

Expanding and Diversifying the Pool of Undergraduates Who Study Economics:

Insights from a New Introductory Course at Harvard

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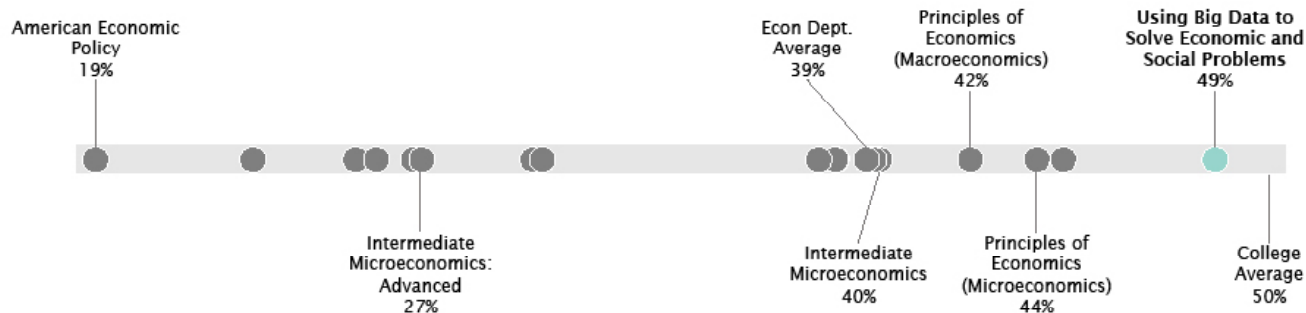


There is widespread concern that economics does not attract as broad or diverse a pool of talent as it could. For example, less than one-third of undergraduates who receive degrees in economics are women, significantly lower than in math or statistics.

This article presents a case study of a new introductory undergraduate course at Harvard, “Using Big Data to Solve Economic and Social Problems,” that enrolled 400 students, achieved nearly a 50-50 gender balance, and was among the highest-rated courses in the college.

This article summarizes the new course’s content and pedagogical approach. It then illustrates how this approach differs from that taken in traditional courses by showing how canonical topics – income inequality, tax incidence, and adverse selection – are taught differently.

Share of Women in Economics Courses at Harvard, 2018-19 & 2019-20



Drawing upon students’ comments and prior research on effective teaching practices, we identify elements of the course’s approach that appear to underlie its success and could be applied in other settings:

Personal connection

The course examines issues that have been experienced by the student or people in their community.

Real-world exposure

The course exposes students to current real-world problems.

Scientific inquiry and ambiguity

The course fosters a sense of inquiry and investigation and encourages a diversity of perspectives.

Career value

The course teaches content and skills that are likely to be valued by future employers.

Social value

The course teaches content and skills relevant to helping other people and society.

We discuss how these ideas for improving instruction in economics in other college and high schools and [provide free resources](#) – lecture videos, slides, empirical projects – to facilitate such efforts.

“This is one of the best courses I have taken at Harvard. I love that the methods and economic concepts were integrated with the issues. I hadn’t been interested in taking economics before, but the fact that this class started with issues I care about and taught the rest through them made it awesome!”

STUDENT FROM SPRING 2019



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