



Economics is What Economists Do: Exposing Principles of Economics Students to Economic Research and Researchers

This paper describes an innovative approach to increase the diversity of students majoring in economics. The approach involves a virtual research seminar series called “Economics is What Economists Do” designed to introduce Principles of Economics students to the range of ideas studied by economists and the diverse people who pursue economics. The series aims to address two possible factors that could contribute to the “supply side” of the economics pipeline: perceived interest in economics and role models. By exposing students to many current research projects, the seminar series can broaden students’ perceptions of the field. Additionally, the series serves as a source of role models for students who do not identify with their professors’ race or gender. We describe how we implemented the “Economics is What Economists Do” seminar series in multiple sections of Principles of Economics, discuss the associated learning outcomes, and share reflections on its effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents an innovative approach to introducing Principles of Economics students to the diverse range of ideas studied by economists and the people who pursue economics. Our intervention involves hosting a series of virtual research presentations called “Economics is What Economists Do.” The primary motivation of this series is to increase the number of women and underrepresented minority students majoring in economics.¹

The underrepresentation of women in the economics profession at all levels is well documented. Only about a third of undergraduate economics students are women. This figure falls behind traditionally male-dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (Dynan & Rouse, 1997; Bayer & Rouse, 2016; Daly, 2018; Lundberg & Stearns, 2019). Similarly, students from underrepresented minority groups comprise less than 12% of economics majors, despite accounting for almost 20% of all college graduates (Bayer & Wilcox, 2019).² The “Economics is what Economists Do” seminar series aims to address two potential factors that contribute to the supply side of the economics pipeline: perceived interest in economics and the need for diverse role models.

Many college students hold inaccurate preconceptions about economics, leading them to avoid economics classes. Dynan and Rouse (1997) find that college women who are sophomores or above were twice as likely as men to cite a lack of interest as the reason for not taking a first-year economics course. Likewise, the St. Louis Fed reports that several women, interviewed for their podcast series, did not initially consider economics due to a lack of knowledge about the field until they accidentally discovered its merits (Ackley et al., 2022). Students who only take one economics course may fail to grasp the breadth of ideas encompassed by the discipline. The mini research series addresses this concern by exposing students to various current research projects.

Existing research indicates that role models can play a factor in a student’s choice of major (Carrell et al., 2010; Hale & Regev, 2014; Fairlie et al., 2014; Bayer & Rouse, 2016; Porter & Serra, 2020). Students may be less likely to pursue an economics major if they cannot identify with their professors in terms of race or gender. Given that a majority of economics faculty are white men (Bayer & Wilcox, 2019), it is likely that white women, men and women of color, as well as non-binary students, will have a Principles of Economics instructor who differs from them in terms of race, gender, or both. The series can address this concern by inviting diverse guest speakers in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity.

The “Economics is What Economists Do” seminar series aims to expose students to the breadth of topics studied by economists and to the diversity of researchers within the economics profession. Both of these goals are grounded in the economic education literature. For example, the “Undergraduate Women in Economics” initiative (Avilova & Goldin, 2018) suggests improved information, role models, and instructional content as ways to increase the retention of women in the economics major. This seminar series offers improved information regarding the topics studied by economists and exposes students to potential role models. The use of diverse role models in an introductory economics course is also conceptually similar to the intervention “Visible Hands in Economics” proposed by Bayer et al. (2020), which aims to expose students to diverse mentors.

¹ John Viner is credited as defining economics as “what economists do.” See Backhouse and Medema (2009) for a discussion of this phrase and other definitions of economics.

² The phrase “underrepresented minority” is an aggregate that includes Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native American students, as in Bayer and Wilcox (2019).

Finally, the seminar series could help the instructor select course content that expresses diversity, which is a stated goal of the American Economic Association (Bayer et al., 2019) and consistent with interventions for the undergraduate economics classroom suggested by Al-Bahrani (2022).

2. Economics is What Economists Do

A. Overview

I organized a series of virtual research presentations called “Economics is What Economists Do” for my Principles of Economics course. Each invited economist gave a five-minute non-technical presentation on one of their research papers, followed by a discussion with students for five to ten minutes. This series was conducted over two semesters: Fall 2020 in a fully remote, synchronous online course, and Fall 2022 in a traditional face-to-face class. In both semesters, the presentations were held virtually via video call.

To ensure a diverse range of topics, I allowed each presenter to choose a topic within their area of expertise. Since this Principles of Economics course covers both micro and macroeconomics, presenters were invited from various economic disciplines such as macroeconomics, public finance, international trade, environmental economics, education, development, health, and other applied microeconomic fields. This series could also be implemented successfully in introductory macroeconomics or microeconomics courses.

