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Subdiscipline-Specific Journal Rankings in Economics

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SUBDISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC JOURNAL RANKINGS IN ECONOMICS

by

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IN ECONOMICS

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IN ECONOMICS
Christopher B. Barrett, Aliakbar Olia, and DeeVon Bailey

ABSTRACT

In light of widespread specialization of research and teaching, it seems appropriate to supplement the existing general rankings of economics journals with subdiscipline-specific rankings. That is the primary objective of this paper. The availability of subdiscipline-specific rankings also permits both (i) alternative journal ranking methods for the general discipline that account for the breadth of a journal’s impact across specialized fields, and (ii) estimation of the relative weights implicitly associated with each field in traditional disciplinary journal rankings. The results are robust to the exclusion of self-citations.

JEL Classification: A10, A14
SUBDISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC JOURNAL RANKINGS IN ECONOMICS*

Journal rankings serve multiple purposes in economics, as in other disciplines. Many institutions use rankings to evaluate faculty in hiring, promotion and tenure decisions. Rankings likewise inform allocation of increasingly scarce library funds for serials acquisition. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, journal rankings influence individual researchers' choices as to where to submit manuscripts and which journals to read. Toward these ends there exist excellent recent studies of the relative impacts of economics journals on the discipline as a whole (Stigler et al., 1995; Laband and Piette, 1994—henceforth abbreviated as LP).

Our concern is that most economists and economics departments today specialize in particular subdisciplines and thus might find general disciplinary rankings of limited usefulness. This is especially true in public colleges and universities, where research agendas are often tightly focused on subdisciplines of immediate relevance to the funding jurisdiction (e.g., urban economics), and in economics departments falling within colleges of agriculture or business, where researchers are expected to focus on agricultural or business economics, respectively.

In light of widespread specialization, it seems appropriate to supplement the existing general rankings of economics journals with subdiscipline-specific rankings. That is the primary objective of this paper, addressed in section I. The availability of subdiscipline-specific rankings also permits both (i) alternative journal ranking methods for the general discipline that account for the breadth of a journal's impact across specialized fields, and (ii) estimation of the relative weights implicitly associated with each field in traditional disciplinary journal rankings. We tackle these secondary

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objectives in section II. In both sections, we explore whether the pool of elite journals—for each subdiscipline and for economics as a whole—changes much when self-citations are omitted from the analysis.

I. Rankings Methods

Liebowitz and Palmer (1984), and, more recently, LP) published widely referenced indices of the relative “impacts” of economics journals, where “impact” is measured by the relative frequency with which a journal is cited. While there will always be some disagreement as to whether citations provide the best measure of intellectual contribution or “impact,” they are indisputably a currency understood and valued by academic researchers. We, thus, follow the established methodology of generating journal rankings based on detailed citations information collected from a sample of economics journals.

The principal difference between our study and all previous efforts is that earlier rankings compile citations from a single pool of economics journals while we do so for 16 different subdisciplines, corresponding to codes C through R in the Journal of Economic Literature (JEL) classification system. The first step in the analysis was to construct the 16 subdisciplinary samples of citing journals. The key criterion was that the journals should be recognized as concentrating in the relevant subdiscipline; in other words, general economics journals were explicitly excluded. We constructed the samples by canvassing colleagues with expertise in each subject area and by reviewing coded citations appearing in recent issues of JEL. This generated an initial pool of 8-31 journals in each subdiscipline, from which we included only those indexed by the Institute for Scientific Information’s Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). The final subdiscipline-specific samples of citing...
journals numbered from 4 to 12 in each subdiscipline category, with a mean (median) size of 8.0 (7.5). Since 14 journals appear in more than one subdiscipline’s sample, we used 109 different citing journals.

We collected ten years’ detailed citations data, 1983-92, for each sample. The mean (median) number of journals cited for each subdiscipline sample over that period was 218 (193), ranging from 128 to 376 across the subdisciplines. By way of comparison, the March 1995 *JEL* reported publication information on 251 different journals. Not only are virtually all economics journals cited at some point in at least one subdiscipline, but so are many journals from outside the discipline, especially from international area studies, business, law, political science and statistics.

