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The Economic Problem: Scarcity and Choice

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DETAILED CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction, pages 25–26

This chapter explores the questions of what, how, and for whom to produce. Human wants are unlimited, but resources are not. This creates scarcity. Scarcity, in turn, forces us to make choices. The chapter stresses positive and descriptive economics, postponing normative questions until the students have acquired analytical tools.

TEACHING TIP: Stress the idea that any society must answer the three fundamental questions regardless of its political organization. One reason command economies don't work well is the immense number of calculations that would be required to answer these questions correctly. ◀

A. Resources used in its broadest sense include everything from natural resources (timber, minerals, energy), capital (buildings, machines), labor (human capital), and entrepreneurship. Resources are also called *factors of production*, *inputs*, or simply *factors*. *Output* is what is produced.

B. Key definitions:

1. *Factors of production* (*factors*) are the inputs into the process of production. Another term for resources.
2. *Production* is the process that transforms scarce resources into useful goods and services.
3. *Inputs* or *resources* include anything provided by nature or previous generations that can be used directly or indirectly to satisfy human wants.
4. *Capital* includes things that are produced and then used in the production of other goods and services. As used by economists, capital means physical capital, including buildings and machines

TEACHING TIP: Many goods are used to produce other goods. Some of these goods are counted as intermediate goods ("parts") while others are counted as capital. In the national income accounts, the distinction is simple: Anything that consumers or firms expect to use for more than one year is capital. For example, a computer, furniture, car, or kitchen appliance. If consumers or firms expect to use something for less than one year, it is an intermediate good. For example, quick-release bolts are common in bicycles. Because the bicycle maker expects to use many of these bolts within a year they are intermediate goods, not capital goods. Even though they are goods used to make another good, they are not capital. Think of them as parts instead. This is especially useful for those teaching macroeconomics. ◀

5. Producers are those who transform resources into outputs (final goods and services).
6. *Outputs* are goods and services of value to households.

II. Scarcity, Choice, and Opportunity Cost, pages 26–39

A. Scarcity and Choice in a One-Person Economy

1. Bill must make choices about how to allocate resources, what to produce, and how to produce it. Bill's situation is "constrained choice." His main constraint is available time. Bill must decide what goods and services he wants to produce, what he is able to produce given the island's resources, and how to use the resources to produce what he wants.

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

What are some of the more useful skills Bill might want? Students will come up with things like building a fire, primitive construction, and being able to tell which berries are not poisonous. More subtle answers might include weather forecasting and knowledge of airline and shipping routes. ■

TEACHING TIP: This is a good place to follow the text's lead and discuss the cost of leisure time. As the text notes, Bill can use as much time as he wants to lie on the beach. However, the cost of that leisure time is lost production. ■

2. *Opportunity cost* is the best alternative that we give up, or forgo, when we make a choice or decision.

TEACHING TIP: Instructors sometimes rush through their discussion of individual vs. societal opportunity cost because the point seems obvious. But the idea of opportunity cost makes a deep impression on students. They often find it valuable in their personal lives and remember it long after class is over. ■

Remind students that opportunity cost is relevant to societal as well as individual choices. A good way to drive the concept home is to find some social goal that virtually everyone in the class thinks is "good." National health insurance for all? A pristine environment? Completely safe streets? Point out that achieving the goal requires resources, which must be pulled out of producing something else. How much "other production" would class members be willing to sacrifice to accomplish the goal? A cut in their material standard of living of 10 percent? How about 50 percent? Or 90 percent?

Public policy debates suffer when opportunity cost is ignored or calculated incorrectly. A major contribution of economists is to keep opportunity cost—correctly measured—part of policy debates. ■

Economics in Practice: Frozen Foods and Opportunity Costs, p. 28

Over the last 50 years, the frozen food market has boomed. In 2007, sales were \$27 billion, about 27 times what they were in the mid-1950s. Increased labor force participation by women has increased the opportunity cost of their time. In other words, the cost of preparing meals "from scratch" has risen. A second factor complementing this is a technological improvement, the introduction of the microwave oven. In fact, the widespread acceptance of microwave ovens occurred because of the increasing opportunity cost of time for housework. Entrepreneurs look for areas in which opportunity cost is rising to get some ideas about new technology. Ask the class to list other devices that fall under this heading. One of the more recent additions to the list is the Roomba, a robotic vacuum cleaner that is part of a line of personal robots produced by iRobot (<http://www.irobot.com>).

B. Scarcity and Choice in an Economy of Two or More

1. Now there are two decision makers—Bill and Colleen. Their preferences, skills, and abilities probably differ. They will have to decide how much of each product each person should produce. They will probably benefit from specialization and trade.

