

Introduction: a discussion, not a report

David Colander and KimMarie McGoldrick

When the AEA's Committee of Economic Education (CEE) was asked to develop a report on the economics major as part of a liberal education, there was a real question of whether the CEE wanted to undertake this endeavor.* While the Committee believed that the issue was both relevant and important, the question was whether a traditional, association-compiled report would make any difference. Decisions about the major are made at the department level, and unless there are incentives to change at that level, a report is unlikely to make any difference, regardless of what it contains. Economists, probably rightly, don't pay much attention to reports.

Every so often a report comes along that seems to be influential in creating change, but generally, its influence is derived from it being written at the right time and place. In other words, the situation on the ground was already ripe for change. There is a correlation, but no causation between reports and change. When the Committee asked itself whether the economics major was ripe for change, the consensus was no. The economics major is doing quite well, and while there are issues being debated, there is also a balance of views on those issues so that little overall change was expected. Thus, it was probable that a traditional report would only receive a cursory review before being moved to the back shelf.

Ultimately the Committee decided to do the report, not because it expected to bring about change in the major, but in order to encourage more discussion of the issues that the Committee felt were important. That's why this book is entitled a "Discussion" and not a "Report." But instead of trying to organize a blue-ribbon panel reflecting the various views on the major to generate a report that everyone would sign on to, the CEE asked two of its more provocative members to provide a thought-provoking piece on the economics major and its relation to a liberal education. The assignment was to write a report that would generate discussion and promote the continued debate of important issues.

We quickly decided that the goal of the report would not be to determine a set of best practices for the major – we believe that there are many best practices. We also weren't going to identify a set of lousy practices

– we believe that there are many lousy practices, but they are generally not practices borne out of ignorance, but conducted out of lack of caring, so a report ranting against them would have little effect. Instead, we decided to address some provocative questions that would encourage readers to look at the major in a slightly different light than is typically considered. What is the appropriate training for a person who will be teaching in a liberal arts school? Is it highly correlated with the PhD as currently constructed, or does it entail a quite different set of courses? What incentives would motivate the creation of institutional value through teaching and not simply research? What is the best way to teach introductory economics, and are we training anyone to do it? Is the disciplinary nature of undergraduate education squeezing out the big think questions, and replacing them with little think questions? That report is Chapter 1 of the book.

The initial draft report was distributed to numerous economists who were asked for comments. We organized two conferences designed to discuss the issues raised by the report – one at Middlebury College and one at the University of Richmond. Based on those comments and conferences we revised the report. The reflections of those who reviewed initial drafts of the report and attended the conferences were extremely insightful. Based on those comments, and comments from many others to whom we sent the report, including all the members of the Committee of Economic Education for the AEA, we revised and sharpened our arguments. We then sent the revised report to that same group of people, along with a few others to try to get a wide diversity of views, and invited them to submit revised versions of their comments, or new comments for the book. Those comments make up Parts 2, 3, and 4 of the book. One chapter in those comments, Chapter 12 is longer than the others. That is by design. As we were going through the comments, we found that W. Lee Hansen had developed his “proficiencies” approach to economics in more detail, and we thought it would be much more helpful to readers to see a fuller discussion of his ideas. So we asked him to allow us to publish his longer paper on the subject and he kindly agreed. Finally, the report was presented at the 2009 AEA meetings, at which we asked three economists who have also served as administrators, to comment. Their comments, along with comments from Bradley Bateman, who made the transition from professor to administration between when he first wrote his comments, and when he finished his comments, make up Part 5 of the book.

Writing about the major is usually only done by professors and administrators. But there is another important group – students – who have a large stake in the major and views about the major. Part 6 represents their views. It reports the results of two surveys – one at research liberal arts schools,

and one a random survey of a variety of economics majors – that Dave Colander's Middlebury College students conducted.

A discussion has no conclusion, and we see this book as a discussion, not a report. The point of the discussion is to raise questions, not to provide answers or conclusions. However, we felt that some type of concluding chapter would be useful and Part 7 provides a short summary and overview of the discussion by John Siegfried. We believe that John is in a unique position of having headed the committee that compiled the last report describing the status and prospects of the economics major (Siegfried et al., 1991b).

NOTE

- * This work was generously supported by a grant from the Teagle Foundation as part of their Fresh Thinking: Working Groups on the Disciplines and Undergraduate Education program, <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/grantmaking/grantees/disciplines.aspx> (accessed 17 April 2009).

