

How much economics should you study in college? (Or why economics is like a martial art)

One of my development-oriented students writes:

I have already taken intro micro and macroeconomics and statistics for political science. I am considering intermediate microeconomics this semester, but have heard mixed opinions on whether it will actually be useful or not, and could really use a second opinion.

My personal experience: economic theory courses are a little like karate.

After a course or two you might get your yellow belt, but basically you have just been going through the motions and learning some basics.

(I used to say to my students, “It’s like learning wax on, wax off,” but apparently aging references to a movie that predates their birth is a bad teaching strategy that elicits only blank stares.)

Anyways, with your yellow belt, you’re a little more flexible and you have a sense whether you like the art, but if someone jumped you in an alley you would probably be worse off than before you took the class.

Your karate classes will pay off slowly, with time and practice. You might get your green or brown belt eventually, and this will serve you well in life. For most of you. For others, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and you will run around looking for a fight, sometimes clobbering an innocent, and basically simply miss the big picture.

Stick at it awhile longer, and you might get your black belt, some perspective and some discipline. It takes a while for this to pay off, however, and very soon diminishing returns set in, unless you happen to want to run your own dojo.

In case it’s not obvious, intro to microeconomics is the yellow belt, and intermediate micro is the green at best. An undergraduate degree in economics is a brown and an MA is arguably the black. And if you want your dojo or jedi master status then get a PhD or go into investment finance.

And of course the ass who runs around looking for a fight is the ideologically left or right jerk who manages to turn a conversation about the weather into a diatribe about free trade.

(In college I was actually just such an ideological ass—I won’t tell you what side of the spectrum but leave you to guess. Glad to say it was just a phase.)

This lumpy, nonlinear learning pattern is fundamentally different than the other social sciences, or even bits of applied economics like history or development. The accumulation of knowledge, and your ability to use it, is much more linear there. You learn something and you can see quickly how it fits into your view of the world. You talk about a problem differently after just a few books.

You can still be dangerous. The difference is lumpiness. To add a second metaphor, in my experience your brain needs to marinate in economics for a while before you deeply get it.

Some might take this as a warning not to embark on economics. I disagree. I think a serious student of any social science interested in applying their skills in the real world—including development workers and diplomats—ought to seek a degree of mastery in political science, statistics and economics, and dabble in things anthropological, post-modern, or historical to stop them from having asinine views.

I think economic learning could be more linear and less lumpy if undergraduate courses were taught with fascinating problems first and theories supporting them, rather than theories for the sake of theories. Good instructors do this, and you will find them everywhere, but maybe less at top research universities where the instructor sometimes leans towards generating future PhDs over informed citizens. Or maybe they just want to get back to their research. So find the dedicated instructors.

Of course, you might do well to ask someone who has actually taught undergraduate micro. I TA'd intro and intermediate macro for several years, as a PhD, under superior professors, and saw the benefits. But the textbooks available often get good instructors off on the wrong foot right away.

For related academic advice that is actually informed by experience and expertise, see the development and academic advice on the right sidebar.