We present journals’ subdisciplinary rankings in the form of citations-weighted indices. For each of the 16 subdisciplines we compiled an n by m citations matrix, C, from the set M containing m different subdiscipline-specific citing journals and the set N of n different journals cited by the journals in M. By summing citations across the m citing journals, we generate a vector of raw citations scores, $s_0$. In keeping with earlier studies (Liebowitz and Palmer, 1984; LP), we then compute adjusted citations scores by weighting each citing journal by its own citation score from the previous iteration’s ranking. Thus, more generally, we generate a citation score vector, s, from the inner product of C and w, a weighting vector. In algebraic terms, the method is as follows:

\[
C'w_j = s_j
\]

\[
w_0 = 1
\]

\[
w_{ij} = s_{ij-1} / \max_M s_{j-1} \quad \forall i = 1, \ldots, m \text{ and } \forall j = 1, \ldots, J
\]

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1Boldface denotes a vector.
where i indexes the journals in M and j indexes the iterations \((j = 0, \ldots, J)\) through convergence on the \(J^{th}\) iteration. The convergence criterion is stability in the rank order of the top 50 journals across successive iterations. Raw rankings emerge from \(j = 0\). We report index numbers constructed from these score vectors, where the most cited journal's index is set at 100.0 and all other journals are measured in relative adjusted citations.

The adjusted rankings and index numbers are reported for all 16 subdisciplines in Table 1. Before discussing these results, we wish to explain several methodological differences between this study and earlier ones. First, we do not restrict the period in which a cited article appeared. On the one hand, our measure favors journals with a longer publishing history. Liebowitz and Palmer (1984) and LP thus advocate including only citations to articles appearing within a brief, well-defined period. On the other hand, our measures accommodate (i) cycles of fashion in academic research and lags in the recognition of seminal work, the timing of which varies across fields and is difficult if not impossible to establish precisely,\(^2\) and (ii) the importance of history to journal quality. An article still receiving citations many years after publication brings lasting credit to the journal in which it appeared. Second, we do not normalize citations by either articles or printed characters.\(^3\) The use to which journal rankings are put determines whether it is preferable to consider citations of journals or of a journal's "representative" manuscript. Our primary interest is the former, and, as a

\(^2\)An obvious example is Muth's (1961) classic work, which predated the rational expectations revolution by more than a decade.

\(^3\)Liebowitz and Palmer (1984) and LP calculate citations per character in recognition that SSCI article counts do not distinguish between full-length articles and shorter pieces, such as comments and replies. Of course, just as citations per article ignores differences in articles' lengths, so does a citations-per-character measure ignore how characters are organized. Moreover, estimation of typed character spaces published by journals is based on crude methods and likely introduces considerable errors in variables problems that offset any prospective gains. We concur with Archibald and Finifter (1990) that normalization by either articles or characters generates flawed measures, just as nonnormalized citations analysis. There is no unambiguously preferable accounting scheme. Ours is clearly computationally simpler.
consequence, journal size obviously influences total citations. The reader should take this into consideration in interpreting our results.

Overall, 63 different journals appear in the 160 top-ten slots across the 16 subdisciplines. There is thus a fairly large pool of frequently cited journals when analysis is taken to the more disaggregated level at which most of us work. Many journals that impact heavily on particular subdisciplines fall well outside the mainstream of the profession. Indeed, 11 of the 63 do not appear in LP's rankings, as they either hail from another discipline (e.g., *American Political Science Review, Annals of Statistics, Social History*) or have a highly specialized audience within economics (e.g., *International Journal of Game Theory, Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Journal of Futures Markets*).

Nonetheless, there is a strong correspondence between general disciplinary impact and importance to more specialized niches. Table 2 divides the 130 journals in LP's rankings into quintiles. All but three of the top 25 journals appear in at least one subdiscipline's top-ten list, while less than half of the journals in each of the other four quintiles appears in a top ten. By the time one reaches the bottom quintile, only one journal makes any subdiscipline's top-ten list. The major journals in the profession invariably have some strong subdisciplinary base(s) for their popularity.

Only 23 journals appear on more than one subdiscipline's top-ten list; these are listed in the rightmost column of Table 2. Within this group of journals with broad impact in the discipline, a "holy trinity" stands out. The *American Economic Review* and the *Journal of Political Economy* appear in every subdiscipline's top ten, and *Econometrica* appears in 15 of the 16 (it is 12th in

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4There are only 25 journals in the top quintile because, unlike LP, we treat the *American Economic Review* and its annual *Papers and Proceedings* volume as a single journal.
Economic History). While general disciplinary rankings uniformly rank these three journals highly (e.g., each is in LP's top seven), subdisciplinary rankings reveal the uniquely pervasive influence of the "holy trinity." There is an enormous gap between these three journals and the rest in terms of breadth of impact. Only the Quarterly Journal of Economics (QJE) (9 top-ten lists) also appears in more than half the subdisciplines' top-ten lists. Joining QJE in a second elite group of seven journals appearing on 4-9 top-ten lists are: Review of Economic Studies (8), Review of Economics and Statistics (7), Rand Journal of Economics (6), Journal of Economic Theory (5), Economic Journal (4), and International Economic Review (4). Another four journals appear on three top-ten lists (Journal of Finance, Journal of Financial Economics, Journal of Law and Economics, and Journal of Public Economics). No journal ranked below 29th on LP's general list appears in more than two subdiscipline's top-ten lists. This demonstrates the intuitive correspondence between impact on the discipline as a whole and breadth of impact on its subdisciplines.

