Preface

Michael Watts

In fall 2006 the Teagle Foundation awarded $75 000 grants to investigate the role of majors from each of six different academic disciplines in promoting undergraduate liberal education. One of the grants was made to the American Economic Association’s Committee on Economic Education (AEA CEE); the other five grants went to the American Academy of Religion, the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the Center for Hellenic Studies, the Modern Language Association, and the National History Center. A summary of the six projects, with links to white papers prepared for each of the disciplines, is available at http://www.teaglefoundation.org/grantmaking/grantees/disciplines.aspx (accessed 17 April 2009).

Teagle’s request for proposals for this initiative arrived shortly after I began my first term as Chair of the AEA CEE. I knew enough history of the Committee and the AEA to understand how some key institutional features would affect any participation by the AEA CEE in the project. Most important, an explicit objective of the AEA has been, since its founding in the late 1800s and its incorporation in 1923, “The encouragement of perfect freedom of economic discussion. The Association as such will take no partisan attitude, nor will it commit its members to any position on practical economic questions” (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AEA/gen_info.htm, accessed 17 April 2009).

Given that long-standing and, for the most part, scrupulously observed policy, there was never a question of producing an “official” AEA or AEA CEE document on what economics departments should do to provide the best possible liberal education for economics majors, and for students in other majors who take economics courses – which is a far larger number of students. What might have been done instead, and has been done in the past, was to establish an independent committee to prepare such a report. For example, in 1961 a document titled Economic Education in the Schools was published by a National Task Force on Economic Education, with members appointed by the AEA and funding provided by the Committee on Economic Development. The report was influential, with over a quarter of a million copies of the booklet distributed to US schools. But within
the economics profession the report and its national distribution led to a heated debate, featuring such prominent economists as Paul Samuelson, George Stigler, and Lee Bach, on the questions of whether or not it makes sense to teach economics at all at the secondary level, and if so whether the recommendations of the National Task Force – or for that matter any “official” recommendations – were the best way to go about doing that. That episode may demonstrate the wisdom of the AEA policy promoting freedom of discussion while keeping the association itself out of the business of directly adopting statements on practical questions, including even questions about how and when to teach economics. It may also offer some support for George Bernard Shaw’s quip about economists laid end to end not reaching a conclusion.

For the Teagle project in 2006, after consulting with John Siegfried at the AEA and several others, I opted not to set up a large independent committee, not from any fear of the controversy such a report might engender, but rather just the opposite. In my experience, today academic committee reports all too often turn out to be so bland and general that they are neither useful nor memorable. Instead they are more likely to become long and bulky documents by trying to provide balanced discussions of all reasonable points of view. If specific recommendations are offered – frequently that is left as something to be done by “the next” committee, which may never be appointed – they are often presented as such broad statements (or even platitudes) on desirable goals that almost everyone accepts them, and already did before the committee was appointed.

To try to ensure that this project, if funded, would attract attention and promote active discussion and debate among economists who are seriously concerned about undergraduate liberal education – which is perhaps not the representative or majority group of US academic economists, but is certainly a large and important group – it seemed more promising to choose two co-authors to write the white paper. The authors should be working at schools with good liberal education programs, and known both for holding strong views on these topics and for regularly engaging in free and open discussions about the goals and practice of teaching undergraduate economics. Dave Colander and KimMarie McGoldrick came quickly to mind. They generously agreed to serve, first by writing the proposal. As this volume makes clear, they embraced the goal of promoting a discussion of ideas on a wide range of topics and specific recommendations, including several that were always expected to be controversial. They never envisioned the report as trying to set out a settled body of conclusions on best practices for all schools or even all liberal education programs. And they understood that neither their white paper, nor the responses to the white paper that they hoped to elicit and publish, would
be viewed as official documents or position statements of the American Economic Association or of the AEA CEE. The discussion and proposals would have to stand or fall on their own merits, and on the authors’ powers of persuasion. As was true in the 1960s, these are still not areas in which economists are noted for agreeing to make changes. That is particularly true in times when, as now, undergraduate enrollments in economics majors and courses are high and rising. Why tamper with a major that is already passing the test of the marketplace? The answer, of course, is that even in good times there may be some serious problems with the economics major and how we teach undergraduate economics, and some of those problems may be getting worse rather than better.

