

INTRODUCTION

In 2015 Claudia Goldin, Henry Lee Professor of Economics at Harvard University, published a report entitled “Gender and the Undergraduate Economics Major: Note on the Undergraduate Economics major at a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College.”¹ The impetus for this study was the national statistic that among the top 100 rated liberal arts colleges there are 2.6 male economics majors for every female economics major, a ratio that does not appear to have changed in 20 years. (Goldin, 2015, p.2.)

In her report she analyzed students in the 2005-2013 graduating classes of “Adams” college and found that: “Women primarily exit the path to getting an economics major *before* taking Principles and *between* taking Principles and the Intermediate sequence. . . . Female students are also more sensitive to the grades they receive in Principles than are their male peers [emphasis added].”²

Professor Goldin’s report and her findings resulted in a project entitled, The Undergraduate Women in Economics Challenge (UWEC).³ Twenty colleges were invited to join the Challenge, which has several goals: to explore the situation at their institution; and to explore and share deliberate interventions to improve the number of undergraduate women majoring in economics. Trinity was not among those chosen. The Challenge has been working to identifying common causes across institutions and has begun to share potential interventions at their first two conferences, which were held in the summer 2016 and 2017.

STUDY OF WOMEN ECONOMICS MAJORS AT TRINITY

At Trinity we have observed similar ratios of male to female economics majors. For example, in the graduating class of 2018, there are 3.3 male majors for every 1 female major; this ratio stands at 3.5:1 for the class of 2019. Although these two years suggest that Trinity fits the national pattern, we have not undertaken a systematic review of the gender breakdown in our major to see whether this pattern has persisted. More importantly, we do not know whether particular obstacles (or not) face women in the study of economics at Trinity, and if so, how we might create a more inclusive environment that empowers women to pursue the study of economics.

STEPS IN OUR STUDY

The first step would be to collect statistics on enrollment of women in economics at Trinity with the help of Chuck Powell, Director of Academic Assessment. The first questions we would want to answer are:

- Do we conform to the national pattern of the number of female majors – in coed colleges?

¹ Her article can be found at:

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/goldin/files/claudia_gender_paper.pdf.

² See <https://scholar.harvard.edu/goldin/background-facts>.

³ See <https://scholar.harvard.edu/goldin/UWE>. The project is funded by the A P Sloan Foundation through the National Bureau of Economic Research.

- Do we conform to the exiting pattern found in Goldin’s study?

In addition, we would want to collect information, among other things, on grades by gender in Economics 101 and the 200-level elective courses, on the timing of enrollment in Economics 101 (i.e., when students enroll in 101), and on other student characteristics by gender. Also, we may compare economics majors at female colleges to isolate the coed effect.

Step Two would include both data analysis and review of the literature. We would want to gain some familiarity with the literature on segregation and integration as it applies to the context of gender and higher education. This step offers the opportunity for collaboration on a number of dimensions:

- We can collaborate with our colleagues in Political Science who have submitted a similar proposal on women in Political Science. Here we could possibly conduct a joint reading group on the literature on obstacles facing women in the social sciences in general and in our specific majors. The review of the literature can be combined with our data analysis to help focus the next steps in our project.
- Our analysis of the data collected by Chuck Powell can involve student majors. This involvement can take the form of an independent research project or may become part of a course-based research project. Student majors are trained in empirical methods of investigation and this project would represent an excellent application of those skills.

Step Three would focus on reviewing the range of interventions that have been proposed and tried at the colleges in the Challenge (UWEC) project. Part of this step may include attending the summer conference in 2019 that focuses on both identifying common causes (for low female enrollment in economics) and sharing interventions across institutions. This step could also involve students.

Step Four would shift focus to conducting surveys amongst women students at Trinity. The targeted group of students, the questions asked, and the goals of the survey would be based on our findings from steps two and three. This step may also include student participants. We would train students in interview techniques.

Step Five would pull everything together with the goal of identifying the main lessons from the study and suggesting possible experiments to conduct (e.g., summer economics workshop for female students after their first year at Trinity).

TIMELINE

We anticipate conducting this project over a two-year period. Steps 1 and 2 represent the main work for the first year. While step 3 will be underway in the first year (including attendance at the summer Challenge conference), it will continue into year two. Steps 4 and 5 will be undertaken in the second year of the project.

Diane Zannoni and Rasha Ahmed will take the lead in year 1 (2018-2019 academic year), with Carol Clark taking a more active role in the project in year 2 (2019-2020 academic year).