TEACHING TIP: Students often have difficulty remembering that opportunity cost and comparative advantage are intertwined. Try using the term *comparative opportunity cost advantage* when calculating who should specialize in what. It helps students to remember that comparative advantage is what matters when calculating who should produce which good to maximize the gains from trade. ■

2. Specialization, Exchange, and Comparative Advantage: David Ricardo formulated the *theory of comparative advantage*, the idea that specialization and free trade will benefit all trading partners, even those that may be “absolutely” more efficient producers. (As we know today, this must be true of any voluntary exchange.) Ricardo’s most important point is that everyone—every individual, firm, and country—has a comparative advantage at something *even if another has an absolute advantage at producing all goods and services*. Trade and specialization allow the most efficient producer to produce each good. This increases productivity and aggregate output. “Learning by doing” means specialization will improve each worker’s job skills leading to further productivity increases.

A producer has an *absolute advantage* over another in the production of a good or service if he or she can produce that product using fewer resources. A producer has a *comparative advantage* over another in the production of a good or service if he or she can produce that product at a lower *opportunity cost*.

In the text’s example, Colleen has an absolute advantage at both cutting logs and gathering food. In this context, *absolute advantage* means one person can create a product using fewer resources than the other person. By contrast, *comparative advantage* means one person can make a product at a lower *opportunity cost* than the other.

Trade means both parties can consume at points outside their PPFs. This demonstrates the gains from specialization and trade.

TEACHING TIP: Comparative advantage is extremely important. It is the economic motivation for exchange between individuals (roommates, workers within an office, etc.); groups of individuals (divisions within a company, firms that specialize in productive tasks within an economy); and nations (international trade). Ask students to give examples from their own experiences. For example, who does which chores in their families and why? ¶

TEACHING TIP: Walk through the example on pages 29–31 in the text in class. Do the calculations of opportunity costs. Show how Figure 2.3 on page 31 is constructed. It’s worth the time. If you don’t like the example in the text, try the following alternative example. Suppose Colleen and Bill subsist on fish and coconuts. Catching fish requires patience and good vision. Picking coconuts requires climbing ability and manual dexterity. Colleen can catch 18 fish per day or pick 36 coconuts. It costs her $36/18 = 2$ coconuts per fish or $18/36 = 0.5$ fish per coconut. Bill can catch 9 fish per day or pick 27 coconuts. It costs him $27/9 = 3$ coconuts to catch a fish or $9/27 = 0.33$ fish to pick a coconut. Colleen has a comparative advantage at fishing since one fish costs her only 2 coconuts compared to 3 for Bill. Bill has a comparative advantage at picking coconuts since it costs him 0.33 fish per coconut while it costs Colleen 0.5 fish per coconut. Colleen should specialize in fishing while Bill should specialize in picking coconuts. Be sure the students understand how these calculations are done and why the numbers are opportunity costs. ¶

3. Weighing Present and Expected Future Costs and Benefits: There is a trade-off between present and future benefits and costs. The simplest example of trading present for future benefits is saving part of our income, which allows us to consume more in the future.

TEACHING TIP: This is a good place to introduce the time value of money. Make the point that the interest rate is the marginal opportunity cost of consumption today and the marginal benefit for saving. ¶

4. Capital Goods and Consumer Goods: *Consumer goods* are goods produced for present consumption. When a society devotes a portion of its resources to investment in capital, it is trading present benefits for future benefits. *Investment* is the process of using resources to produce new capital. By giving up some production of consumer goods today in order to produce more in the future, society will be able to consume more in the future.

TEACHING TIP: Emphasize that economists are quite specific when defining investment and capital. *Capital* means physical capital—buildings and machines. *Investment* is the process of creating new capital, often involving the construction industry. This is especially important when teaching macroeconomics. ◀

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

Introduce the idea of human capital. Explain that education is an investment in human capital. Draw on the analysis of the cost of going to college (from Chapter 1) to consider it as investment. Is it a trade-off of current benefits for future benefits? What are those benefits? ■

C. The Production Possibility Frontier

1. The PPF can be used to show the principles of constrained choice and scarcity.
 - a. A *production possibilities frontier* is a graph that shows all the combinations of goods and services that can be produced if all of society's resources are used efficiently.