B. Recruitment

For the initial round of “Economics is What Economists Do,” presenters were recruited from my network. I invited colleagues, friends from graduate school, and co-authors to participate. This recruitment approach had the advantage of featuring professors from the college, allowing students to become acquainted with potential future instructors.

In the second semester of the series, I focused on recruiting job market candidates to present their research. I reached out to graduate coordinators in several Economics departments and asked them to share my contact information with their job market candidates. Additionally, I used social media, particularly the #econtwitter hashtag, to recruit presenters. Job market candidates found value in presenting their research to students as it sometimes forms part of their interview process. Presenting to students also provided candidates with an opportunity to discuss their research in a non-technical manner, which is good practice for interviews with economists in different sub-disciplines. Notably, recruiting through social media resulted in a more racially diverse group of economists, and we also had the privilege of hosting visitors from various countries worldwide. Over two semesters, I hosted 25 economists: Seven women and 19 men. Sixteen of the presenters were white and nine were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

C. Implementation

I facilitated the seminar series using an online video conference. Each guest joined the class during a unique video conference. The guest was projected onto a large screen in the classroom and the camera was oriented towards the students so the guest could see them. I taught multiple sections of Principles of Economics each semester I hosted this series and generally had different guests present in each section, although a few guests presented in back-to-back sections of the course.

D. Learning Objectives

The main pedagogical goal of the “Economics is What Economists Do” Seminar Series is to expose introductory economics students to the diversity of ideas and people within the economics profession. In an informal evaluation, over ninety percent of students who took the course agreed with the following statements “The series exposed me to topics I didn’t realize were economics” and “The series changed my perspective about what economists do.” Over eighty percent of students also agreed that they “could relate to at least one of the presenters.” This informal feedback provides suggestive evidence that the seminar series broadened the students’ perspectives regarding what economists study and may have helped students feel included in the academic discipline.

The seminar series may also relate to course and department learning goals. For instance, by showcasing contemporary economic research, the seminar series provides examples of how economists approach questions. This may help students “apply the principles of economics to understand behavior in the real world,” which is the first learning outcome listed on my Principles of Economics syllabus. To assess this learning outcome, I ask about the research presentations on exams, providing a summary of the research question and main finding. Students are then prompted to relate the finding to at least one economic principle from class by (i) clearly stating the principle of economics and (ii) explaining how the research relates to that principle.

Furthermore, the seminar series may lay the groundwork for students to achieve the learning outcomes for the economics major. The primary learning outcome for the economics major at my current institution is to “Demonstrate command of microeconomics and macroeconomic theory, including the ability to identify and apply basic economic principles.” Interacting with economic researchers and posing questions about their research may assist students in identifying and applying these basic economic principles.

Finally, the seminar series provides role models who embody many of the learning outcomes typically associated with Principles of Economics. While listening to presentations alone does not equip students with all the tools needed to be successful economic researchers, it does offer concrete examples of what they might achieve if they persist in the field. By sharing one of their research papers, the researchers themselves demonstrate “the ability to apply the scientific process to economic phenomena,” how to “analyze and evaluate behavior and outcomes using economic concepts and models,” and provide an example of how to “use quantitative approaches in economics” which are all learning outcomes suggested by Allgood and Bayer (2017).

E. Reflection

Organizing the Principles of Economics seminar series and inviting economists from diverse backgrounds was an enjoyable and straightforward method to introduce students to a wide range of economics topics while subtly emphasizing the diversity within the field.

One of the objectives of the series was to showcase the breadth of topics studied by economists. At the midpoint of the semester, I conducted an informal survey among students, and all agreed that the seminar series exposed them to at least one topic they didn’t realize was economics. Further, the presentations sparked numerous one-on-one conversations with students about potential additional economics courses they might find interesting and topics they could explore for independent research.

The second goal of the seminar series was to emphasize the diversity of individuals within the economics profession. A majority of students reported in an informal mid-semester

survey that they could relate to at least one of the presenters. During the second semester when I implemented the series, only half of the presenters were white, with just three Americans. This allowed students to interact with economists who differ from their instructors in terms of race, ethnicity, native language, and national origin. This is a simple yet effective way of demonstrating to students that I do not represent the entirety of the economics field.

Overall, students enjoyed the presentations and spoke highly of the seminar series in informal mid-semester surveys. However, in their feedback, some students felt that we had too many visitors. I hosted 15 presenters in my second semester and agree with the students, considering that we had presentations on more than half of the non-exam class days. Taking this feedback into account, in future semesters, I would aim to have 8-12 presentations to strike a balance between exposure to guest speakers and ensuring sufficient class time for other activities.

