

The Relative Decline in Women in the Consumer Economics Major: A Case Study of the University of Illinois at U-C

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Since merging with the Agricultural Economics Department in 1995, the consumer economics department (CE) of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has been transformed from primarily female to primarily male, and as a result, the question arose in the minds of some faculty whether the merger with a traditionally male department reduced the attractiveness of CE to women and thereby caused this decline, and if so, why? The question in this study, which documents empirically the relative decline in women and tests several hypotheses on its source, examines whether the decline is attributable to the merger *per se*, to national trends in economics majors, or to a variety of factors both specific to UIUC and more general.

The study begins by reviewing literature on women in undergraduate economics since CE is an applied discipline, and then conducts empirical analyses with data from the campus' Division of Management from national sources. First, we analyze changes in the gender composition of the CE major at UIUC (all other economics majors on campus) from its origin in 1982 to 2003, and consider several possible marked declines in women (from about 80 percent to a low of 26 percent). Currently, we are extending 2009 now that we are able to make recent data (since a 2004 change in the computer system) comparable. Second, an examination of national data shows that trends in the percentage female enrolled as economics majors can account for but a small portion of the decline in the percent women in UIUC's CE major. Third, detailed data on the more than 1000 individual students *ever enrolled* in our CE major, with which gender composition (and quality) of entries into and exits from it. While the major is characterized mobility, we find that *transfers* into the major are not disproportionately male, nor are transfers out disproportionately female. In fact, those who transferred out to the College of Business are disproportionately male, and this has not changed over time. Many students who transfer out ultimately go into economics, but the gender of that group has remained relatively stable over time. Consequently, it appears that most of the changes in gender composition are traceable to the freshman *applicant* pool to CE; however, to date, we have to obtain such data from the UIUC Admissions Office necessary to investigate this explanation directly. We will review and incorporate into our analyses the tipping model about sudden large changes composition, estimate a regression model that combines the separate pieces into a single framework to relative contributions to the overall change, and finally, develop specific recommendations designed to reverse the outflow of women, with the explicit goals of improving the learning environment for all students and maintaining enrollments in the CE major at UIUC and nationally.