TEACHING TIP: Figure 2.5 on page 33 shows a PPF for the economy. This graph will be useful when discussing these concepts. Make frequent references to various points on the graph as you define these terms. For example, point *D* is inefficient because it's possible to increase production of capital without decreasing production of the other good. And point *G* is unattainable without technological improvements or economic growth. ◀

- b. All points on the curve are combinations of output produced using full resource employment and production efficiency.
 - c. *Production efficiency* means producing a given combination of outputs at least cost. This implies producing the maximum quantities of both goods given society's resources and technology.
 - d. Points inside the curve are achievable but are not efficient. Points outside the curve are unattainable.
 - e. Different points on the PPF show the quantities of each of the two goods. At point *F* the economy is producing more capital goods and less consumer goods than at point *E*. In subsequent years, the PPF will shift out further from point *F* than *E*.

TEACHING TIP: The presentation of the PPF is an excellent time to reinforce the way in which one should detail and use an economic model. Lay out the assumptions, being sure all variables are clearly defined, and use the model to explain what it is designed to explain (or predict). Advise students who are hesitant to work with graphs that the appendix to Chapter 1 provides a good review. ◀

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

Draw a PPF for the choice between military goods and consumer goods. Use that to start a discussion about economies during the Cold War. How have things changed since the Cold War ended? ■

2. Unemployment

- a. Every point inside the PPF is *inefficient* because some resources aren't being used. At point D in Figure 2.5 there is unemployment.
 - b. Inefficiency and unemployed resources mean production of either good can be increased without reducing production of the other. Along the PPF this is not possible.
 - c. Unemployment of labor also means unemployment of capital.
3. Inefficiency: An economy can be operating at full employment and still be inside the PPF. Although resources are being fully used, they are not being allocated to their most productive uses.

TEACHING TIP: Suppose LeBron James, a well-known professional basketball player, was forced to teach economics. Presumably that would not be his most productive activity. ◀

4. The Efficient Mix of Output: To be efficient, an economy must produce what people want. This means choosing the right point on the PPF. This is called *output efficiency*.

TEACHING TIP: Extreme examples can help students see the difference between allocative efficiency and productive efficiency. Suppose all of the land, labor, and capital in the country were used to produce something students might find undesirable, say Brussels sprouts or turnips. As long as the economy is producing the maximum amount possible of that good, then productive efficiency is achieved. However, the economy is not producing the best mix of outputs because the mix of goods is not allocatively efficient. Make it clear to students that points on the curve represent a productively efficient combination of resources, but not necessarily an allocatively efficient combination of resources. *Productive efficiency* means all resources are being fully used. *Allocative efficiency* means the economy is producing the combination of goods and services consumers want to buy. ◀

5. Negative Slope and Opportunity Cost: The negative slope of the PPF (down from left to right) illustrates opportunity cost. To have more of one good there must be a sacrifice of the other. The *marginal rate of transformation* (MRT) is the slope of the production possibilities frontier (PPF). In Figure 2.7 on page 35 the MRT is the quantity of additional corn that can be produced when wheat production is reduced by one million bushels.
6. The Law of Increasing Opportunity Costs: The slope of the PPF is not only negative, but also increasing (the curve is concave). This shape implies increasing opportunity cost. Since the PPF gets steeper as you move along the horizontal axis, greater quantities of the good on the vertical axis must be given up in order to produce one more unit of the good on the horizontal axis.

Unique Economics in Practice

Sometimes, government contributes to allocative inefficiency. Under current U.S. law, ethanol intended for use as vehicle fuel must be made from corn. Part of this law imposes a tariff of \$0.54 on every gallon of ethanol imported into the U.S. This tariff is aimed squarely at Brazil, which produces ethanol from cane sugar at about 20 percent of the cost of producing ethanol from corn. Technologically, producing ethanol from sugar needs only water and yeast, while corn needs to be cooked before fermentation. The result has been high corn prices leading to high prices of many other foods, such as beef and chicken because those animals feed on corn. Producing ethanol from sugar in the U.S. is economically unattractive because the government restricts sugar imports. The price of sugar in the U.S. is about twice the world price due to these import restrictions. While the U.S. economy may be productively efficient, it is not allocatively efficient, largely because of these policies. Figure 2.6 on page 34 in the text can be used as an example of this with very few changes. In fact, the ongoing example of increasing opportunity cost as the quantity of corn increases fits this example perfectly.

Question: Why does the government impose tariffs on ethanol and sugar imports?

Answer: Special interest groups seek ways to increase their incomes. One method they use is lobbying Congress to restrict imports and other forms of competition. In this case, those groups have been quite successful.

7. *Economic growth* is an increase in the total output of an economy. It occurs when a society acquires new resources or when it learns to produce more using existing resources. Growth causes an outward shift of the PPF. Growth is an increase in the total output of an economy.

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TEACHING TIP: Demonstrate that the absolute value of the slope of the PPF at any given point measures the opportunity cost of one more unit of what is being measured on the X-axis in terms of what is measured on the Y-axis. The reciprocal of the slope measures the opportunity cost of a unit of Y in terms of X.

