
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Econ curricula shortchanging majors and non-majors alike

Original Reporting | By Mike Alberti | Alternative models, Economy, Education

WHY SO NARROW?

This article is part of Remapping Debate's five-part series on the consequences of how economics is and is not taught to undergraduates in the United States.

[Part 1](#) of the series looked at the divergent perspectives that are ignored by the academic mainstream, and the charge that the current system fails to foster critical thinking. [Part 2](#) showed how neoclassical economics, behind a scientific façade, serves a heavy dose of laissez faire.

In this installment, we focus on the impact on students: not just economics majors, but those who sample the discipline's offerings, as well as those who are deterred from taking any economics courses at all.

In Part 4, we will hone in on what would be involved in developing more pluralistic models.

Finally, in Part 5, we will investigate the obstacles that stand in the way of changing how economics is taught to undergraduates, and ask supporters of the status quo to explain why they believe that both students and society at large would not benefit from a more open, inclusive curriculum.

— *Editor*

Feb. 22, 2012 — Although the foundational assumptions of neoclassical or “mainstream” economics are often presented to students as akin to “scientific fact,” those assumptions, [as Remapping Debate recently reported](#), actually carry strong biases in favor of free markets and individualism. Because students are rarely, if ever, given an opportunity to question those assumptions or compare them with alternative perspectives on economics, they are effectively encouraged to internalize those values, critics say. And a curriculum with a strong bent toward abstract mathematical modeling facilitates the illusion that the materials being presented are simply neutral descriptions of uncontested facts.

These biases of the academic mainstream have a far-reaching impact on a tremendous number of college students, not only on those who major in the discipline. Many other students take only an introductory class where they are not exposed to alternative perspectives that would help them think critically about the discipline or about the economy they inhabit.

And still other students may be dissuaded from taking any economics classes at all due to the mathematical emphasis or the perceived ideology of the classes. Together, these phenomena have raised questions among a number of economists about what role economics does play, and should play, in a broader, liberal education.

“Models and then more models”

The vast majority of colleges and universities require economics majors to take a set of five or six “core” classes in their first two years. In the first year, students take introductory courses in microeconomics and macroeconomics, in which they are introduced to a narrow set of neoclassical economic models that purport to explain how the economy functions and how people and businesses act within it. Those courses are followed with intermediate microeconomics and macroeconomics, in which the same models are studied in more depth. Many programs also require students to take a course in econometrics, which is even more purely mathematical than the other intermediate courses.

According to many economists, the narrow focus on a small set of neoclassical models in the core curriculum leads students to think about the economy in an abstract, unrealistic way, and distracts from an empirical exploration of how the economy actually works.

“You start out learning the models in the introductory course, and then you learn basically the same models in the intermediate courses,” said Geoffrey Schneider, a professor of economics and the director of the Teaching and Learning Center at Bucknell University. “It’s just models and then more models.”

“Thousands of students take the introductory course every year, but economics has a declining share of majors,” said Geoffrey Schneider of Bucknell. “There’s clearly something behind that.”

Schneider said that, because students are often not explicitly taught what assumptions the models rest on, they are not encouraged to think critically about their application. (See bottom box on next page on what graduate economics students think it is important to know.)

For majors, therefore, it is not surprising that the foundational principles and preferences of the academic mainstream — for example, that people will always act “rationally” to maximize their self-interest, and that markets should be allowed to function as much as possible without interference — are often internalized. If students are not given the opportunity to study other perspectives, an undergraduate economics education can quickly become closer to “indoctrination,” said David Ruccio, a professor of economics at the University of Notre Dame.

And according to Peter Dorman, a professor of economics at Evergreen State College, majors are also being isolated from other disciplines that they would benefit from studying in tandem with economics. “Economists have been insulating themselves from the work of people in adjacent fields. At the same time, a lot of the most interesting work is being done on the boundary between disciplines, in hybrid areas like neuro-economics and health economics and ecological economics,” Dorman said. “It’s very unfortunate for students that they aren’t being exposed to that.”