LP make the point that the "second-tier" general-interest journals have lost influence with the rise of specialty journals over the past quarter century. Our findings reinforce their claim. Of the 32 general-interest journals in LP's second through fifth quintiles, only 5 (Canadian Journal of Economics, Economic Inquiry, Economic Journal, Economica, Review of Economics and Statistics) appear on any subdiscipline's top-ten list. Forty of the 63 journals appearing on a subdisciplinary top-ten list make it in only one subdiscipline, and most of them are highly specialized in that field.

Some of the specialized journals exert considerable influence within their subdiscipline. The most notable case is the American Journal of Agricultural Economics, which has almost five times

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The American Economic Review tends to dominate this trio, ranking above both Econometrica and the Journal of Political Economy in 10 out of 16 subdisciplines.
the adjusted citations of any other journal in the agricultural and natural resource economics field (JEL code Q). *Econometrica* similarly dominates in the mathematical and quantitative methods field (JEL code C), with almost four times the citations of the next most cited journal in the field. The *Journal of Urban Economics* is the only other journal with more than twice the adjusted citations volume of any other serial in its subdiscipline (JEL code R: urban, rural, and regional economics). Considering *Econometrica* as a general journal, given the manifest breadth of its appeal, a field-specific journal ranks first in 11 of the 16 fields, and 8 of those leaders appear on only that one field's top-ten list. Unlike general disciplinary rankings, subdiscipline-specific rankings capture the dominance of many focused journals over their fields. Indeed, they reveal a fallacy of composition in ranking journals' impact: prominence in the small, at the subdisciplinary level, does not equate to stature in the large, in the discipline as a whole, nor vice versa. Indeed, general rankings exhibit an inherent bias against journals from small fields (Bide, 1973; Janke, 1973; Weisheit and Regoli, 1984; Archibald and Finifter, 1990), as is evident in the statistical results of section II.

The rankings depend critically on the weights associated with each citing journal, and those weights are in turn a function of how many citations each citing journal itself receives. This raises the question of whether self-citations unduly influence the rankings presented in Table 1. If a journal's authors have an unusually high propensity to cite other papers from that journal as a means to curry editorial favor, such *gamemanship* might bias the analysis of *scholarship* attempted through citations analysis. We, therefore, repeated the computations described earlier, now dropping self-citations from the analysis. 6 Table 3 reports the resulting subdiscipline-specific rankings.7

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6Excluding self-citations provides further reason not to normalize journal citations by article counts. More articles certainly generate more citable material, but it also generates more citations of other journals' material, *ceteris paribus*. Citations per journal have no clear bias for or against high frequency journals if self-citations are excluded.
In general, excluding self-citations has little effect on the pool of top-ten journals within the subdisciplines. While the orderings of journals within each subdiscipline often change, in only 25 of 160 (15.6%) cases did journals fall out of the top-ten lists on which they appeared in Table 1. The number of journals now appearing on at least one subdiscipline's top-ten list was unchanged at 63, with 10 journals (instead of the previous 11) not appearing on LP's rankings because they hail from other disciplines or specialized niches within economics. Again, an elite group of journals stands out, notably the trio of the AER, JPE, and Econometrica. Excluding self-citations significantly improves the standing of the QJE and the Review of Economics and Statistics, which now appear on 12 and 11 of 16 top-ten lists, respectively (Table 4).

It is natural that subdiscipline-specific journals' rankings fall when one excludes their self-citations. Thus, one of the “holy trinity” tops 14 of 16 disciplinary rankings; the American Economic Review alone tops 10 of them. Self-citations form such a large core of the citations base of some journals that led their subdiscipline in Table 1 that they fell out of the subdiscipline's top-ten list entirely in Table 3. The Journal of Accounting and Economics, the Journal of Comparative Economics, the Journal of Economic Education and Public Choice each manifest this characteristic.

II. Subdisciplinary Impact Measures

Part of the fallacy of composition in journals rankings derives from the clearly uneven impact of different fields on the broader discipline.8 We think these differences in subdisciplinary impact are

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7In the case of four subdisciplines (JEL codes D, I, M, and P), a citing journal had to be dropped in order to generate a stable ranking of the top 50 journals in that area. In each case, these were journals with no or very few other-than-self-citations, so the qualitative impact on the rankings is negligible. The dropped journals are noted in Table 3.

