Fels was elected president of the Southern Economic Association for 1966-67 and the Midwest Economics Association for 1984-85. In 1970, he became Secretary-Treasurer of the American Economic Association (AEA) and moved its office from Evanston, Illinois to Nashville, where it has remained since. He remained Treasurer of the AEA from 1976-87. While an officer of the Association, he was instrumental in starting the Journal of Economic Perspectives (JEP), a publication designed to showcase new ideas and policy issues in economics in language accessible to people who are not professional economists. The Association’s financial capacity to initiate the JEP by 1987 reflects Fels’ astute management of the Association, which in 1970 was teetering on the edge of a financial cliff.

Fels’ initial research focused on the theory of business cycles and on the explanation of American business cycles between 1865 and 1897. This research eventually led to Fels’ first book on American business cycles, which included an analysis of the depression of the 1890s. Scholars have subsequently cited Fels’ estimates of the turning points of particular business cycles. Fels examined the four main approaches that scholars had taken to business cycles: the inductive approach of the National Business of Economic Research (NBER), the deductive, the econometric, and the historical approaches. After criticizing the first three, he opted for the historical one, with its tailor-made (rather than generic) explanation of individual cycles.

In 1964 Fels published an edition of Schumpeter’s monumental Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical, and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process (1939), which he abridged to less than half its original length in order to make it accessible to other economists. This was a labor of love, to which Fels added an introduction and (as an epilogue) an eighteen-page summary attempting to reduce this long-winded work to its essentials. Reducing lengthy prose to its essentials was one of Fels’ particular skills. One author of this biographical note once received a two word letter from Fels. Later, he discovered an even shorter letter Fels had sent to someone. After the salutation, it said simply: “No.”


Sometime in the 1950s, a growing interest in research on teaching economics began to compete with Fels’ work on business cycles. He wrote his first article about economic education in 1955, a note in the American Economic Review titled “On Teaching Elementary Economics.” It introduced two themes that characterized Fels’ contributions to the teaching of economics for the subsequent forty years. First, he argued that if economists were to learn how to improve the teaching of economics, they needed to abide by the same methodological standards to which they subject their analysis of other subjects. Second, he initiated his career-long emphasis on teaching a few important ideas very well.

Fels devoted his 1968 Southern Economic Association Presidential Address to hypothesis testing in economic education research, exhorting economists to abandon anecdotes in favor of systematic evidence. Indeed, in one of his last publications (1993), Fels continued to press for carefully modeled theories evaluated with sound evidence. Evaluating a symposium about how experimental economics can be used to improve the teaching of economics, he noted the irony that none of the authors had performed a controlled experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of their proposed use of controlled experiments.

Sound measures of learning are necessary to conduct quantitative studies of the effectiveness of teaching methods. To further this approach, in 1968 Fels chaired a blue-ribbon committee to prepare a standardized test for use in the college-level introductory economics course. The committee produced two versions of a microeconomics and two versions of a macroeconomics Test of Understanding College Economics (TUCE). The original TUCE and its revised version (published in 1980 and 1990) have been used in hundreds of studies of teaching effectiveness. The creation of this examination was crucial to the expansion of research on effective teaching in economics, for without a reliable and valid test instrument it is difficult to conduct persuasive empirical studies.
The impact of the TUCE extended beyond its role in facilitating research, however. By focusing on analysis and application questions, the TUCE encouraged faculty to de-emphasize the teaching of economics as a list of terms and a set of facts, and to focus instead on the role of the deductive logic and repetitive applications of powerful economics principles to realistic problems.

In the 1970s, Fels reinforced his emphasis on teaching a few important principles very well through repetition. To mastery of the basic economics principles he added the ability to analyze policy issues systematically using economics principles. To facilitate policy analysis, he created the seminal Casebook of Economic Problems and Policies: Practice in Thinking (1974), which encouraged students to work through contemporary economic policy issues found in newspapers and magazines.

Fels applied his principles to his teaching at Vanderbilt. He was known for high standards in teaching Economics 101. Few students missed exams, because word-of-mouth information that the make-up exams were oral, consisting of one question with follow-ups to discover if the student really understood the material, ensured that few students missed the original written examination. In the 1970s Fels developed an innovative self-paced introductory economics course. Students who completed the course all received an A. The rest received an F. The average grade in the course did not vary much from other Vanderbilt courses, but the absence of any Bs, Cs, or Ds was peculiar. There is a (perhaps apocryphal) story that circulates at Vanderbilt, of a dissatisfied student visiting Fels’ office after a course ended. The student demanded to know why he had received a D in the course. A calm answer came from Fels: “Because you did very well on the final examination.”

Fels served for many years on the American Economic Association’s Committee on Economic Education, and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Joint Council on Economic Education (now the Council for Economic Education). His vigilance for high quality economics content in National Council publications is legendary. Fels was honored with the National Council on Economic Education and the National Association of Economic Educators’ Distinguished Service Award in 1989. In 1993, he received the National Council on Economic Education Board of Trustees’ Marvin Bower Award. The Bower Award is given to an economics educator who has had a distinguished career in economic education marked by leadership and innovation; who has contributed to economic education through outstanding teaching, publication, or administration, and who has demonstrated an unusual ability to communicate the goals and the content of economic education to a variety of audiences. This award describes well Rendigs Fels’ many contributions to the economics profession and almost two generations of students at Vanderbilt University.

by John Siegfried
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