Several economists and experts added that the narrow focus on abstract models and analytical thinking does not allow majors to grapple with broader, more philosophical questions. “I’m afraid that many stu-

dents don't come away with a perception that economics is concerned with 'big think' questions," said Martha Starr, a professor of economics at American University. "Instead of asking them to think about how we as a society can promote the well-being of the population or what their role in the economy should be, they're just presented with a model and told, 'Here, memorize this.'"

What about non-majors?

Most critics of the current model of economics education said that it would be a mistake to consider undergraduate economics education only from the point of view of students who major in the discipline. The vast majority of students who take introductory classes in economics do not go on to major in the field. This has caused critics of the current curriculum to focus intensely on trying to reform the introductory courses, as it is the entry point for most students and, often, the only time that they will formally study economics.

What is important to graduate students?

In a [recent survey of graduate students in economics](#), the economist David Colander of Middlebury College asked students what skills they believed were most important to success as an economist. Students were allowed to select multiple skills. Whereas 33 percent said it was "very important" to "make connections with prominent professors," for example, only 9 percent said it was very important to have a "thorough knowledge of the economy." The percentage of students who cited each of the following skills as "very important" is shown below:

According to John Harvey, a professor of economics at Texas Christian University, the results of the survey are "a function of the fact that economists spend too much time developing complex thought experiments and clever stories and not working to understand the complexities of the real-world economy."

Being smart in the sense that they are good at problem solving	53 percent
Being very knowledgeable about one particular field	35 percent
Ability to make connections with prominent professors	33 percent
Excellence in mathematics	30 percent
Being interested in, and good at, empirical research	30 percent
A broad knowledge of the economics literature	11 percent
A thorough knowledge of the economy	9 percent

And Geoffrey Schneider of Bucknell said that it is instructive to study the attitudes of graduate students both because the undergraduate curriculum has been focusing increasingly on preparing students for graduate school and because "it is often graduate students who are teaching undergraduate courses, and their perceptions of what skills students should develop will be a reflection of the skills that they personally value."

“Thousands of students take the introductory course every year, but economics has a declining share of majors,” Schneider said. “There’s clearly something behind that.”

DOES TAKING AN ECONOMICS CLASS MAKE YOU MORE SELF-INTERESTED?

Empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that an economics education contributes to or reflects a relatively conservative perspective among students. For example, [a 2010 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York](#) found that economics majors were less likely to believe that “the distribution of income in the U.S. should be more equal” than other majors; less likely to believe that the government should regulate oil prices; more likely to believe that tariffs reduce economic welfare; and that the more economics courses a student takes, the more likely he or she is to be a member of the Republican Party.

Another study, by the economist Robert Frank of Cornell University, found that taking even one course in economics has an impact on the way that students perceive and interact with the world. [In an experiment designed to measure honesty](#), Frank asked students to imagine that they had found an envelope containing \$100 and bearing the owner’s name and address on it, and then asked whether they would return it. Students who had taken an introductory course in microeconomics were found to be nearly three times as likely not to return the money than the control group of students.

According to Peter Dorman of Evergreen State, these studies show that when you’re teaching students that “markets always work” and that self-interested behavior is good, that is “going to rub off.”

A common criticism of the introductory course is that it focuses too narrowly on exposing students to the basic neoclassical models without providing them with any real-world context. “If the only exposure that an undergraduate is going to get to economics is in the intro course and that course is just supply and demand, perfect competition and rational people maximizing their utility, then I think we can safely say that they haven’t learned much that will be useful to them,” said Frederic Lee, a professor of economics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Robert Prasch, a professor of economics at Middlebury College, agreed that many students may feel disappointed that they were asked to memorize abstract models instead of studying how the economy works or exploring issues that affect them in real life. And he raised another issue: that even the brief exposure to those models and their assumptions might exert a distorting impact on students’ perception of the economy.

