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De-emphasis on Cooperatives in Introductory Economics Textbooks

Lori Lynch, Marilee Urban, and Robert Sommer

In response to a perceived de-emphasis on cooperatives in university curricula by cooperative leaders, Schomisch and Torgerson surveyed the situation in upper Midwest land-grant institutions and painted a bleak picture. The study was followed by companion surveys in the Northwest and the north-central states, in the southeastern and south-central states, and in the West (Reeder; Schomisch). Of the 63 land-grant institutions surveyed, 24 had courses specifically devoted to cooperatives in 1977-78. These courses were usually offered only once a year, were not required, and lacked a research complement to the teaching program. Eighteen schools had dropped courses that were offered in 1960. There are, however, some hopeful signs. A study cited by Torgerson and Street indicates a slight enrollment increase in specific courses devoted to cooperatives, and the emergence of the *Journal of Agricultural Cooperation* and two textbooks on cooperatives are encouraging developments.

A related issue is the amount of attention given to cooperatives in introductory textbooks in economics and agricultural economics. These textbooks are used by hundreds of thousands of students annually, and, for many, these texts are their only exposure to formal economic theory and concepts. As fewer university students come from farm backgrounds and have no more than passing acquaintance with any type of cooperative (Vitaliano), discussion in introductory courses is one way of introducing these students to cooperatives. We were particularly interested in whether there had been a decline in space devoted to cooperatives in recent textbooks. A related issue is how the current division of the field into macroeconomics and microeconomics has affected textbook coverage of cooperatives.

Method

The analysis included all introductory economics and agricultural economics textbooks in the main library of the University of California, Davis.

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Table 1.—Mention of Cooperatives in Introductory Textbooks

Textbook Category	Number of books	Space Devoted to Co-ops			
		100 + Lines	50–59 Lines	Under 50 Lines	No Mention
Economics	55	4	7	13	31
Agricultural Economics	15	6	3	2	4
Microeconomics	19	0	0	0	19
Macroeconomics	25	0	0	0	25

Representative titles included *Introduction to Economics*, *Understanding Economics*, *Introduction to Agricultural Economics*, *Agricultural Economics and Management*, and so on. In cases of multiple editions, only the most recent edition was used. For each book, the index was examined first to find mention of "cooperative" or "cooperation." The researcher then turned to the designated pages and counted the number of lines devoted to the topic. This coverage could include a general discussion of principles or practices, laws affecting cooperatives, case studies, and the like.

Results

Excluding multiple editions, there were 114 introductory textbooks in the analysis divided into four categories: economics (55), agricultural economics (15), microeconomics (19), and macroeconomics (25). Excluded were books not in English, intermediate or advanced textbooks, and technical monographs. We focused specifically on textbooks appropriate for introductory courses that are taken by a large number of undergraduate students each year.

Cooperatives were mentioned in 44 percent of the economics texts, 73 percent of the agricultural economics texts, and in none of the introductory textbooks in microeconomics and macroeconomics (table 1). There was significantly more mention of cooperatives in agricultural economics than in economics textbooks ($X^2 = 4.2$, d.f. = 1, $p < .05$). In books that mentioned cooperatives, the agricultural economics textbooks devoted more space to the topic ($X^2 = 4.0$, d.f. = 1, $p < .05$).

Only the economics sample was large enough to justify an analysis of changes over time. Two-thirds of the economics textbooks between 1920–49 mentioned cooperatives, compared with less than half in the next 20 years, and only 22 percent of books published since 1970 (table 2). This decline in interest over time is statistically significant ($X^2 = 6.1$, d.f. = 2, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Given the importance of cooperatives in the farm economy, it is not surprising that more emphasis is given to the topic in agricultural economics than in general economics. However, the complete disappearance of the

Table 2.—Longitudinal Trends in Mention of Cooperatives in Introductory Economics Textbooks

Publication Date	N	Economics Textbooks	
		Mentioned Cooperatives	No Mention
		Percent	
1920–49	12	67	33
1950–69	25	48	52
1970–present	18	22	78

topic in introductory textbooks of microeconomics and macroeconomics is disappointing, especially since many universities have accepted this division for their introductory course.

To the degree that the amount of space textbooks devote to a topic indicates the extent to which it is discussed in courses, the attention given to cooperatives has significantly decreased over the past decades and the trend to further specialization into macroeconomics and microeconomics seems to have worsened the situation. A challenge for cooperative educators is to find a place for cooperatives within the current divisions of the field. This may help to restore interest in the topic.

The present analysis looked only at the amount of space devoted to the topic; the quality of the discussion is also important. However, if the topic is not mentioned, then quality is moot. It is also difficult to compare the quality of a paragraph on cooperative principles written in 1950 with a detailed account of farm credit published in 1975. The present analysis could be expanded in range of subject matter to include fields such as accounting, law, marketing, sociology, and political science; course level (intermediate and advanced courses); and the number of key words. Although one might not expect entire chapters or full pages devoted to cooperatives, the fact that there are an estimated 350 million members worldwide of organizations affiliated with the International Cooperative Alliance suggests the need for at least passing mention of cooperatives in fields concerned with economic and social organizations.

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