But we all knew specific claims about problems with the way undergraduate economics is taught, and specific recommendations on how to make things better, were almost certain to generate disagreements, counterarguments, and counterproposals. In fact, that was an integral part of the intended outcome from this discussion. To make sure it happened and was at least partly documented, the white paper was presented and revised over a period of more than a year, at two small conferences specifically on the white paper, at several paper sessions in national and regional professional meetings, and in other venues. That helped shape the recommendations and arguments in the final draft of the white paper, and brought the discussion to a larger audience. But the intent was not to have all of the objections and disagreements reflected in the white paper. Instead, the goal was to sharpen the arguments and recommendations in the white paper, and to provide ways for those who disagreed – or more often who partly agreed and partly disagreed – to speak for themselves. And so this book also emerged from the project, and will now be distributed to chairs of US economics departments.

I attended the conferences at Middlebury and Richmond that were organized for the project, and some of the other sessions in which various drafts of the report were presented and discussed. As other participants in those meetings can testify, I can be included among those who disagree with several of the major arguments and proposals in the white paper. But in this Preface I have a different role to play, reflecting on what I heard at the earlier discussions and, now, in reading these chapters. So having set the stage with a bit of background on the report and how it came about, I will now risk suggesting some “points of emphasis” readers may want to take special note of as they read the following pages.

First, in Chapter 1, Colander and McGoldrick note that in framing their recommendations their focus was on “the economics discipline within research liberal arts colleges” (p. 21). They hope some of their ideas will also be useful at other types of schools and in other disciplines, but do not
claim that they will be. I have not heard or seen responses from people in other disciplines, but as other economists responded to the white paper there were, not surprisingly, clear examples of a different focus in many of the responses from those who work at research universities or other schools in which liberal undergraduate education is not the key focus of the school or the economics department. What is perhaps more surprising is how much disagreement there is in the responses from other economists who are also employed at schools where liberal education is the key focus of the faculty. Clearly economists’ individual “perspectives” – a term that appears in many of the responses – shape their ideas and many of their reactions to specific points in the white paper. Those perspectives are certainly influenced by the kinds of schools at which the authors are working or have worked in the past, but just as clearly, that occupational influence is not so strong or so uniform in its effect as to establish a standard set of positions on questions about how the economics major contributes to or limits a liberal education, or whether the sources of those positive and/or negative effects are rooted in the discipline itself or in how economists are trained (or not trained) to research and teach, or in the incentives they face from departments and central administrations at their schools.

More generally, there seems to be considerably more disagreement than consensus among the authors on many of the specific arguments and recommendations in the white paper, including:

- whether the discipline of economics represents – and prepares faculty and students to understand and discuss – “big think” or “little think” ideas;
- whether economics, as it is practiced today, has become narrow and perhaps imperialistic, or is instead more likely than ever to draw ideas from other disciplines and therefore fit naturally with interdisciplinary initiatives, including public policy programs;
- whether individual economics courses and/or the economics major promote too much depth and too little breadth (or vice versa, some argue), both in absolute terms and compared with undergraduate coursework and majors in other disciplines – particularly other social sciences and the natural sciences;
- whether breadth or depth is a more effective way to teach undergraduate economics content to economics majors or to non-majors taking only two or three economics courses, and a more effective way to promote a lifelong passion for learning;
- whether particular breadth courses (such as economic history and the history of economic thought, according to Colander and McGoldrick) should be required courses for undergraduate students,
and for graduate students in economics who want to teach in liberal education and interdisciplinary programs;

- whether special credentialing programs for faculty who take jobs at schools that stress undergraduate liberal education would be well received by individual faculty members, economics departments, and schools, and whether the best way to provide those credentials would be in new or existing doctoral programs (in economics or, perhaps, from economics programs in public policy schools), or as post-doctorate programs;

- whether teaching and research are, in theory and/or practice, substitutes or complements, or perhaps operate in different combinations for economists at different kinds of schools; and

- whether bottom-up or top-down reforms at colleges and universities have the best chance of being adopted and succeeding – unless top-down programs must have enough support from faculty and departments, and bottom-up programs must have enough support from central administrators that the differences are not really as important as they sound.