The table below shows the cost of one more bushel of corn between each pair of adjacent points in Table 2.1 (page 35). Since corn output is on the vertical axis, the slope will increase as you move from point A to point E. The slope is approximately the opportunity cost. (The slope is not exactly the opportunity cost because the slope of the secant line is not the same as the slope of the PPF at either endpoint.)

The textbook example as well as the slope calculations are in the Excel workbook for this chapter.

Points	Slope
$B \Rightarrow A$	-2.00
$C \Rightarrow B$	-1.29
$D \Rightarrow C$	-1.09
$E \Rightarrow D$	-0.50

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

Growth is what happens when you relax the restrictive assumptions (fixed resources and technology) used to draw the first PPF. Have students consider what happens if a change in resources or technology affects society's ability to produce one product but not the other. This can lead into a discussion of how the Internet has changed productivity in different industries. ■

Unique Economics in Practice

This example shows how an increase in productivity in one sector of the economy can actually raise the opportunity cost of production in other sectors. During the mid-1980s, the lumber industry announced that a cord of wood (a 4-by-4-by-8 foot pile) could be converted into 942 one-pound books, 2,000 pounds of paper, 61,370 number 10 envelopes, or 7,500,000 toothpicks.

Measure the opportunity cost of books in terms of “toothpicks forgone.” Given the data above, the opportunity cost of a book is $7,500,000/942 = 7,961$ toothpicks per book. Suppose that a technological advance in the toothpick industry (perhaps a waste-reducing technique) enables more toothpicks, say 9,000,000, to be created from a cord of wood. Question: What happens to the opportunity cost of producing a book when productivity increases in the toothpick manufacturing industry?

Answer: The opportunity cost of producing a book increases! Now, one book “costs” $9,000,000/942 = 9,554$ toothpicks, even though there has been no change in book-producing technology.

8. Sources of Growth and the Dilemma of the Poor Countries

- a. Historically, the two most important sources of growth have been the accumulation of capital and technological advance.
- b. For poor countries, taking resources out of the production of consumer goods is very difficult because they are living so close to subsistence levels. This lack of saving can make it difficult for them to accumulate capital, pay for research and development, and grow.

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TEACHING TIP: There are several directions you can go from here. It appears that poor countries are destined to remain poor based on this analysis. However, recent research by Lucas and Romer seems to show that accumulation of human capital is more important than either physical capital or technology. And Lawrence Summers has estimated the rate of return on educating women in less developed countries is more than 20 percent. ◀

- D. The Economic Problem: How do different economic systems answer the three basic questions?

Economics in Practice: Trade-Offs among the Rich and Poor, p. 39

Poor countries are very poor. Consumers spend well over half their income on food. But they still make choices. About 10 percent of income is spent on sugar. About the same amount is spent on weddings, funerals, and other festivals. Even poor economies find the time and income for entertainment.

III. Economic Systems and the Role of Government, pages 39–42

There are different types of economic systems:

- A. *Command Economies* are those in which the central government either directly or indirectly sets output targets, incomes, and prices. There are few true command economies left in the world. Even China has become a “magnet for private capital and entrepreneurship.”

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

Ask the class if they can name any countries that are pure (or almost pure) command economies. Two examples are Cuba and North Korea. You can get a cheap laugh by referring to the People's Republic of Santa Monica (California) as a third example. ■

- B. *Laissez-Faire Economies: The Free Market*

A *laissez-faire* economy is one in which individuals and firms are free to pursue their own self-interest without central direction or regulation. The *market* is the institution through which buyers and sellers interact and engage in exchange. (“Laissez-faire” is from the French: “allow [them] to do.” Laissez-faire economies rely on *markets*, institutions through which buyers and sellers interact and engage in exchange. Its characteristics include:

1. *Consumer Sovereignty* is the idea that consumers ultimately dictate what will be produced (or not produced) by choosing what to purchase (and what not to purchase). The mix of output produced is dictated by the tastes, preferences, and incomes of consumers.
2. *Individual Production Decisions: Free Enterprise:*
Free enterprise is the freedom of individuals to start and operate businesses in search of profits. This increases output and develops new production techniques.
3. *Distribution of Output:* Also determined in a decentralized way, the distribution depends on a household's income and wealth. *Income* is the amount the household earns in a year. *Wealth* is the households accumulated saving (assets) out of income.
4. *Price Theory:* Prices are the basic coordinating and signaling mechanism. *Wage rates* are the prices of various kinds of labor.

