

Female Economist on Education and Leadership

**Scott Jacobsen,
Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Simon Fraser University,
& The University of British Columbia**

Author's Contact Information

*Scott D. Jacobsen,
Department of Psychology & Continuing Studies (Mandarin)
Kwantlen Polytechnic University,
Simon Fraser University, & The University of British Columbia
8983 Major Street, Langley, BC V1M 2S4
phone: (604) 513-1547
email: Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.com*

Abstract:

This interview explores the personal experience of Shauna McAuley-Bax, Business Instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, to provide commentary from a highly relevant vantage in three ways. One, the viewpoint of an economist from the younger cohort of instructors. Two, a young female economist's experience of graduate school and educating new generations of undergraduates. Third, McAuley-Bax's generation, and subsequent generations, of women will likely have the largest impact on the affairs of women in business. Shauna's work focuses on 'Economics and Education', 'Globalization and Economics', and 'Economics in Development'. Her M.A. thesis, earned at Simon Fraser University, explored the effects of policy reform on child labour in transition countries. This interview develops within the foci related to experience of education and leadership, and development of an NGO for women in leadership: 1) experience of teaching in graduate school, 2) experience of teaching undergraduates, and 3) experience of leading in education as a female academic.

Key Words:

Business, economics, education, female academic, instructor, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Simon Fraser University, instructor, teaching.

Interview

You have great relevance in commentary for education and leadership. Based on three reasons, you have valuable insights: 1) your viewpoint from a younger cohort of instructors, 2) your experience as a young female economist in graduate school and educating new generations of undergraduates, and 3) your own, and subsequent, generations will likely have great impact on the affairs of women in business. With these in mind and to begin, for studies in graduate school, you published an M.A. thesis entitled *Child Labour in a Transition Economy: Evidence from*

Albania (2008). Did you have much experience as a teaching assistant? What most stood out about the student population and style of teaching?

In graduate school, I completed over two years and six months as a teaching assistant. I felt eager to teach at the time. It is common for most students to focus on teaching only one course per semester while focusing maximum effort on their course work. I was an exception. Every semester there would be TA sections left over after everyone was assigned a course, so I would request to teach all courses left without a teaching assistant. I taught approximately three different courses per semester. I found working as a teaching assistant allowed me to focus on the two best aspects of being in graduate school, the ability to learn or revise different economic topics/subjects while being able to engage with others who were eager to learn. During my time as a teaching assistant, I had the opportunity to teach a variety of subjects including Labour Economics, Environmental Economics, Principles of Economics, and Development Economics. In addition, these experiences allowed learning from professional educators such as Doug Allen and Peter Kennedy. For me, they taught valuable lessons on fostering the love of economics at the level of principles.

When I started work as a teaching assistant, only my experience as a tutor guided me. In the beginning, I felt terrified to speak in front of large groups of students. However, my favorite topic is economics. I began to appreciate a fact. My job enabled me to spend time talking about something of interest to me. I am grateful for my work as a teaching assistant; it allowed me to find my passion in life, which I may not have had the courage to try without it.

My graduate thesis is a testament to how you can use economics in a variety of ways to solve a myriad of social problems. I am extremely interested in transition countries and how they have evolved from social economies to more market systems. There are some interesting issues that have been created in the process, child labour and bride kidnapping to name a couple. My thesis was analysing the effects of an increase in income on the incidence of child labour. We can use economics to answer this question by looking at the root causes of the choices that people are making and testing it with available data.

As for my experience as a graduate student, I found an almost equal number of men and women in my cohort. All had different backgrounds, which was good when it came to forming study groups and working on projects. This was a very different experience from my undergraduate years where there was a smaller female population in the economics field. However, I find that whoever you are and whatever your background, everyone knows good teaching from bad. Good teaching engages, informs, and gives practical applications. I liked that in school. I hope to bring this to my classes as an educator.

Regarding your transition from teaching graduate students and then undergraduates, how did you find it?

Upper level students in 3rd or 4th year on the path to graduate studies are already excited about learning new approaches and applications of economics. They are there to learn more about a topic, which they know and love. Far different from teaching a first-year principles course. Your priority when teaching principles level economics

courses is to demonstrate the fascinating and significant aspects of economics, but to overcome the biases that people have already formed about economics.

