Gender Differences in Predispositions towards Economics

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Abstract

Research has found that women tend to have more negative predispositions towards studying economics than men, which contributes to their underrepresentation in the field. This paper uses survey data on principles students at a large state university to investigate causes of this difference. We find that students widely view economics as a business-oriented field that prioritizes math skills and making money — a combination that is a turnoff for women, but not so much men. Thus, emphasizing uses of economics for social welfare analysis, while de-emphasizing its business applications, may help to rebalance predispositions at the outset of the principles class.

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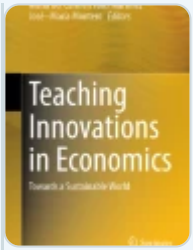

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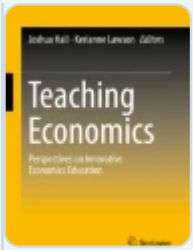

Navigating the Economics Major: The Effect of Gender on Students' Degree Pathways

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Notes

1. See Jacobs [1995] on the slowdown in gender integration after 1985.

2. For example, Turner and Bowen [1999] find that, among students with very high math SAT scores (above 750), the share of women majoring in economics is significantly lower than men.

3. Here “preferences” should be understood in the general sense of “reasons for behaving” [Bowles 1998], not as hard-coded orientations.

4. That people rely primarily on first-hand information about what different careers are like receives some empirical support from our survey: two-thirds of students said their own jobs and internships were of primary importance in influencing their ideas, and two-thirds again pointed to discussion with family, friends, and acquaintances. In contrast, a quarter or less said internet/library research and reading job postings were important in their job search.

5. See Bauer and Dahlquist [1999] on differences in gender representation across business fields. Given that women are known to be underrepresented among finance majors (Figure 1), it is unexpected that they are evenly represented among students planning to major in financial business fields at SDSU. Note that not all of the majors referred to here as “non-financial

business fields" are offered through the Business School. Majors in public relations, advertising, and journalism are offered through the School of Communication, while the recreation major is offered through the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts. Nonetheless, we consider these majors (along with marketing, hospitality/tourism, and sports management) to be "non-financial business fields" as they share an applied business orientation, in contrast to the study of arts and sciences or engineering.

6. Salemi and Eubanks [1996] discuss the flow of "discouraged business majors" into economics. At SDSU, the GPA required to declare a business major is 2.9, while it is 2.4 for economics.

7. Several of the self-assessment and attitudinal questions are modeled after those in the annual Survey of College Freshman of the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of Los Angeles. See Higher Education Research Institute [2005].

8. Note, however, that checks of self-reported SAT scores against administrative records show upward bias in self-reported data [Maxwell and Lopus 1994].

9. Note that missing values on the math SAT score primarily reflect non-response: of the 32.8 percent of students not reporting a math SAT score, 6.3 percent had taken the ACT, and 26.5 percent left the item blank. Students who had taken the ACT were asked to report their composite score only, rather than scores on its individual components, because the former is more readily recalled.

10. Given that only one of the five instructors was a woman, it is not possible to examine possible effects of the gender of the instructor on expectations at the outset of the class. For findings in this area, see Canes and Rosen [1995], Robb and Robb [1999], Rask and Bailey [2002], and Bettinger and Long [2005].

11. The probability of expecting the class to be relevant to their careers is also 42 percentage points lower for students intending to major in arts and sciences (p-val=0.00).

12. The mean number of topics was 4.6 for women and 4.3 for men, with standard errors of 0.12 and 0.16, respectively. The p-value for the hypothesis that the means are equal is 0.22.

13. See also Jensen and Owen [2001] on the importance of career interests in students' decisions.

14. Notable also were the sprinkling of answers like "Ferris Bueler's Day Off" (the film in which Ben Stein played an insufferably boring economics teacher) and "Alex P. Keaton" (Michael J. Fox's character in the 1980s sitcom "Family Ties," in which he played a *Wall Street Journal*-carrying, Louis-Rukeyser-watching proponent of supply-side economics).

15. As can be seen from Figure 3, there were modest yet significant gender differences in expectations, with women tending to rate jobs of economists, stockbrokers, lawyers, and engineers as even more about money, hard work, and high incomes than men — while rating the other jobs as somewhat more about helping people, friendly workplaces, interesting lives outside of work, and work/family balance than men. This may reflect some bias among women (relative to men) against fields that are predominantly male and bias in favor of others — but it also may just be that women use a broader frame of reference when thinking about jobs than men do.

16. Note that this difference has some parallel in the distribution of female Ph.D. economists across research fields, wherein their shares are relatively high in labor, health, public economics, and development and relatively low in macroeconomics, finance, and econometrics. As Dolado et al. [2006] discuss,

however, these distributions likely reflect “path dependencies” in the representation of women in the economics profession, not simple differences in “tastes” for research in different fields.

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Appendices

Appendix A

illustration

Survey questions

Background information

Year of studies: __ Freshman __ Sophomore __ Junior __ Senior
Gender: __ Male __ Female
Major/likely major: _____
Standardized test scores (report your best results):
SAT Math: _____ SAT Verbal: _____
ACT composite: _____

Self-rated abilities

Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself. *Response categories: Top 10 percent, above average, average, below average, lowest 10 percent*

Competitiveness
Computer skills
Communication skills
Interest in helping the disadvantaged
Mathematical ability
Motivation for school work
Overall intelligence

Personal goals and values

Please rate the importance to you personally of each of the following. *Response categories: Very important, somewhat important, not important.*

Helping others who are in difficulty
Becoming a respected professional
Having a job that involves lots of work with people
Becoming well-off financially
Having intellectually challenging work
Contributing to the betterment of society
Finding a career that permits good work/family balance

Reasons for taking economics

What reason(s) did you have for taking this introductory economics class? (check all that apply):

___ General-education requirement
___ Requirement for my major
___ Possible major or minor

Expectations of studying economics

Before taking this class, how did you expect a class in economics to compare to classes in other subjects? *Response categories: Yes, no, and "about the same."*

More interesting
More difficult
More relevant to my career
More concerned with today's world
More oriented to ideas about improving people's lives
More oriented to issues of money and business
More demanding in math skills
More demanding in verbal skills

Types of jobs to which an economics major is expected to lead

What comes to mind when you think of the typical job that someone majoring in economics would get after college? _____

General interest in economics topics

Which of the following topics, if any, would you be interested in learning about during your undergraduate studies? {check all that apply}

Consumer behavior and the media	Women and the work world
Globalization and international trade	How global capital markets work
Poverty and inequality in the US	Race, ethnicity, and economic opportunity
Global poverty and inequality	Reform of US social security retirement program
Discrimination in wages and employment	What drives the stock market

Impressions of various professions

We are interested in your impressions of jobs in various fields. For the following list of professions (journalist, stock broker, high-school teacher, electrical engineer, economist, psychologist, and corporate lawyer), which do you think of as:

- … having well-defined expectations about work hours, dress, and behavior on the job?
- … fostering friendly, sociable relationships with co-workers?
- … likely to lead to a high-income lifestyle?
- … offering flexibility to balance work and family?
- … putting a priority on math-related skills?
- … primarily concerned with business and making money?
- … primarily oriented to helping people?
- … attracting people who put work first in their lives?
- … attracting people who have interesting lives outside of work?
- … being the kinds of people I could imagine myself working with?

Respondents were asked to check all that apply.

Appendix B

See Table B1.

Table b1 Measures of math ability

Appendix C

See Table C1.

Table c1 Expectations of introductory economics, compared to your other classes, including controls for intended major: probit analysis, marginal effects

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