The History and Scope of the American Economic Association’s EconLit and the Economic Literature Index

Drucilla Ekwurzel

This paper discusses the coverage and history of the American Economic Association’s electronic bibliographic databases, EconLit and Economic Literature Index. The author briefly traces the origins of the discipline of economics and discusses the history and early print bibliographies of the association, which were later expanded into electronic media with the creation of the Economic Literature Index and EconLit. Tables show the subject and geographic scope, as well as the coverage dates and number of records, for the different document types contained in both EconLit and the Economic Literature Index.

Shortly before the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, Adam Smith published his Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations in 1776. This pioneering work is generally acknowledged as marking the point at which economics emerged as a separate, serious discipline of scientific inquiry. In a wide-ranging analysis, Smith discusses the familiar topics of labor productivity, economic growth, exchange, prices, wages, profits, capital, saving, investment, the economic development of Europe from ancient times to the eighteenth century, systems of political economy, taxation, public debts, and fiscal policy.

In the nineteenth-century atmosphere of growth in commerce and industry, the scholarly discipline of economics flourished in both Europe and the United States. One hundred years after the publication of Wealth of Nations, a group of economists founded the American Economic Association as a scholarly society. In 1911 the association established the American Economic Review as a journal for its members.

In the twentieth century, evidence of the importance of economics to business, citizens, and government is found in the burgeoning of scholarly articles by economists. In 1961 a committee of the American Economic Association began publication of the Index of Economic Journals in order to facilitate access to the literature of economics. The first volume of the Index contains a subject index and an author index to articles published in 88 journals over the years 1886–1924. Subsequently, Index volumes were expanded to include articles in conference volumes, collected essays, readings volumes, and the like, and the

Drucilla Ekwurzel is associate editor of the Journal of Economic Literature, 4615 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3661.
name was changed to the Index of Economic Articles in Journals and Collective Volumes.

In 1963 the Journal of Economic Abstracts began publication under the auspices of the association, and in 1966 this journal was included in members' subscriptions to the American Economic Review. The Journal of Economic Abstracts was replaced by the Journal of Economic Literature (JEL) in 1969. The quarterly issues of JEL included then, as they do today, survey articles on economic literature, book reviews, an annotated index of new books in economics, a contents listing and subject index of journal articles, and abstracts of articles from selected journals.

From almost the beginning, JEL made use of computer technology to achieve production efficiencies. Journal article records were entered one time into a fielded bibliographic database, which was used to create the JEL indexes. The JEL journal database was later augmented with collective-volume article records to produce the Index, beginning with the 1969 volume, which indexes 182 journals and 176 collective volumes.

The storage of the JEL bibliography on magnetic tapes made possible the mounting of the Economic Literature Index on the DIALOG Information Retrieval Service in 1981. At first the Economic Literature Index included only journal articles without abstracts, but in a few years it began to add collective-volume articles, beginning with the 1979 publication year, and abstracts for selected journals published in JEL 1984 and subsequent issues. By 1992 journal and abstract coverage in the online bibliography was expanded to include both journals and abstracts not indexed in JEL. More than 430 economics journals were indexed online in 1994.

In 1991 the association published its first CD-ROM bibliography in partnership with SilverPlatter™ Information. The new database, named EconLit, varies slightly in coverage dates of the collective-volume articles and abstracts from the coverage dates of the older Economic Literature Index because of media incompatibilities at the time. However, EconLit was also able to introduce dissertation records and abstracts of books from JEL, which were added to the DIALOG file at a later date. In 1994 the association began licensing Cambridge University Press Abstracts of Working Papers in Economics and including the records in the EconLit database. In that year also, EconLit began to include the full text of JEL book reviews. Table 1 shows the dates and numbers of records covered in EconLit, and Table 2 shows the total number of records for the different document types covered in both EconLit and the Economic Literature Index.

This year the association has increased the availability of EconLit by broadening its distribution through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) system. Over the next year the goal is to increase distribution options and make EconLit available in as many library systems as possible. EconLit-AEA, a shortened version of EconLit for association members only, covering the most recent fifteen years of records on a CD-ROM, was introduced in early 1995 at an affordable price for individuals.