're sort of combining this a little bit. Instead of the great men, I would say it's a few good men and women, obviously, right? So they're not necessarily great. What we're actually looking at is how does the good rise up to be great. So it's almost like a retrospective study of leadership.

RAHMAN: 18:21

We have these individuals that have made tremendous advances coming from relatively, humble backgrounds, right? And, so the biographies of the well-known, of course, would come from, let's say, Chester Nimitz, class of 1905, Bill Halsey, class of 1904, even going back to George Dewey, 1858, or Alfred Mahan himself, 1859. We have such a wealth of information regarding their trajectories. But of course, lots of people do because their biographies have been written and explained. What we don't have are the tens of thousands of others that were living parallel lives in many respects. So why didn't they make, quote-unquote, "make it"? I mean, they've done amazingly great stuff, but they didn't rise to maybe the top of the leadership spectrum. The question for us would be, in this kind of study, what were the factors? Again, what were those X factors that potentially contributed to the rise of great success for some but not others. And we can bring this right up to the present day. I mean, we can look at someone like Jimmy Carter in 1946, class of '46, who obviously

became president. John McCain, class of - what? - 1958, who almost became president. And we can even connect that with his son, Jack McCain, who I had in class, class of 2009, who might become president, although based on his performance in my class, maybe not.

RAHMAN: 19:51

But the point is, again, with this wealth of very detailed information across these individuals, this is a new approach of thinking about leadership potential. And so, if there are these X factors mixed in with certain innate traits, we'd love to know what those are so that we could try to replicate that. Again, it's probably maybe it's not possible, but certainly every business school is looking for that sauce, that secret sauce of leadership. And so we're doing it in our own way, and we're hopeful that we're going to find some interesting results.

CROFT: 20:23

Now, from the prior research that you've done in this area, do you have any thoughts at this point of what some of those traits might be, particularly that you'd want to be looking at closely?

RAHMAN: 20:40

It's a great question. So I talked about Professor Rahman, the so-called great professor who actually turns out to be not so great for a longer run perspective. That kind of experience is also something we're looking at very deeply. Every individual really accumulates a portfolio of past experiences, people, your past peers, your classmates, your instructors, your workmates, your bosses. And you come away with a human capital kind of background that's a function of all those past experiences. So another X factor would be, what if you get a bad boss? We've all been there, I think. And so that response to poor leadership, what we have seen in these past studies, both in terms of the historic history, but also the contemporaneous data, is there are situations where bad bosses completely derails one's career. In fact, they stop having the career. It's enough to actually derail. And this is really important if we care about, specifically in the military, to have a group of officers and leaders diverse, willing to explore different ideas and thoughts about the future of this country.

RAHMAN: 22:02

And so, we want to make sure that we have retaining those proper skills. Other situations, the same bad boss will create, on other sort of slightly different circumstances, positive impacts. Creates that resilience. Creates, "I need to overcome this bad outcome, so that I could do better next time." So do we have the secret sauce right now? We do not. But the thing is, we have so many covariates, I guess, the attributes of these individual officers that simply looking very detailed day to day, week to week, month to month, in terms of their experiences with other leaders, good leaders, bad leaders, how do they respond to those things, we're hoping to get a flavor of that. That's one kind of way of thinking about leadership. Here's another that I think might be interesting from the context of the digitization of this qualitative information. So part of the digitization are these yearbooks. The Naval Academy, like every university, I believe, will have these annual books that's produced by the senior graduating class that commemorates sort of their lives in the school for the last four years.

RAHMAN: 23:12

Naval Academy have these things going back again to the inception-- ah, maybe, no, in the 1850s. But what's really unique there is every student at the Naval Academy has a picture of him and his roommate and a blurb under the picture that the roommate has written about the person. So it's like a biography, a bit of tongue in cheek regarding the roommate felt was appropriate to actually share with everyone. What we've done is fed that through language models, and actually, a little bit just as



a lark, just ask, "Hey, based on the roommate's assessment of this individual, do you think this person would be a good leader or a follower?" And we were struck by how much interesting variation came from that very just simple exercise. And then when we correlated with their actual experiences in service, it did not a bad job. In which case, the roommate can tell us something that maybe the grades cannot or the leading officer's report cannot. This kind of qualitative information, we have tons of. And so that is the exciting part about another aspect of leadership is, "What are your peers talking about you?" And so what are those traits? So language models can pull out various words or traits that we can kind of correlate and say, "Oh, these are the ones that are the," quote-unquote, "good ones", and these are the ones that might predict less opportunities for success. So just a couple of examples of where we're thinking of leadership in a slightly different way, historical, with military application, but we're thinking that, yeah, there should be a lot of insights here for leadership studies more broadly.

CROFT: 25:02

Now, finally, a year seems like a long time, but it goes fast. And what, at the end of the year, on your sabbatical do you hope to have accomplished? And how far do you hope you've kind of moved the needle on this topic?

RAHMAN: 25:23

Yeah, so there's two ways to answer. I guess the immediate objective — and I say immediate, although it will take a while — is peer-reviewed papers, right? I think that is the currency in which we live. This is the metric of success. And I think it's more or less a valid one. It can be frustrating at times, the peer review process. But this is really the immediate objective here of sabbaticals to produce these papers on issues of leadership, issues of education, and actually what is effective in terms of human capital accumulation. There is also a broader objective here of thinking about military history, but recasting it from a labor economist perspective. Now, we have this wonderful opportunity as a country that has gone through massive ups and downs when it comes to, let's say, naval operations and what these men and women are doing in service for their country. So I think a book, at the very least, will be in order. That's not the immediate objective here for the sabbatical, but certainly something in the pipeline.

RAHMAN: 26:33

And then finally, bringing it to the students, making sure that what we learn in our natural experiment settings can be brought to the classroom to then teach the next generation of future leaders. This is what we're all here to do. And so I'm hoping to make a contribution there. And I hope the needle is moved. To what extent will just depend on lots of other X factors, I suppose, for us. But we are very hopeful.

CROFT: 27:01

Ahmed, thanks for being with us on iLUminate again today. And I must say appreciate your kind of explaining sabbaticals and what it is that faculty hopes to get out of these and why they are important.

RAHMAN: 27:19

Well, thanks so much. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about this.

CROFT: 27:23

Ahmed Rahman's research areas include economic growth, economic history, immigration, and the economics of education. In addition to his research on the effects of peers and teachers on college student performance, his other research interests include the impacts of different experiences in military service on private sector employment and the wage and employment effects of immigration on native workers. This podcast is brought to you by iLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh business thought leaders, please visit us at

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