8Archibald and Finifter (1990) try to control for these differences in their general journal rankings.
themselves informative, perhaps especially to graduate students trying to decide on fields in which to specialize or to faculty contemplating retraining in a new area. By generating subdiscipline-specific journal rankings we can directly estimate the implicit weights associated with each subdiscipline in general disciplinary journal rankings.

General journal rankings represent, in effect, a weighted sum of subdiscipline-specific journal rankings. Given the subdiscipline-specific journal rankings reported in Table 1 and discipline-wide, general rankings, one can estimate the weights associated with each subdiscipline by the relation

\[ r_i = \sum_{j=1}^{16} w_j r_{ij} + e_i \]

where \( r_i \) is the \( i \)th journal's general ranking (expressed as an index number), \( r_{ij} \) is its index number in subdiscipline \( j \), the \( w_j \) are weights associated with each of the 16 subdisciplines, and the \( e_i \) are iid disturbances.\( ^9 \) For the weighting scheme to make sense, it should also be true that \( w_j \in [0, 1] \forall j \) and \( \sum_j w_j = 1 \).

The \( r_{ij} \) from equation (2) emerge from the computations partially reported in Table 1. In order to estimate the \( w_j \) we first had to calculate the \( r_i \). We thus grouped all the data from the 109 different citing journals across the 16 subdiscipline-specific citations matrices, and added citations data from another 35 general economics journals appearing in LP's list but absent from our subdiscipline-specific samples. We then used these 144 journals\( ^{10} \) to compute, by the iterative method in equation (1), the general rankings we report in Table 5a. Assuming the \( e_i \) are normally distributed, we then estimated the subdisciplinary weights by constrained maximum likelihood per equation (2), imposing the restrictions that \( w_j \in [0, 1] \forall j \) and \( \sum_j w_j = 1 \). We repeated the exercise, this time excluding all...

\( ^9 \)These rankings are over the same set of journals for each subdiscipline and the general discipline. There is no significant difference when we rerun these using Table 3's rankings excluding self-citations.

\( ^{10} \)LP used 129 journals. Again, we count the American Economic Review and its Papers and Proceedings issue as a single journal; LP treat them separately. We do not include 8 journals on LP's list, for which we were unable to assemble citations data for the full period, and include 23 not in their study, for a total coverage of 144 journals.
self-citations. These general rankings are reported in Table 5b. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first published citations ranking that adjusts for self-citations. As in the subdiscipline-specific rankings, excluding self-citations has no significant effect on general economics rankings. No journal moves by more than eight positions from Table 5a to Table 5b. Indeed, 90% change by three or fewer positions in the rankings.

The results ratify common observations about which subdisciplines exert the most influence on the discipline as a whole today (Table 6). Only 7 of 16 subdisciplines have positive weight on the traditional general disciplinary rankings. Macroeconomics and monetary economics (E) and microeconomics (D) have the highest estimated subdisciplinary weights, at 33.4 and 22.0 percent, respectively. This should come as no surprise since these are the subdisciplines at the core of graduate instruction in economics. Industrial organization (L), public economics (H), mathematical and quantitative methods (C), financial economics (G), and international economics (F) round out the roster of fields having nonzero estimated implicit weight in traditional general economics journal rankings, although fields C and F have estimated weights not statistically significantly greater than zero. The data suggest that, in essence, the traditional general disciplinary journal rankings employ less than one-third of the fields within economics, only those which contribute substantially to the basic theoretical and methodological toolkits common to all economists.

Previous studies have remarked on the relatively poor showing in general disciplinary rankings by highly regarded journals specific to marginalized fields, e.g., economic history (Archibald and Finifter, 1990; Laband and Piette, 1994; Stigler et al., 1995). Table 6 shows that most of the fields within economics are implicitly marginalized by traditional ranking methods. If one is looking to
identify the journals with the greatest impact on the discipline as a whole, the search can be safely confined to the subdisciplines from which basic theory and methods originate.

These findings may disturb some applied economists. Note, however, that one can equally use equation (2) to estimate not the subdisciplinary weights, \( w_j \), but instead the general disciplinary journal rankings, \( r_i \), assuming one is willing to impose a particular weighting scheme across the fields. Some economics departments that specialize in a proper subset of the 16 fields might find this an appropriate way in which to customize the journal rankings used in hiring, promotion and tenure decisions to their particular mission.