There is no list of arguments and recommendations from the white paper with which all of the respondents explicitly agreed, but there is a short list of ideas that at least some respondents supported and with which I do not remember hearing or reading any substantive disagreements from other respondents. Even that limited consensus may reflect only a considerable degree of selection bias in those who were invited to the conferences and who chose to attend. And it is also possible that there were some respondents who did not agree with these points but did not say that because they cared more about expressing their thoughts on other points they considered more important. But with those caveats, it seems to me the following few points of agreement are also worth noting:

- Economics instruction for liberal education, and for that matter all other kinds of education, could be improved by training economists to use more innovative, student-centered teaching methods, either as graduate students or as new faculty members.

- We can probably do more to tailor undergraduate courses (especially principles classes) for different groups of students – mostly for non-economics majors.

- Not surprisingly, almost all academic economists agree that incentives are important, and can be used to promote more attention to good teaching. But exactly how, where, and when to do that, and who should do it, is not so clear. For example, is it better to promote
a culture that values teaching through existing school and department structures, or to set up special units or schools to provide general education or interdisciplinary programs, with promotion, tenure, and salary decisions residing at least partly in those units?

I had seen almost all of the papers printed here, or at least earlier versions of them, at the conferences or sessions in which they were first presented. Rereading them to prepare this Preface left me with two very general impressions. First, it was more fun to hear people making these points and arguing these points face-to-face, because what has been lost in the printed pages is a good deal of humor and general goodwill, even when the oral disagreements were sharp and sometimes more pointed. That suggests that there is still a role for those kinds of forums.

On the other hand, in reading the papers together without the generally pleasant distractions of individual personalities and group and subgroup dynamics, I was left with a stronger sense of how important the overall issue of an educational culture (to use a term from Brad Bateman’s response) at any kind of school can be. Understandably, the culture at a school that prides itself first and foremost on the quality of its undergraduate liberal education will often be different from the culture at a school that ranks itself based on doctoral or master’s programs. But it is also worth noting there are some large research universities that manage to put more emphasis on undergraduate education than others, and that’s a culture issue, too.

Ultimately a school and department’s culture sinks through and affects the behavior of individual faculty, even with those who are stellar researchers and stellar teachers of both undergraduate and graduate students. If you can keep that kind of faculty member in the undergraduate classroom, he or she will inspire students’ passion for learning in ways that most non-researchers can’t. And the faculty member will find the experience rewarding and worthwhile, and derive satisfaction from building up the size and reputation of the undergraduate economics major. At schools where the university and department cultures encompass excellence in undergraduate teaching, this can be a stable equilibrium. But if the culture of the department and school is focused on doctoral or master’s programs (as in business schools that are ranked on MBA programs), and the undergraduate program comes to be valued primarily because that justifies faculty slots that can be used to bolster rankings for the graduate programs, the handwriting is on the wall. And so after reading these chapters again, I wondered how many of the problems raised in the white paper might be addressed if it were possible to change the culture in departments and schools, perhaps through our graduate programs or perhaps in post-
doctoral programs, so that the value of good teaching in good undergraduate programs at any kind of school is regularly seen as a more important part of what it means to be a professor. It would be interesting to compare the characteristics and histories of the large research universities where that seems to happen to those where it does not.

I hope these brief summary impressions and the short lists of major questions addressed in this volume show that the discussion Dave and KimMarie have started takes in a large number of interesting and important questions. Some of the questions are what they call “big think” questions, with no simple answers, and some are “little think” questions, or recommendations that may or may not be worth pursuing, compared with alternative approaches. I am extremely grateful to Dave and KimMarie for agreeing to accept the risks of developing the proposal, and then doing all of the hard work that came along when the proposal was funded. They drew together a wonderfully diverse and engaging group of respondents, who served in many respects as collaborators in developing the project and this volume. And of course without the funding and initiative from the Teagle Foundation none of this would have happened, so sincere thanks are due there, too.

It was a privilege for the Committee for Economic Education of the American Economic Association to support and facilitate this project, even though I must repeat that the white paper and responses are not official statements of the AEA or the AEA CEE.

Michael Watts, Chair
American Economic Association Committee on Economic Education