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Author(s): Claudia Goldin

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The B- Economics Major: Can and Should We Do Better?

Claudia Goldin

The basic recommendations of Siegfried et al. (1991) attempt to raise the grade we receive as instructors of undergraduates. They endeavor to (1) enrich and enliven theory courses with a limited number of applications of concepts and theoretical constructs; (2) make connections between theory and its empirical counterparts; (3) fortify statistics courses with data, including their deficiencies, and with economic applications; (4) encourage students to be broader thinkers, that is, to be less narrow and parochial; (5) make certain that the applied courses are linked to the theory courses; and (6) enhance the ability of seniors and other advanced undergraduates to engage in independent projects and write more papers, that is, enable them to “think like economists.”

At almost the same moment that this study of undergraduate economics education was organized, a project of independent origin, focused at the graduate level, was begun. That project—executed by the American Economic Association (AEA) Commission on Graduate Education in Economics (COGEE)—has also just been completed, and their recommendations are similar in spirit, if not in detail, to those of the group evaluating the undergraduate program. The leading COGEE recommendation is that “relatively more emphasis [should be] given to providing students with applications of the tools of economics to economic problems.” Other COGEE recommendations are that: “the core sequence should be regarded as a departmental public good and its content should be the concern of the entire department”; “field courses should attempt to include more empirical applications”; and “papers should be required where possible, so that students begin using their tools and gaining experience in writing prior to the dissertation stage.” The bottom line of the COGEE report is that graduate schools are producing students who are technically superior but narrow, who find it difficult to apply what they have learned to the important problems of our day (or any other), and who have little knowledge of data, the history of institutions, the origins of modern economic issues, and the history of ideas.

The striking similarity between the two reports raises an important question. Is dissatisfaction with teaching at the undergraduate level coming from how we train (or do not train) our future teachers at the graduate level

Claudia Goldin is a professor of economics at Harvard University and research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA.

and, possibly, from the incentives we give them once they leave graduate school? Or, alternatively, is the dissatisfaction at the graduate level, expressed in the COGEE report, coming from the lack of skills we offer to and endow in our undergraduates? That is, we are presented with what appears to be a classic chicken-egg problem. Are undergraduates being cheated because they are not being adequately taught? Or, are graduates poorly prepared for their training because as undergraduates they were improperly or incompletely taught? What came first—poorly taught undergraduates (only one-eighth of whom eventually become economics majors) or poorly taught graduate students, many of whom eventually become teachers? I sense, in putting both studies together and in thinking a bit about the process, that the problem is *not* at the undergraduate level. Rather, the problem is in the training given graduate students and the incentives for the profession as a whole.

The recommendations in the report on undergraduate economic education are all admirable. I do not believe for a moment that teachers of undergraduates would *not* want to achieve the enumerated goals. Rather, I believe precious few individuals are sufficiently gifted to do so, and few researchers have the time, particularly if they are untenured, to perfect their teaching skills, to construct the ideal application, to create the exciting experiment, and so on. Perhaps if textbooks did precisely what is asked for in the report, we would have far less of a problem, and I wonder why the committee did not examine the content of the best-selling textbooks.

Are these recommendations anything less than what we would all like to achieve? I think not. What, then, is the problem? Is it resources? Maybe to some degree, but resource scarcity (in terms of teaching bodies in the classroom) probably accounts for only a small difference between what we have and what we would like to have. Is it incentives in the profession as a whole? Probably to some degree. Is it the ability to teach economics in an enriched and enlivened fashion, acquired by our future teachers at the graduate level and then further honed through their own research endeavors? Most likely I think that is the ultimate problem, and it is not one that can be remedied at the undergraduate level.

REFERENCE

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