- C. *Mixed Systems, Markets, and Governments*

All real-world economies are mixed, with differing degrees of government intervention. Market systems have advantages, but are not perfect. However, remember the “law of unintended consequences.” Government intervention may make things worse instead of better. Government sets and enforces the rules for an economy. Two important rules are the protection of private property and the enforcement of laws governing intellectual property.

TOPIC FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

Have students research countries in transition and consider the problems and challenges faced in the process. ■

IV. Looking Ahead, page 42

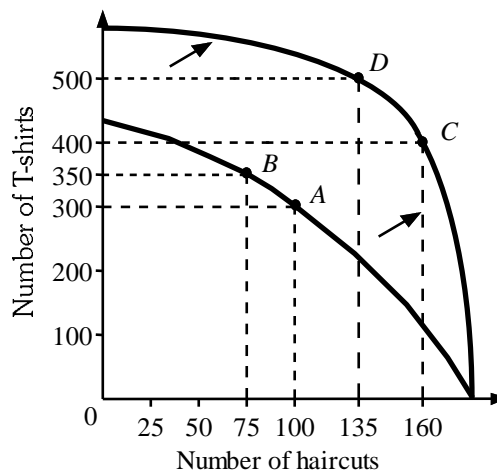
The next chapter discusses how markets work.

EXTENDED APPLICATION

Application 1: The Rising Cost of Services

Consider how the cost of services tends to rise over time. Why do items like haircuts, medical care, and education keep getting more and more expensive, both absolutely (they cost more dollars) and relatively (they require a larger and larger portion of our incomes)? Using the concept of opportunity cost, the production possibilities frontier, and a little common sense, we can come up with a realistic answer.

The three items mentioned above are examples of services. A service is, by definition, provided by workers directly to consumers. (One of the fastest-growing service sectors in the United States is meals eaten away from home.) A service is always consumed the moment it is produced. It cannot be brought home in a shopping bag or resold to someone else. Services can't be inventoried. To keep the analysis simple, let us assume that a nation can produce only one good (T-shirts) and one service (haircuts). The nation's production possibilities frontier is shown in the following graph:



Initially, at Point A, the economy is producing 100 haircuts and 300 T-shirts per day. Between points A and B the opportunity of producing 50 more T-shirts (increasing from 300 to 350) requires the sacrifice of 25 haircuts (decreasing from 100 to 75). The marginal rate of transformation is thus $50/25 = 2.00$. Now (as students who are taking microeconomics will see later on) relative prices in a market economy usually correspond quite closely to opportunity costs. That is, if producing 50 more T-shirts uses resources that could otherwise produce 25 haircuts, then a haircut should cost about two times the cost of a T-shirt. Let us suppose that for this economy at Point A, each T-shirt costs \$5 and each haircut costs \$10.

Many economists believe that the growth of productivity (output per hour) is much slower for services than for goods. This is easy to see in the case of T-shirts versus haircuts. Over the past 50 years, the number of T-shirts a worker can produce in an hour has increased dramatically due to technological advances in cotton-picking, weaving, and assembly-line production techniques. Over the same period, however, the number of haircuts a barber could perform in an hour has probably increased very little, if at all.

The effect of this asymmetrical change in productivity is illustrated in the diagram. Note that the vertical (T-shirt) intercept of the production possibilities frontier has increased, reflecting an increase in the maximum quantity of T-shirts that could be produced—after the productivity change—if all resources were devoted to T-shirt production. But the horizontal (haircut) intercept remains the same, as there has been no productivity change in this industry.

Suppose that the economy ends up at Point *C* on the new PPF. The economy is producing more T-shirts (160) and more haircuts (400). In addition, the opportunity cost has increased. As the economy moves from Point *C* to Point *D* (after the productivity change) it could produce 100 additional T-shirts with a sacrifice of 25 haircuts. The opportunity cost is now 4.00 instead of 2.00. In other words, even though there has been no change in haircut technology or productivity, the opportunity cost of haircuts has risen! One haircut should now cost the same as 10 T-shirts. If T-shirts continue to cost \$5 each, then haircuts should rise in price to \$50. Alternatively, if T-shirts fall to \$1.50 each, haircuts should remain priced at \$15. Either way, the relative price of haircuts will rise, as the opportunity cost of haircuts has risen.

This simple analysis has far-reaching implications. It explains why college tuition rises faster than the general price level, as providing an education relies heavily on services (teaching, building maintenance, administrative services) rather than goods. Similarly, it suggests that ongoing efforts to reform health care may be only partially successful. We can certainly choose, as a nation, to provide better health care to more of our population. But if manufacturing productivity continues to increase faster than productivity in medical services, then the relative price of health care like the relative price of haircuts, will rise.