3. Additional Considerations

A. Opportunity Cost

The opportunity cost of incorporating numerous in-class presentations is a reduction in available class time for other activities and content. Allocating 15 minutes to each of the 15 visitors was equivalent to three full 75-minute class sessions. To address this, consider either reducing the number of presentations (as my recommendation) or shortening the duration of each presentation. Informal feedback from students also suggested reducing the number of visits to around 10-12. This would reduce the total time dedicated to the seminar series while still introducing students to a variety of topics within the field.

B. Relevance of Presentations to Course Content

I did not specifically recruit economists to present on specific topics, resulting in presentations that did not always relate to a particular section or chapter in the course textbook. Some students expressed frustration, particularly those who inquired about the exam relevance of the presentations. However, nearly all economics research can be framed using key economic concepts such as opportunity cost, marginal thinking, or incentives. To facilitate connections, I encouraged students to consider these overarching ideas during the discussion portion of the presentations. Additionally, I included a short-answer question on exams, asking students to relate a presentation to one of the big ideas in economics.

C. Extensions and Adaptations

The first semester I hosted this series, I invited my department colleagues to present their research to my students. While this was beneficial in introducing Principles of Economics students to the economics faculty and inspiring them to explore additional economics courses, it may not be feasible for colleagues to visit every section of Principles of Economics every semester due to time constraints. Similarly, it might be difficult for an instructor at a large university to find enough external visitors to come to multiple sections of Principles of Economics.

To address these concerns, three possible extensions are utilizing recorded videos, highlighting the faculty research profiles on the department website, and hosting the seminar series outside of regular class.

Using recorded presentations would reduce the burden of asking presenters to come to multiple sections of a course or multiple semesters. Recording presentations could be followed

by an asynchronous Q&A using the class learning management system. The instructor could also curate a small list of excellent questions and send them to the presenter to answer via email. Alternatively, the instructor of the course could attempt to answer questions themselves. The American Economics Association and the organization DivEQ (Diversifying Economics) have compiled a list of videos titled “Diverse Economists Talking About Their Research” that could be incorporated as part of an “Economics is What Economists Do” series. These videos are available at <https://diversifyingecon.org/videos-on-economists/> and <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/programs/resources/videos>.

Another potential extension to familiarize Principles of Economics students with the faculty in their department is to leverage the department’s faculty research website. Many economic departments have dedicated webpages showcasing faculty research. An approach employed by one of my colleagues in Spring 2023 was to highlight the research of three faculty members every few weeks in his Principles of Economics class using the department website. He would present the website to students, navigate to a specific faculty member’s section, and provide a brief overview of their teaching and research. This method allowed him to introduce students to all the faculty in our department throughout the semester. This strategy can be particularly effective for departments with a comprehensive and informative faculty research website.

A third potential adaptation of the “Economics is What Economists Do” seminar series for colleges or universities that teach many sections of introductory economics each semester would be to host the seminar series outside of class. For example, the seminar series could be hosted during a recurring lunch or study session that is open to students from all sections of the introductory course. Alternatively, the seminar series could be hosted as a round table or panel with many guest presentations on a single day. The single-day seminar could be held in the afternoon or evening, depending on the particular nuances of the college or university, and could be open to all sections of the introductory economics course. However, one downside to hosting the seminar series outside of class is that it may be difficult to find a time that a majority of students can attend.

4. Conclusion

The “Economics is What Economists Do” seminar series is a new approach to increasing interest and representation in the field of economics. By hosting virtual research presentations from diverse economists in a Principles of Economics course, the series successfully showcased the breadth of topics studied within economics and highlighted the diversity of people within the profession.

The seminar series not only exposed students to new areas of economics but also provided them with role models from different backgrounds and perspectives. Students gained a better understanding of the opportunities available within economics by engaging with a diverse group of economists. Overall, the series received positive feedback from students, although some suggested reducing the number of presentations would be better. The seminar series proved effective in promoting interest, challenging preconceptions, and encouraging a more inclusive and diverse field of economics.

Future researchers might use an experimental design to test the effectiveness of the seminar series in promoting students from underrepresented groups to continue taking economics courses. For example, colleagues in an economics department could randomly assign some sections of Principles of Economics to host an “Economics is What Economists Do” seminar series, other sections to watch videos of economists discussing their research, and third a control group. The department could track the progress of the students to see who takes additional economics courses. Ideally, the researchers could pair this with a survey to assess students’ interest in economics at the beginning of the semester and again at the end.

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