Consider: any movie that you have seen involving university classes. When producers want to show a dry and boring course, they often choose economics. Therefore, when it comes to choosing courses many students remember the scene of students struggling through dry, mathematical material, and then decide economics is not for them. Most students registered look at it as material for them to get through and never look at again. Students do not realize that basic economics could predict the collapse of the Soviet Union (allocating resources without a pricing system is extremely difficult in the long run), what economic benefit smokers provide for non-smokers (they die earlier, leaving more money in the pot for healthcare and pensions for the rest of us), why mandating more generous maternity leave benefits for women only may actually be detrimental to women (employers may discriminate against young women when hiring), or why sumo wrestlers cheat (they have a large incentive through higher winnings with low chance of being caught).¹

Modern problems can be solved by applying economics. Do you dislike pollution? If you do not like pollution, then do not sit and complain about the social injustice of it—make a serious change. Economic science allows the knowledge of behaviour to investigate possibilities of stopping pollution. Is there discrimination in the workplace? An economist named Claudia Goldin of Harvard University found out by holding blind auditions for the American orchestras that, yes, there was discrimination in the workplace. In blind tests, women were 50% more likely to be hired². Economics presents us with a powerful, and easy to apply, set of tools to explain how events unfold. An example of this is the introduction of mandatory seatbelts increasing the number of car accidents. Another, the recent global recession caused by lax regulations and government backed securities reducing risky behaviours. Economics is necessary to understand the behavior of people in a complex world. No matter your chosen major, it will always have applications.

Once students have recognized the intrinsic value of economics, they can apply basics that they have learned to the specific areas that they are concerned about like economic development or equality in the workplace. Upper level courses will give more specific applications of the economic principles.

I began development of one Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), *Women in Leadership Support Network (WILSN)*, in early 2014 with one branch devoted to women in business, which makes your commentary highly relevant. Your education and work in economics are crucial for both understanding the world of business and education. In addition to this, your experience in a younger cohort of female economists may provide an insight into more modern gender dynamics in the university system and educating new generations of undergraduates. With these in mind, what difference in the demographics altered the style of your teaching and the receptivity of those being taught?

¹ Levitt S. D. Levitt, & Dubner, S. J. (2005). *Freakonomics: A rogue economist explores the hidden side of everything*. New York: William Morrow.

² Goldin, Claudia and Rouse, Cecilia (2000) "Orchestrating Impartiality; The Impact of 'Blind' Auditions on Female Musicians," *American Economics Review*.

Since my experience centered in the faculty of economics, I can speak on the student body in my area of expertise. When I look at current classrooms, I feel hopeful for the future of diversity in economics. If I could compare the present classroom dynamic to my time in school, I observe more and a greater mix of students. My 4th year undergraduate courses had 2 or 3 females in attendance. Today about half are women. I feel fortunate to never have felt the need to alter my style of teaching to compensate for my gender. However, compared to way I learned economics, I teach economics much different today. From everyday life, I have more practical examples. I focus less on calculated business decision making. My goal is to show students the tool box provided by economics for decision making about everything. After all, it is a social science.

It is said that economics has a problem, i.e. not enough female economists. This may stem from economic pedagogy; basic models in economics originated in a male-dominated, nuclear family (1950s) era. Others think we need to “feminize” economics. I feel the right way to teach economics today emerges from the need for this. For an example, Dr. Gary Becker’s model of the household and family production. When Becker first created the model, women commanded household production and men commanded market production.³ I consider this a fabulous model because it speaks to the idea of specialization contributing to overall household income, i.e. by focusing on areas of best performance makes everyone better off. Now, of course, critics consider the model archaic, especially used as an example of the masculine nature of economics. I teach this model in my ‘Women and the Economy’ course because it represents the importance of specialization. However the modern economy is tailored for it. The model’s flexibility allows for women to focus on work, instead of only household, or even partial specialization.

It seems important to me to recognize society no longer works in a certain way. It did at another earlier time. Becker’s model was created in an era of men working outside the home while women worked inside the home. Even today, some students feel more comfortable discussion around household production being separated by gender because their family works this way. Education should encompass all backgrounds, genders, and family structures because in the world operates this way. I feel fortunate. I have the ability to discuss this and other issues in my classes.

