

Designing and Implementing Literacy-Targeted Principles Courses

Lessons from Simon Fraser University
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Why Rethink Introductory Economics?

- Many students in principles courses are non-majors
- Traditional principles courses emphasize:
 - Too many topics
 - Formal models
 - Preparation for intermediate theory
- Result: many students don't find the courses useful on their professional development
- Long-standing calls to refocus principles on **economic literacy**

This Paper and Talk

- We present an institutional case study from SFU
- Focus on:
 - Adoption politics
 - Course design
 - Early evidence on enrolments and outcomes

Talk Outline

- Background & early adoption attempts
- Course design and embedding in the curriculum
- Preliminary evidence: enrolments, student composition, and performance

Background and Early Adoption

Introductory Economics at SFU (Pre-2016)

- Two traditional principles courses:
 - ECON 103 (Microeconomics)
 - ECON 105 (Macroeconomics)
- Courses were required for:
 - Economics majors
 - Business students (BBA requirement)
 - Applied Sciences students (e.g. Engineering)

- Dual role:
 - Gateway to the Economics major
 - Breadth education for non-majors
- Over 60% enrolled due to degree requirements
- Courses were quantitatively demanding and coverage-heavy

Problem Recognition and First LT Proposal (2016)

- Traditional courses created barriers and had limited appeal for non-majors
- Central question:
What do we want students to be able to do with economics after principles?
- Proposal for two literacy-targeted courses (Econ 123/124):
 - Small core of durable concepts
 - Emphasis on application, writing, and real-world reasoning
 - Optional non-quantitative pathway into the major

Resistance, Failure, and Lessons (2016–2020)

- Strong internal resistance from principles instructors
- Concerns:
 - Duplication of content
 - Loss of rigor
 - Threats to departmental standards
- 2016: Proposal rejected
- Lessons:
 - No consensus on purpose of introductory economics
 - Institutional incentives not yet strong enough

Institutional Momentum (2020–2022)

- Beedie School of Business launched major curriculum reform
- Pressure to reduce required credits
- Economics principles courses targeted
- Risk:
 - Loss of up to 550 student seats
 - Significant funding implications
- LT courses reframed as an **Enrolment-preserving compromise**

Approval and Launch (2021–2022)

- New courses proposed:
 - ECON 113: Introductory Microeconomics
 - ECON 115: Introductory Macroeconomics
- Passed Curriculum Committee (Nov 2021)
- Senate approval in early 2022
- First offering (Fall 2022):
 - ~165 students total

Course Design and Implementation

Course Design: Guiding Principles

- Educational goals:
 - 1 Understand basic policy debates in Micro and Macro
 - 2 Encourage students to develop their own positions
 - 3 Encourage students to articulate arguments supporting their positions
- Emphasis on critical thinking, real-world relevance, and narrative structure
- Lectures use stories, historical context, and policy debates

Design Strategies (Part 1)

- Emphasize topics likely to impact students' lives
- Use real-world applications to illustrate concepts
- Connect concepts to news, social media, and current debates
- Incorporate storytelling to create a coherent narrative

Design Strategies (Part 2)

- Include historical context and schools of thought
- Present policy as debates, not facts
- Use experiments for experiential learning
- Explain institutional details of key organizations

Examples: Macroeconomics

- Financial systems: mortgages and long-term financial decisions
- Inflation: labor disputes and strikes
- Economic growth: China case study
- Trade deficits: US-China relations, political context
- Vancouver real estate market: bubble experiments

Examples: Microeconomics

- Tariff debates: geopolitics, outsourcing, reindustrialization
- Externalities: global warming, pipelines, indigenous rights, carbon tax.
- Public goods: in-class experiments

Preliminary Evidence

- Compare traditional (Econ 103/105) vs LT (Econ 113/115) pathways
- Focus on enrolments, student composition, preparation, and performance
- Data span three academic years
- Evidence is preliminary but informative

Summary Statistics: Key Patterns

- Incoming academic preparation is similar across pathways
- average high school grades are comparable
- LT students less likely to continue into advanced economics (terminal literacy role). Selection(?)
- Average grades higher in LT courses (B vs B-)
- LT courses serve a more domestic student population

Enrolment Trends Over Time

- Traditional enrolment declined 15% from 2016 to 2021
- Since Fall 2022:
 - LT enrolment grew rapidly
 - Traditional enrolment stabilized
- the numbers do not support the conclusion that the LT offerings cannibalized Econ 103/105
- LT pathway offset longer-run enrolment declines
- this could be due to domestic students preference for LT pathway.

