"Economics: The "Just Right" Liberal-Arts Major?"

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March 2009

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE ECONOMICS DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 09-03

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE
MIDDLEBURY, VERMONT 05753

http://www.middlebury.edu/~econ

Economics: The ‘Just Right’ Liberal-Arts Major

By David Colander

Like many liberal-arts institutions, Middlebury College, where I teach, has a problem: Too many students want to be economics majors. Economics enrollments keep growing, and adding more faculty members to the department seems to only increase the demand. The rumor on the campus is that if the college actually provided enough professors to meet the demand for economics courses, it would have to change its name to the Middlebury School of Economics.

Professors at other liberal-arts colleges confirm that the phenomenon is widespread and has been for some time. But what makes the economics major so appealing? As an economist I like to think that economics has become so popular because of its intellectual rigor, broad appeal, and importance to understanding the world. And those are clearly part of the answer, especially given the recent financial crisis. Modern economics is an exciting and dynamic field of study that has changed considerably in recent years; specifically, it has become more quantitative and scientific. Today’s economists bring technical expertise to interesting and novel questions. They have also expanded their previous narrow vision of human behavior. *Homo economus* is now considered purposeful, not ultrarational, and pursues enlightened self-interest, not greed. Psychological insights and traditional economics are blended together in today’s behavioral economics; because modern economists do not see the market as the answer to everything, they are able to be involved in all types of real-world policies, from changing default options for people’s savings decisions to helping design search algorithms for Google. But as much as I’d like to think so, I suspect that those strengths and improvements are not the main reasons for the economics major’s appeal.

Most administrators and non-economist faculty members attribute that appeal to economics’ relation to business. They assume that because liberal-arts colleges don’t have business majors, the demand for economics is really just a demand for business. To some degree that’s right, but it’s only a small part of the story.

As part of a report on the economics major that I am working on for the Teagle Foundation, my students and I conducted a survey of more than a thousand students majoring in economics at more than 30 institutions. We found that only 19 percent of the respondents said that the job-training aspect of the economics curriculum had been very important to their choice of major. Moreover, only 36 percent said they were planning to work in business. The others were planning to go on to professional school or work for a nonprofit organization, or had no specific plans. The reality is that at most liberal-arts colleges, economics is taught as a social science far removed from business.

Companies like to hire economics majors from liberal-arts colleges not because the students have been trained in business, but because they have a solid background in the liberal arts. What I hear from businesspeople is that they don’t care what a job candidate has majored in. They want students who can think, communicate orally, write, and solve problems, and who are comfortable with quantitative analysis. They do not expect colleges to provide students with specific training in business skills.

If the economics major’s popularity is not due to its intellectual dynamism or connection to business, to what is it due? I suspect a mundane explanation: It is the “just

right” major. By “just right” I mean that the economics major provides the appropriate middle ground of skill preparation, analytic rigor, and intellectual excitement that students look for in a major, and that employers look for when hiring students.

Consider the results of another question in my survey. We asked economics students to identify majors as hard, moderate, or easy, and we found that 33 percent viewed economics as hard, 3 percent said sociology was hard, 7 percent saw psychology as hard, and 13 percent thought political science was hard. Since other social sciences were the primary alternative majors that most of the economics students considered, that data is compelling evidence that the respondents perceived those other majors as too easy. Students likely reasoned that taking a “too easy” major would signal to potential employers that the student had chosen an easy path through college, thereby hurting their chances of being hired.

On the other end of the spectrum were math and science majors. In the survey, 81 percent saw chemistry as hard, 84 percent thought physics was hard, and 68 percent said math was hard. Those perceptions are important, since 38 percent of the economics majors considered one or more of the natural sciences as an alternative major.

The important point is not only that science and math majors are perceived as difficult; most students know that employers like students who choose tough courses. The problem, the students I spoke with felt, is that science and math—unlike economics—are not meant to provide general students with knowledge that they can bring to their everyday lives and jobs. For example, most liberal-arts math departments hire professors trained in pure mathematics, who naturally offer courses in pure mathematics even though applied math and statistics is more likely to be relevant to students’ futures. Similarly, the students I spoke with saw course work in the natural sciences as preparation for graduate school; if that isn’t your goal, they believed, a science major isn’t for you.

The truth is that many companies would love to hire students who have a liberal-arts math or science degree, especially if that training focused on applied math and science. The National Leadership Council, of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, made this clear in its “Liberal Education & America’s Promise” report, which stated that “narrow preparation in a single area—whether that field is chemistry or information technology or history—is exactly the opposite of what graduates need from college.”

At Middlebury, the economics department continually gets students who were planning to major in science until they discovered that in a science major, they would be expected to make a deep commitment to future graduate work. (How deep is that commitment? Students told me that one science student at Middlebury was informed that he would not have time to participate in a sport and also be a science major.)

As chair of the economics department, I am frequently asked by my dean to figure out ways to reduce the number of economics majors—the administration simply refuses to keep increasing the number of economics faculty members. I propose that the solution does not lie in changing the economics major, but in making other majors “just right” as well.

To that end, I asked my students why they considered the other social sciences easy. The answer was twofold. First, far fewer courses in those fields are taught quantitatively than is the case in economics, even though much of the relevant research work is highly

quantitative. Other social-science curricula could challenge students more by adding some applied-statistics, math, or computer-science courses as standard requirements. The second reason my students considered the other majors too easy was that they believed the grading standards were undemanding. If they are right, those standards could be raised. For example, social-science courses could require students to write substantial papers that are subject to rigorous standards of logic and exposition.

When I asked my students how the natural sciences could become "just right" majors, they suggested that those departments focus less on training future scientists and more on educating future citizens about the exciting developments in science today. That way, science majors would be able to wait to become scientists in graduate school; they could learn *about* science during their undergraduate years. One way to accomplish this might be reducing both the number of required courses and the number that require labs. My students also suggested that natural-science introductory classes could be changed from "hurdles"—classes designed to scare away students who are not fully dedicated—to "gateways" that allow students to experience the wonder of science while welcoming them into the field.

I don't claim to know whether my students' perceptions of other majors are correct, or whether these solutions will work. I don't even know for sure whether the demand for economics courses will remain as high as it is now. (While the recent crisis has increased student interest in economics, it may also lead to fewer students taking economics as a gateway to a financial career. I suspect that the two forces likely will cancel each other out.)

What I do know is that liberal-arts administrations have their logic backward when they ask economics departments to reduce the number of majors. Economics has so many majors because it is doing something right. You don't ask a successful department to change; you reward it, and you ask other departments to follow its example. Administrators should encourage those departments to become "just right," too.

David Colander is chair of the economics department at Middlebury College. His recent books include The Making of an Economist Redux *(Princeton University Press) and* The Stories Economists Tell *(McGraw-Hill).*