You teach at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU). KPU’s mandate focuses on teaching. In that, it is mostly a teaching institution, hence the title of ‘instructors’ for educators. Simon Fraser University (SFU) places more emphasis on research. Specifically, they have graduate schools, more research centers and labs, and so on. How does this influence the educational culture of the institution?

Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) most certainly centers on students. I consider that one of its best qualities, which makes it such a great workplace. Statistics gathered at Simon Fraser University (SFU) on students entering from outside universities show that the students coming from KPU are maintaining higher averages.

³ Becker, Gary (1981, 1991). *A Treatise on the Family*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

This is encouraging information. It reflects the benefits of a teaching-focused university. At KPU, we are able to spend time with the students one-on-one by provision of in-class work and additional office hours. We have an engaged faculty. Foremost, we are committed to improvement of teaching skills and increasing retention of materials for students. KPU prides itself on having a student body with practical skills, i.e. equipped to handle 'real world' problems occurring in the workplace. A university focused on educating means you can be taught by people who have owned businesses themselves or have worked for larger corporations and are now passing down firsthand knowledge. When planning to enter the working world, practical skills have high importance, you get these practical skills and the textbook materials for application to everyday cases.

In addition to these, you need to keep updated on the latest research and advances in your field. At both SFU and KPU, we are encouraged to do this, but we always make students top priority. I believe this creates the difference when it comes to higher achieving students.

How might undergraduate education benefit from insight of educational methods at the graduate level?

Graduate level education and undergraduate level education are very different. It is not material-based differences, but classroom dynamics too. For one, small class sizes facilitate discussion. Another difference, courses take a format of discussion-and-generation of ideas rather than a 'sit-and-learn' environment. At KPU, I feel we are able have a flexible classroom style, which allows for discussion and active learning. I can apply the skills learned through teaching at SFU. Extra time devoted to application of knowledge allows students to have a deeper understanding of the subject. I am completely opposed to the memorization as a method of teaching. A method with students encouraged to memorize the textbook for a good grade. Once again, I feel privilege to teach economics. It is an application course. You must take knowledge learned in the classroom and apply the knowledge to various contexts to earn a decent grade. At KPU, I get the benefits from the classroom experience, which would occur in an upper level course at a more prominent university. My experience at SFU allowed me the opportunity to see the growth in student potential through the optimal classroom dynamic.

From your experience, what barriers exist for a woman in the academy for teaching? How does being a woman influence students' perception of your capability in the classroom?

One of the most difficult aspects of choosing economics as my field of study: lack of mentors. I had to go looking for them. When choosing my major, I borrowed many undergraduate textbooks from the library and read them. The economics textbook had examples of exemplary economists at the end of each chapter, I remember two of them in particular. One was Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, the bank for the microloans to the poor. The other was Hazel Kyrk, whose work on theory of the family and consumer theory was later extended by Gary Becker to create his famous theories that were dubbed the "new home economics" containing the model of which I spoke earlier. She was one of the first women to get a PhD from University of Chicago and was one of the founders of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Although relatively unknown, she contributed a great deal to the field of economics. In addition to this, she

contributed to the field of women's participation in work.⁴ Hazel Kyrk showed me economics was not about finding market prices alone, it was using knowledge of markets and human behaviour to apply to many socio-economic problems. Her message was that you must first know how something happens, the causation of the problem, before you can solve the problem and economics was the tool you needed to separate causation from correlation.

After this, came undergraduate school, I found few mentors or even peers in my discipline. During my entire undergraduate career, I had two female professors who taught me. One of them, we awarded with the annual teaching award the year of my graduation. Although, I work with many female instructors at present. Evidence points to a lack of women in the upper levels of economics faculty. According to Claudia Goldin in 2011, only 34 percent of economics Ph.D.'s are women compared to the average 46 percent of all doctorate degrees earned by women.⁵ This might be due to what Donna Ginther and Shulamit Kahn refer to as the "leaky pipeline." Women start dropping out as they get closer to the top. They found that in 2012, 28 percent of assistant professors were women, then 22 percent of the associate professors, but at the top only 12 percent of the full time professors were women.⁶ Ginther and Kahn found that even if they control for education, ability, productivity and family choices there is still a gap of about 16 percent in the likelihood of promotion to full professorship.⁷ To see the cause of this we return to Claudia Goldin who says that it may stem from the way we are teaching economics, it is "the same way we did when women didn't matter. Now, women do matter."⁸ That means that our job today as instructors of economics is to be sure that both genders and all cultures are given equal merit through examples and applications of the theories. However, I also believe that all students are capable of abstract thought; one of our greatest abilities is to learn through example by seeing the world through the eyes of others.

