

# Confessions from an Economist Trying to Be Relevant (And Why It Matters to You)

**Jeremy Weber**

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Jeremy Weber '05 received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2010 and is a research economist for the Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C.

When I was studying at Juniata, a lot of what I read from academic economists seemed tangential or irrelevant to the policy questions for which I sought answers. It seemed that economists inhabited a different world with its own language and narrative. In short, economists seemed disconnected. Now I am one. Was I wrong, have I found irrelevance enjoyable, or is the story more nuanced?

The August after graduating from Juniata I traveled to Peru where, with the support of a Fulbright grant, I planned to spend a year studying the responsiveness of small-scale rice farmers to market conditions, which were likely to change with the coming Free Trade agreement with the United States. Upon arriving in Peru, I found that my host organization (an economic development NGO) had responded to low rice prices by suspending its work with rice farmers. The organization, however, had begun to work with cooperatives of coffee farmers trying to enter Fair Trade and organic certified export markets. The topic sounded promising and was relevant to my host organization, so I sprang at the opportunity to get involved.

Being in the field without a clear research question presents challenges, but it also allows the people closest to the topic to influence the focus of the research. This was good for me, in large part because it helped make my research more relevant to the people whom I wanted my research to serve. Through conversations with cooperative leaders, local NGOs, and people close to the coffee industry, I settled on several related questions and spent the next ten months trying to answer them.

I enjoyed research in Peru but realized that my skills limited the depth and usefulness of my research. Wanting better research skills, I applied to graduate programs and in particular to the Agricultural and Applied Economics program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The profiles of the professors and the sound of 'applied' appealed to me. I decided to attend the program and, after some time there, found it more conceptual and academic than I had expected, especially many of the courses that I took in Wisconsin's other economics department (the one without the "applied" modifier).

Institutions acculturate those who enter them and I was (and am) no exception. In time my research focus shifted. Instead of asking, for example, whether Fair Trade price premiums that coffee

growers receive cover the cost of becoming Fair Trade certified, I would ask whether premiums for physically undifferentiated commodities could persist in a competitive market. The first question would interest the people whom I had met in Peru. The second question is more abstract (Fair Trade is just one case where a premium is paid for a commodity) and is framed in academic language (“competitive” is a type of market whose theoretical properties are well known among economists).

It is not that the first question is relevant and the second one isn't. Both are relevant, but to different audiences. In fact, to publish research on the second question, the paper must be framed to fit into an existing academic conversation and make a clear contribution to it. What determines for whom the researcher writes? Job security, remuneration, and prestige in universities are all strongly linked to how much and in what journals a researcher publishes. This pressure to publish shapes research questions to fit into broader academic debates that may seem (and may be) irrelevant to other audiences.

Writing for an academic audience is not all bad – it can even be a really good thing. Abstracting from one case can provide insight into an entire class of problems. For example, paltry fertilizer use and the low crop yields of farms in Cameroon may be an issue of farmers needing money to buy fertilizer today even though the gains from doing so only occur at the end of harvest season. The lack of liquidity among small-scale agricultural households may have similar consequences in developing countries around the world. Studying fertilizer use and cash constraints among farmers in Cameroon can inform policies in other countries. Besides shedding light on an entire class of problems, academic research is marked by its rigor. The peer review process, though imperfect, can catch strong assertions backed by weak evidence.

Writing only to an academic audience nonetheless has downsides. Academic audiences are small and are not necessarily the people who would most benefit from the knowledge produced. Writing for an academic audience can also push a researcher to stay confined to a narrow specialty since contributing to the academic conversation in a different area requires intimate knowledge of the area's methods, debates, and history. Furthermore, a paper may languish in the peer review process for years on the basis of inconsequential details. One paper of mine evaluates a development project that finished in 2005. The paper will be published in November of 2011.

The best of both worlds is a job that values research that speaks to multiple audiences, which is true of my current job. While I have only written to an academic audience so far, the goal is that almost every academic piece is accompanied by a more general interest publication. Wanting to be relevant, I value this and hope to find it in any future job I might take.

What does my journey from viewing economists as irrelevant to becoming one mean for you, the Juniata student? Juniata has already acculturated you to some extent. It has colored how you view the world, what you value, and what you hold as true. Your next place of study or work will have its own

values and pressures. A good liberal arts education helps people critique the forces shaping them. When you are in that next place of study or work, ask yourself if you like who you are becoming. Take a step back and critique your professional goals. Do you like the trajectory that you're on? While the worlds that we inhabit inevitably shape us, we can take a more active or passive response to those forces. It's even possible to be a research economist and escape irrelevance!