“When they graduate, they’re going to remember almost nothing about those models,” Prasch said. “The danger is that they might have learned the neoclassical ‘metaphysic,’ and that’s what they’ll take out into the world, self-regulating markets full of self-interested people.” (See sidebar titled “Does taking an economics class make you more self-interested?”)

According to Schneider, the realization that they are being presented with a set of models that tend to support free markets uncritically and diminish the importance of values other than self-interest can often deter students from continuing to study economics. “I think there are a lot of students who come into

the intro courses thinking that they might want to major in economics, but who leave firmly convinced not to,” he said. “There are students who have a kind of visceral reaction to it. They think, ‘this world you’re talking about does not match up with my experience or my values at all.’”

According to Prasch, the abstract, mathematical nature of the intermediate offerings also dissuades non-majors from continuing past the introductory course. “I cannot imagine why anyone would want to take those courses if they didn’t need to,” he said. “Students understand that they wouldn’t actually be studying the economy in more depth, but rather just continuing to study these few models.”

At most schools, the intermediate “theory” courses, plus additional math courses, are often required before students are able to take many of the advanced courses that in the aggregate explore a broader range of topics — effectively locking out any students that might be interested but who are intimidated by the intermediate courses, Prasch said. “If you want to take a more topical class in labor economics or a policy class in health economics, well, that’s too bad. You can’t do it. You have to run the gauntlet first,” he said.

And what about the rest?

Several economists and educators point out that there is another group of students who might be alienated by the current state of undergraduate economics: those who never take an economics class at all.

“Obviously there are always going to be some people who are just not going to be interested,” said Tae-Hee Jo, a professor of economics at Buffalo State College. “But economics departments have not been doing a very good job of making their classes seem interesting...either.”

Jo said that the association of economics with abstract mathematics likely intimidates many students who prefer a qualitative approach or who are simply more interested in learning concretely about how the economy works. “I think that right now most students would be interested to learn about unemployment or how the financial crisis happened,” he said. “But if they think they’ll just be doing a lot of equations, then they won’t take the class.”

One of the costs of the current presentation is that some students who are thoughtful people and want to ask questions that economics should be asking go into philosophy or anthropology or some other field, because they sense that they won’t be able to ask those questions in economics classes,” said Steve Cohn, a professor of economics at Knox College.

“Instead of asking them to think about how we as a society can promote the well-being of the population or what their role in the economy should be, they’re just presented with a model and told, ‘Here, memorize this.’” — Martha Starr, American University

And Goodwin added that, especially since the financial crisis, many students may have come to perceive economics, even at the undergraduate level, as embodying an ideology with which they don't identify. "That's where you get the stereotype that economics majors are just trying to go to Wall Street and get rich when they graduate," she said. "Perceptive students can feel the link there."

"If somebody goes to college, gets a degree, and essentially knows one thing, you can say that they've been *trained*... That's very different from being educated." — Robert Prasch, Middlebury College

Chuck Barone, Professor of Economics at Dickinson College, used the example of a hypothetical student who came to college with a strong belief in social justice. "There's going to be an interior conflict there," he said. "On the one hand, that student probably understands that economics is related to social justice and should be studied. On the other hand, there's an understanding that economics doesn't speak to the questions that student is interested in asking, about race and class and gender. I think the second consideration tends to win out and that's why students who are interested in social justice don't take a lot of economics courses."

There is a [substantial body of academic literature](#) that supports the claim that economics has become an increasingly "self-selecting" discipline at the undergraduate level, meaning that it attracts a particular kind of student while alienating or excluding others. Studies have found that, on average, students who decide to major in economics display signs of being more self-interested, less able to work with others, less concerned about fairness (particularly in the workplace), less likely to give to charity, and more likely to report that they would be willing to receive a bribe than students in other disciplines. While some studies point to a degree of indoctrination, others find evidence that those types of students are more likely to major in economics in the first place.

"It's strange, to say the least, that there isn't more concern that economics is attracting this kind of student," Schneider said. "We need to be thinking about what we're doing to the students who are in these classes, but also about why other types of students, who we would presumably want in these classes, are not taking them."