The real question here should be, "Does it really matter how many women economists there are"? All sources say, "Yes, it does." As Susan Athey, an award winning economist at Stanford University, points out; if we exclude women, we will be "losing out on a large chunk of human capital."⁹ A study conducted by Ann Mari May, Mary McGravey and Robert Whaples found that when it comes to opinions on public policy, men and women economists are very different.¹⁰ We need gender diversity when it comes to decisions on changes in minimum wage, labour market policies and social benefits.

⁴ Cicarelli, James & Cicarelli Julianne (2003). *Distinguished Women Economists*. Greenwood Publishing Group. Westport, Connecticut.

⁵ Goldin, Claudia. "Working It Out," *New York Times*, March 15, 2006, retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.org>.

⁶ Ginther, Donna K. and Shulamit Kahn. "Women in Economics; Moving up or Falling off the Academic Ladder?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18 (2004); 193-214

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Goldin, Claudia. "Working It Out," *New York Times*, March 15, 2006, retrieved from: www.nytimes.org.

⁹ Romero, Jessie. "Where are the Women?" *Econ Focus*, Second Quarter, 2013, retrieved from: http://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2013/q2/pdf/full_issue.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid

What programs might assist women in the university system in educating and teaching current generations, and retraining older generations?

The most important factor that we are currently addressing is mentorship. We need strong role models who can show us the importance of our participation in the field of Economics. The older generations in my field are the trail blazers of our profession. It is extremely hard to be the first one attempting what others have not yet done. It is true that more young women are choosing more STEM (Science, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields as their major, those fields have to support efforts to foster functioning mentor programs. According to a 2005 study by The Society of Women Engineers, one in four women with an engineering degree had jobs in fields other than engineering compared to only one in ten for men.¹¹ One of the problems in retaining women in the STEM fields is the lack of female mentorship. In a 2005 study by Phyllis Tharenou, mentoring can be more effective for women in career advancement than men.¹²

The value to mentorship in any career is immeasurable, finding a mentor early can contribute to job accomplishment, job satisfaction, and employee retention. A good mentor will take interest in a person's long term potential, helping build confidence while providing support in the technical aspects of the job. I have been lucky to have two very important mentors in my career, which was much more than they had when establishing their own careers. I see that this is changing throughout institutions, many more diverse backgrounds and genders are found among the faculty. Now, we must focus on creating the bonds among our peers and create an environment of sharing knowledge and skills. I am also privileged that the idea of mentorship is a priority in my workplace.

Finally, this educational experience provides an opportunity for leadership in academia and with teaching. How have you found being a woman in leadership in education within the academy?

As I mentioned earlier, I feel the importance to reach out to the future generations of educators. Our workplace is evolving, creating more focus on sharing and developing ideas with work peers. It is important to help those around us. In economics, we call this a positive externality; spreading knowledge from one person to another, benefiting workers and promoting a positive work environment.

One of the most positive aspects of my job is that I can influence future generations and how they view themselves as well as how they view the world. I have met so many promising students whom I am confident will contribute immensely to whatever field they choose to focus on. My role of being a woman in leadership means recognizing the potential of my students and encouraging them to do whatever they choose to be. Sometimes we all need someone to give us the courage to pursue our dreams. Every new semester brings new opportunity to excel in my role as an educator and mentor; that is something I always look forward to.

¹¹ Frehil, Lisa. "A Review of the Findings", *The Society of Women Engineers National Survey about Engineering*, Fifth in a Series, 2005, retrieved from:

<http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/swe/nationalsurveyengineering/index.php?startid=15>

¹² Tharenou, Phyllis. "Does Mentor Support Increase Women's Career Advancement More than Men's? The Differential Effects of Career and Psychological Support", *Australian Journal of Management*, June 2005. Vol 30 no 177-109, retrieved from: <http://aum.sagepub.com/content/30/1/77.full.pdf+html>