

October 16, 2002

Professor Oliver S. Hart
Department of Economics
Harvard University
Littauer 220
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dear Professor Hart,

Last year, like many freshmen, I decided to concentrate in economics, hoping to involve myself in studies that would be intellectually stimulating and enjoyable. After taking Professor Perkins's spring class on the economics of Southeast Asia, and encountering both of those positive qualities in his teaching, I felt it safe to assume that on average, other economics classes might be equally suitable to my interests. Especially in the context of an otherwise-dismal freshman year, I was elated to find an excellent professor in an area that I liked. Unfortunately, my experience in the economics department so far this year has dampened my optimism.

As one of the premier institutions of learning in the nation, Harvard sets the bar higher than everyone else—and rightly so. Admissions are more challenging and selective than ever, it is becoming progressively more difficult to earn degrees with honors, and faculty members are second to those at no other school. It is for this reason, as well as the fact that such excellence tends to be costly in a monetary sense, that I feel it my obligation to tell you of the situation currently confronting the students of Economics 1010a. It has not been more than a month since classes began, but already I can assure you that its instructor is among the worst I have ever seen. Though I can only speak for myself, I think my peers tend to agree.

To be sure, Professor Neugeboren is trying to do the best that he can. For that, he should be lauded; I will be the first to admit that teaching is by no means an easy task. It requires immense patience, skill, clarity, insight, and of course, intellect. While Professor Neugeboren certainly possesses plenty of intellect, it alone cannot make up for what he lacks in the other traits. For four weeks, my classmates and I have tolerated incomprehensible lectures, confusing graphs, repeatedly botched arithmetic, poorly written problem sets, and apathetic teaching fellows. We face a midterm re-scheduled for Monday, October 21 (the same day as the midterm in Statistics 104, which overlaps for many students), and I can honestly say that I do not feel any more prepared for it than I did when I walked into lecture on September 17. I tell you this with the hope of preventing this derailed wreck of a course from causing more injuries later on down the line, as it will inevitably continue on the curricular track for the remainder of the semester.

My goal is not to humiliate Professor Neugeboren, but without a few concrete examples, you may not appreciate the degree of frustration that my peers and I have had to experience every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Once the course was underway, we began with problems related to budget constraints and indifference curves—relatively basic economic concepts. Professor Neugeboren spent close to twenty minutes attempting to work through one such problem, but still managed to skip all of the algebra in the middle, resulting in some confusion. Unsure if my answer, $0 = 336$, was the result of a conceptual misunderstanding on my part, or a simple arithmetic error, I asked the Professor if he could explain where I had gone wrong. Not only did he refuse to answer the question—he insisted that we had to move on to a more complicated problem. As it turns out, I had made a mistake in the middle of the algebra

which he never bothered to explain, but it should not have taken long for a Harvard professor with a doctorate in economics to point that out. Furthermore, his response was rude.

In another instance, Professor Neugeboren's lecture made it seem as if the value of a variable was both 4 and -4 simultaneously. A student raised her hand to inquire as to which value was actually correct, but she never received an answer. Instead, Professor Neugeboren vacillated between the two options for several minutes, totally unable to determine which one was correct. In the end, out of sheer desperation, he shouted, "Don't worry about the positives and negatives, okay?" While I could easily save myself the trouble of understanding the finer points of economic theory, I doubt the Professor will allow us to cite his advice when it comes time to take the final exam.

Professor Neugeboren also consistently appears to be unprepared for lectures. Knowing full well that an example would require taking the natural logarithm of several numbers, he neglected to bring a calculator or even a pre-calculated table of values. He was not sure what to name the equation $U = \ln(W)$; after consulting his notes, he settled on "Von Neumann Utility Index," since none of the teaching fellows knew, either. Later, without explanation, he used the same name to refer to a completely different equation.

Even the most basic and obvious lecturing practices evade Professor Neugeboren. He draws his letter "U"s exactly the same as his letter "V"s, resulting in intriguing, yet wholly inaccurate, recursive mathematical functions. Questions—perhaps the most important learning resource in a confusing lecture—are never repeated, making them impossible to hear in Emerson 105, not to mention forever lost to anyone watching lecture videotapes on-line. The rushed conclusion to the last lecture took place after the Professor sent a clear signal to leave, leaving many students who had to rush to another class extremely irritated.

The problem sets compound the unacceptability of a Harvard Lecturer who can neither lecture nor carry out sixth-grade arithmetic. Thus far, they have been challenging, not due to challenging material, but because of ambiguously worded questions and unfamiliar content. On the first problem set, the Lowell House economics tutor was so misled by one question that he recommended the wrong approach to all of the students he talked to. When one considers a comment written on my first problem set, that I should have deduced my correct answer from equations instead of a graph, it is almost too much to bear. Last I checked, the graph was still considered a valid economic tool.

On behalf of all of my classmates in Economics 1010a, many of whom have also signed this letter, I politely request that something be done with the greatest of urgency to rectify this totally unacceptable situation. My classmates and I would be happy to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss the available options. As you know, many of the more advanced economics classes depend on this one. I would like to understand basic economics well enough to take them.

Yours sincerely,

Aaron Greenspan

CC: Dean Benedict Gross
Dean Jeffrey Wolcowitz
Professor Benjamin Friedman

