

An Economist's Response to Steven Klees' 2008 CIES Presidential Address

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Steven Klees has been one of the CIES' most tireless champions. But only two years after the Stanford University "Beyond Dichotomies" meeting, Klees disserves the CIES by reemphasizing dichotomies and dismissing economic and quantitative research. Having followed Klees' writings and talks over the course of his career, I was not surprised by what he had to say. Nonetheless, as an economist who cares deeply the CIES, I was disappointed that he chose the presidential address as the place to air his problematic views. Since Klees' views were delivered in a presidential address, they have the danger of being taken by members as the official position of the CIES, or the unofficially-endorsed position of the members. I am concerned that this will not only reduce the overall quality of research and outside opinions of the CIES, but will also serve to marginalize those of us in the CIES and the education community at large who use economic and quantitative research. In this article, I sympathize with some of Klees' concerns, but question his assertions on the inherently dubious nature of all economic and quantitative research.

I am deeply sympathetic to Klees' criticisms of economic and quantitative research. Undoubtedly, many inequities and social injustices have been exacerbated in the name of sound economics. Many of these inequitable and unjust policies have been substantiated using flawed quantitative research methods. Economics and quantitative methods, however, are merely tools, and the use and abuse of these tools depends entirely in the hands of the user. Fortunately, the abusers are thoughtfully scrutinized by scholars like Stephen Heyneman, Diedre McCloskey, and Lant Pritchett; however, these scholars are also appreciative of good research and often revise their views in light of new evidence. In contrast, Klees' fierce opposition to economic and quantitative research shows a poor awareness of different frameworks and research standards.

Klees shows a weak understanding of the diverse research approaches under the Neo-Classical and Neo-Keynesian economics frameworks. He never acknowledges that even the dominant Neo-Classical framework (emphasizing the merits of the market) can be modified to support progressive ideas that emphasize equity and social justice. Scholars like Amartya Sen have done this successfully. Others, like Joseph Stiglitz, work through the Neo-Keynesian framework (recognizing the limitations of the market) in support of equity and social justice. Klees's dismissal of economics is therefore comparable to dismissing the use of political science and sociology within the CIES because realism and systems theory do not fully explain all social phenomena.

Contrary to Klees' accusations, the majority of education economists and development economists do not subscribe to the extreme versions of Neo-Classical economic approaches and Neo-Liberal ideas. As evidence, we only have to look at the inclinations of our most distinguished scholars, including David Card, Alan Krueger, Cecilia Rouse, Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Klees' teachers Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin. Unfortunately, Klees either ignores or misinterprets the work of these distinguished scholars. Notice Klees' troubling take of

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in *The Nation* magazine: “(Amartya) Sen like any mainstream economist, lacks understanding of structures of inequality and oppression.” To read Klees’ complete comments and the response of a baffled Sen, please go to <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20001127/letter>.

Klees could have been constructive and used his presidential platform to assess pertinent contributions by economists in the last 25 years. By incorporating psychology and economics, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have challenged conventional assumptions. David Card, Alan Krueger and Cecilia Rouse have used rigorous quantitative methods to examine the limitations of free markets and privatization. Christopher Udry has reestablished economic anthropology and extensive fieldwork. Anne Case, Cynthia Lloyd, Mark Rosenzweig, and Paul Schultz have made strides in economic demography. From the World Bank, Elizabeth King, Peter Moock, Harry Patrinos, George Psacharapoulos, and Martin Ravallion have produced valuable research on education, poverty and labor markets. Thomas Schelling has incorporated applied game-theoretic approaches to the study of cooperation and conflict. Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer have evaluated several educational interventions using randomized trials. Marianne Ferber, Nancy Folbre and Myra Strober have made important contributions in feminist economics. Martin Carnoy, Gregory Duncan, David Figlio, Henry Levin, Richard Murnane, and Mun Tsang have developed a range of realistic theoretical and empirical approaches in the economics of education. All of these scholars combined new ideas within existing economic frameworks while valuing equity and social justice. Moreover, these contributions borrow extensively from other disciplines and are therefore examples of “border crossings”—described by Klees as “the principal comparative advantage of comparative education.” Why not carefully examine such border-crossing economic research and report on their value to the CIES?

Klees’ dismissal of quantitative research is as problematic as calls by others to dismiss qualitative research. Every piece of research—qualitative or quantitative—suffers from measurement error and omitted variable bias; that is, there are many factors that researchers are unable to measure and account for. Responsible researchers produce a range of robustness checks (using alternative methods and data) and humbly express the methodological shortcomings of their research. The task of researchers is to find a truth, not THE truth. Klees focuses only on what quantitative research does not tell us. Would it not be healthier to also acknowledge what quantitative research can tell us and stress the importance of rigorous robustness checks in CIES research?

In closing, I agree with respected education economist Mark Blaug’s observation that Klees tends to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” by rejecting all economic and quantitative research. Klees’ focus on the bad research is useful but by not acknowledging the existence of good research, he exaggerates dichotomies and undermines the CIES’ commitment to viewing the world and conducting rigorous research in multiple ways. Furthermore, his address may be perceived as a call to the CIES to marginalize economic and quantitative researchers. As an admirer of Klees’ spirit, I hope he will one day treat us to a careful reevaluation of his views.

I thank CIES for inviting me to respond to Steven Klees’ address.