Who Takes the Literacy-Targeted Pathway?

- Attracts students for whom economics is not required
- Elective enrolment stable at 35% of total principles enrolment
- LT contribution to elective enrolment: 15% first year → 40% by 2024/25
- suggest that the LT pathway serves students whose needs and preferences were not met by the traditional principles model

Who Takes the Literacy-Targeted Pathway?

- Strong uptake by Business students and growing participation from non-Business, non-Economics majors
- the success of the LT pathway with Business majors indicates that ECON 113/115 meet the curricular and pedagogical needs of a key partner faculty
- students for whom Econ 103 and/or 105 is not required by their degree program have become more concentrated in the LT pathway

Summary

- LT principles broaden participation
- No evidence of negative selection
- Intended majors remain concentrated in traditional pathway
- Dual-pathway model improves accessibility, enrolment stability, and curricular flexibility
- Early outcomes suggest no compromise in academic standards

Key take aways

- Vision and evidence of likely success is not enough
- Be ready when the time is right
- literacy-targeted principles courses can broaden participation in economics while preserving preparation for students who pursue further study
- academic standards are not compromised

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Observations			
Headcount	2,180	1,467	897
Characteristics at Admission			
Incoming GPA (high-school)	86.1	85.0	86.4
Percentage International/Unfunded	13.3	15.8	8.3
Outcomes			
Average grade in this class	2.46	2.58	3.01
Percentage taking further econ (incl. other 103/105)	59.4	54.6	53.3
Percentage taking further econ (mandatory excluded)	37.1	37.7	19.6
Percentage eligible taking 200-level courses	20.1	19.2	5.3
Percentage eligible taking Econ 201	15.2	16.9	3.5
Excluding Econ Intended Majors			
Headcount	1,863	1,184	856
Percentage taking further econ	54.4	48.0	52.7
Percentage taking further econ (mandatory excluded)	28.3	27.0	17.4
Percentage eligible taking 200-level courses	13.8	11.1	4.3
Percentage eligible taking Econ 201	9.2	9.3	2.5

Note: Data for traditional principles courses (Econ 103/105) and LT courses (Econ 113/115), most recent academic year 2024/25, prior year for comparison. Summer term excluded.

Table 2: Principles Enrolment by Degree Requirement

Acad. Year	Not required		Headcount		LT contribution (%)	
	Trad.	LT	Not req.	Overall	To not req.	To overall
2021/22	834	0	834	2180	0	0
2022/23	741	138	879	2318	15.7	23.5
2023/24	700	281	981	2526	18.4	27.2
2024/25	541	326	867	2367	37.6	37.9

Note: Enrolment summary for Econ principles courses by pathway, excluding summer term.

Table 3: Student Composition

Acad Plan	% of student body			% of student body (BUS excl.)			
	103/105 2021/22	103/105 2024/25	LT 2024/25	103/105 2021/22	103/105 2024/25	LT 2024/25	
ECON intended	14.5	19.3	5.6	25.0	28.4	10.9	
BUSINESS	41.8	31.9	58.0	–	–	–	
ENSC	5.4	11.9	1.1	9.3	17.4	2.6	
APSC excl ENSC	7.6	9.4	9.2	13.0	13.8	22.0	
ARTS excl ECON	13.8	14.4	13.0	23.8	21.1	31.0	
SCI	8.8	6.5	7.8	15.1	9.6	18.6	
Other	5.3	5.6	6.2	13.9	9.6	14.9	

Note: Composition of student body in traditional and LT courses. Sample excludes summer term.

Table 4: Academic Preparation and Outcomes

Acad Plan	Avg high-school grade				Mean grade points							
	103/105	2021/22	103/105	2024/25	LT	2024/25	103/105	2021/22	103/105	2024/25	LT	2024/25
ECON intended	83.2		80.5		88.4		2.00		2.23		2.35	
BUSINESS	88.6		88.1		90.0		2.61		2.72		3.09	
ENSC	86.8		87.2		90.0		2.72		2.96		2.87	
APSC other	85.5		85.7		86.9		2.83		3.00		3.41	
FASS other	82.3		81.4		87.4		2.04		2.06		2.68	
SCI	86.6		86.3		87.9		2.82		2.82		3.10	
Other	82.8		83.6		87.1		2.31		2.39		2.73	

Note: Comparison of academic preparation and course outcomes across pathways.