Training or liberal education?

"Economics is one of the fields, like history or English, that we think of as being part of a well-rounded, liberal education," said Robert Garnett, a professor of economics at Texas Christian University. "But most economics departments have not been taking the liberal education side of what we do seriously."

"If somebody goes to college, gets a degree, and essentially knows one thing, you can say that they've been *trained*, in much the same way my dog was trained," said Robert Prasch of Middlebury. "That's

very different from being educated. To be educated, you need to be able to compare and contrast, to weigh evidence and choose arguments. Somebody who knows one thing cannot compare it to anything else. My dog can't do that."

Thomas Palley, an economist and an associate at the New America Foundation who writes frequently about economics education, agreed. "Students are getting cheated," he said. "It's shocking how little economics majors are learning, how little breadth they get. They are not being given the opportunity to learn about the economy they inhabit."

Schneider said that economics departments have not been successful at providing access to a breadth of ideas and skills to non-majors, either. "All departments have a dual responsibility," he said. "They have to cater broadly to the needs of their majors, but they also have a general education responsibility, to offer classes that are accessible and interesting to non-majors. Economics has been failing at both."

The cult of expertise and a mission unfulfilled

According to Palley, the narrowness of the economics curriculum — both in terms of the narrow range of perspectives offered to majors and the narrow range of courses available to non-majors who have not taken intermediate theory courses — also serves to reinforce the perception that economics is a field that is best left to experts, which discourages many students from participating. He quoted George Bernard Shaw, who once famously said: "All professions are conspiracies against the laity."

"That is true to a much more extreme extent in economics than in other disciplines," Palley said. "Economics has worked very hard to develop its own private language in order to consolidate its power and make it resistant to criticism that does not come in that language."

Barone agreed. "There's a power that comes with positioning ourselves as the gatekeepers of important knowledge, because it makes people dependent on us to translate for them" he said. "We're the only ones who have the keys and you have to come through us to get it."

OUT FROM UNDER THE CURVE

Several economists said that the requirement that students take calculus as a pre-requisite for intermediate courses in economics has a particularly deterring impact on non-majors, effectively closing out both those intermediate courses and the advanced courses for which they are prerequisites.

Tae-Hee Jo of Buffalo State College explained that while calculus is primarily used to calculate areas underneath curved functions — like supply and demand — many courses could be taught using more theoretical or philosophical frameworks, with the empirical investigation done using basic statistical techniques.

"There are a lot of courses we could be teaching, even at the advanced levels, that don't require calculus," Jo said. "By requiring that as a stepping stone for everything else, you're shutting out a lot of students who wouldn't otherwise need to take it."

That dynamic is visible even at the undergraduate level, Barone said. “It’s attractive to a certain kind of student to gain access to this language. For other students, even the perception of that kind of exclusivity is going to be alienating.”

For example, Robert Prasch of Middlebury pointed out that there are ways that the structure of the current curriculum has actually been *designed* to limit access to the major for certain kinds of students. “The intermediate courses are really gatekeeper courses,” he said. “They’re so abstract and mathematical that the math has just become an end in itself. It’s like fraternity hazing in a way.”

“The people who get caught in that filter,” and thus do not major in economics, “are probably the people we want in the field, the kind of students who ask questions and want to think critically, who could move the discipline forward,” he said.

Schneider agreed, and added that, “Professors and departments have an interest in reproducing themselves.”

“There’s a disincentive to invite in students who might be critical of the perspective you’re teaching,” he said. “So it makes sense, in a way, that most of the people who end up becoming economists are people who see the world in this way.”

According to Barone, that approach runs contrary to a liberal philosophy of education, which begins with the principle that students should “develop the intellectual capacity and the knowledge base and the critical thinking skills to be able to improve the state of humanity on the planet.”

“That’s a very noble, humanistic goal,” he said, “and we have been failing as a discipline for more than fifty years to live up to it.”

This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/node/1091>