Thus, the establishment of subdiscipline-specific journal rankings permits an alternative method of generating a general disciplinary ranking of journals. We demonstrate this by assigning a uniform weight to each subdiscipline, i.e., setting \( w_j = 1/16 \) \( \forall j \) in equation (2), and then solving for \( r_i \), given the \( r_{ij} \). Table 5c reports these general rankings, computed using the same 144 journals.

Several interesting findings are evident in comparing Tables 5a and 5c. First, 10 of the top 11 journals are the same, albeit ordered differently. This elite top ten (American Economic Review, Econometrica, Journal of Economic Theory, Journal of Finance, Journal of Financial Economics, Journal of Political Economy, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Rand Journal of Economics, Review of Economic Studies, Review of Economics and Statistics) appears robust (in this data set) to the reasonable assignment of weights across the subdisciplines. Second, relative to the traditional approach reported in Table 5a, the uniform weighting method rewards dominance in any subdiscipline, including marginalized ones, and breadth of impact. Thus, the American Economic Review leaps ahead of Econometrica into the top slot by virtue of its higher rank in 12 of 16 subdisciplines. More striking are the gains made under a uniform weighting scheme by journals that
are especially important to subdisciplines implicitly accorded zero weight in traditional ranking schemes. Thus Public Choice jumps from 33rd to 9th, the American Journal of Agricultural Economics from 36th to 17th, the Journal of Urban Economics from 39th to 19th, the Journal of Comparative Economics from 75th to 22nd, World Development from 73rd to 23rd, and the Economic History Review from 69th to 25th. The use of a uniform weighting displaces 6 of Table 5a's top 25 by at least 15 places: Journal of Econometrics, Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Economic Letters, Journal of Futures Markets, Journal of Mathematical Economics, and the Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis. While the set of elite journals is invariant to subdisciplinary weighting schemes, the set of top second-tier journals depends greatly on how one weights the different subdisciplines. We do not claim superiority for any of the two methods we have employed in Table 5—uniform or nonuniform weighting, exclusion or inclusion of self-citations. We aim only to point out how the different subdisciplines fit into journal ranking systems and how discipline-level rankings might vary with the weights assigned to the different fields, explicitly or implicitly.

IV. Summary

A journal's quality can be judged by its impact on the entire discipline, as captured by traditional citations-based ranking methods, and/or by impact on a subdiscipline(s) of interest. Economics as a whole is clearly dominated by a "holy trinity" of journals: the American Economic Review, Econometrica, and the Journal of Political Economy. Beyond that group, only a handful of journals have a large impact across the discipline, but this set is reasonably robust to different weighting schemes across the subdisciplines, as well to the inclusion or exclusion of self-citations.
Given economists' growing field specialization in research and teaching and the large segment of the discipline focused on applied fields implicitly ignored in traditional journal ranking methods, subdiscipline-specific rankings and general disciplinary rankings derived from them through customized weighting of fields may be of real use to economists.

Given that most subdisciplines are dominated by a journal which is specific to that field but relatively unimportant to the other fifteen subdisciplines, subdisciplinary journals appear to meet specific needs. Market niches are often best filled by subdiscipline-specific journals with a few general journals providing theoretical and methodological tools which are then applied or expanded in the subdisciplines. This system seems to be meeting the needs of the profession, although other journal ranking methods have not previously recognized this point.
REFERENCES


TABLE 1—SUBDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL RANKINGS, INCLUDING SELF-CITATIONS

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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JEL Code C: Mathematical and Quantitative Methods</strong></td>
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<td>Econometrica</td>
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**JEL Code D: Microeconomics**

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**JEL Code E: Macroeconomics and Monetary Economics**

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Note: Inquiry dropped from list of citing journals to achieve convergent ranking.

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Note: International Journal of Forecasting dropped from list of citing journals to achieve convergent ranking.

**JEL Code N: Economic History**

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Note: Acta Oeconomica and Journal of Common Market Studies dropped from list of citing journals to achieve convergent ranking.

**JEL Code Q: Agricultural and Natural Resource Economics**

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*LP, Table 1 (raw figures), Table 2 (adjusted figures). NR = not ranked.
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*LP, Table 2.  
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SUBDISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC JOURNAL RANKINGS IN ECONOMICS

by

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ABSTRACT

In light of widespread specialization of research and teaching, it seems appropriate to supplement the existing general rankings of economics journals with subdiscipline-specific rankings. That is the primary objective of this paper. The availability of subdiscipline-specific rankings also permits both (i) alternative journal ranking methods for the general discipline that account for the breadth of a journal's impact across specialized fields, and (ii) estimation of the relative weights implicitly associated with each field in traditional disciplinary journal rankings. The results are robust to the exclusion of self-citations.

JEL Classification: A10, A14