



## Peak Oil 101: Why Isn't This Class Available Yet in My College?

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*This is a guest post from Max Arturo Alcala Sainz.*

Currently, the list of academic institutions offering relevant and up-to-date information and courses geared to confront the imminent energy slope is awfully short. If you have ever tried to enroll in your local university for some hands-on Peak Oil learning experience, you may have found yourself disappointed in knowing that no such course is offered. Even in certain [high-level economics courses](#) that scrape at energy depletion and natural resources, you will probably be able to teach your professor a thing or two (if you are a keen reader of TOD). :)

Now, this is a very wide generalization. There are quite a few universities that are currently [pushing the envelope in Ecological Economics](#), [Energy Economics](#) and developing some very insightful research (Dr. Hall's [EROEI paper](#) is a good example of students and prof. working together in these issues). Every day, more and more faculty is ramping up on their knowledge of Peak Oil nationwide and passing on the news to students. Still, if students are not fortunate enough to be near the handful of universities that offer Peak Oil-related syllabi (including [Duke](#), [Oregon U](#), [URI](#), [Vanderbilt](#) and others), chances are they will be stuck without any classroom education regarding declining energy and what to do about it. Even in universities where one may find Peak Oil information, open conferences and non-official meetings are significantly more frequent than formal classes and structured courses. Given that universities are the ideal spawning grounds for elaborating on and raising **awareness** of declining energy-related topics, it's worth to analyze a bit more why such a weighty matter is not being fully discussed and integrated into university curricula all over the country.

*note:* Some of the links are kinda old. You might do well contacting the university directly if you are interested in taking classes.

It might not seem that Peak Oil is taking a long time to propagate itself in academic circles, because the standard protocol for new theories dictates a hefty amount of time for discussion, peer review, and proven results (in fact, some may say that this issue has been spreading out incredibly fast for academic standards). There is no getting around this buffer, since it puts a barrier against unfounded knowledge and weak arguments ever getting into the classroom. Nonetheless, the inherent urgency of Peak Oil and the disastrous consequences entailed command a higher priority in the list of newcomer theories to be tried and proven by academic circles in all disciplines. One might dream as far away as to think that Peak Oil theory will be included in syllabi for children in elementary school in a near future, but even [climate change being taught to kids](#) is still receiving attacks nowadays. It is a good bet to first tackle university settings.

Here is a tiny list describing some of the problems Peak Oil runs into while trying to get into the classrooms. In this post I wish to remain focused on the academic, administrative barriers for Peak Oil in the classroom; other elements that also affect the acceptance of Peak Oil in the media, politics and general public have been discussed far more skillfully [in other posts](#) (and [here](#), and

- **The University's flexibility regarding course syllabi and lecture acquisition:** The location of the university, its funding (state or private) and the university's internal regulations will all affect how much liberty a professor has while teaching his classes. Different states will have unique requirements for university syllabi and these affect how much cutting-edge discussion (Peak Oil included) a lecturer will be able to inject into his class. Many professors will use seminars and open discussions to discuss topics not necessarily included in their syllabi, but we are interested in full-fledged, compulsory classes that will hopefully reach all of the students and let them know about Peak Oil.

- **The conservative approach of many Economic schools.** Let us think of "conservative" as a broad, neo-classical economics perspective where growth is considered to be exponential and infinite without taking into account the geophysical limitations of planet Earth. This stereotype only serves to help paint the typical situation in an Economics school of a "typical" university. I am aware that the logical structure I am following has several flaws, but I intend to use it only for illustrating purposes.

This conservative approach we are talking about will busy itself more with the financial, socioeconomic, equity, and international aspects of economics, rather than the energy standpoints of sustainable economics. We can stereotype this approach as what has been taught in Economic schools for the last decades: everything but sustainable, energy-measured economics with strong ties to Natural Sciences, Ecology and Geophysics.

Now, if "Peak Oil 101" existed, it would more than likely first be housed in the School of Economics (Maybe the school of Natural Sciences?) of the "typical" university. If this is to be true, then that means that at least a group of lecturers and professors from that School have a good understanding of Peak Oil and consider Economics to be a wholesome, interconnected discipline that lacks many current "conservative" assumptions. From point A of current conservative economics, to point B of energy econometrics-orientated Economics, a number of situations could take place.

One possibility is that the change in economic schools could take a great deal of time (or never happen at all), regardless of the forthcoming consequences of Peak Oil. It's all too easy to throw the blame around, especially with Peak Oil. In this scenario, experts and academics would go back and forth, blaming the government, the society and Tuna fish for the eventual break-down of financial systems and conventional institutions. Thus, the real cause of economic failure would never be subject to academic study. Another more hopeful alternative is that Economic schools trace the symptoms of market failure and societal breakdown to their roots on their own, and eventually come to terms with Peak Oil knowledge. The acceptance of Peak Oil would imply a change in many fundamental economic assumptions that would, in turn, take a great deal of time to take hold of classrooms. Then again, this would not be the first time that academia lags behind on accepting evidently visible facts. Only time will tell how Peak Oil knowledge will trickle down from the Sustainable Economics roots it is based upon to commonplace Economics, but in my personal opinion it is a bleak immediate future. It will take fierce determination from both students and professors to put Peak Oil in the university map, at least in the Economic disciplines.

*Note:* This is a particular situation of the School of Economics. I am personally inclined to think that other schools (such as Geophysics) would more easily understand Peak Oil, and embrace it faster. I would like other ideas regarding this.

- **The multidisciplinary nature of Peak Oil.** Peak Oil is multidisciplinary in nature:

Geophysics, petrophysics, Economics, Forestry, Physics, Sociology, Chemistry... the list goes on. If it would take a determinate amount of time for a single School (Economics, say) to fully adopt Peak Oil as a reality, it is likely that the other disciplines would be more inclined towards following suit. But the amount of time for multiple disciplines to take full swing would be deadly in the long run, as [some predictions state](#). Economists have been taking a liking to introducing Psychology, Sociology and other interdisciplinary elements into their work in the last years. Let us hope that this trend continues into the Natural Sciences and the other disciplines that help Peak Oil make sense.

- **Funding orientation and Trustee objectives.** Many universities don't exactly have their focus placed upon promoting new ideas, such as Peak Oil. While private universities have the most lax funding available, they also have diverse priorities: promotion, prestige, and grants all play a decisive factor as to how much incentive professors have to get entrepreneurial. State educational systems have the strong money leverage to play a big part in promoting Peak Oil, but policy decisions and politics also constrain that budget.

There is a multitude of other reasons why Peak Oil isn't quite taking off in many universities, and even the above points would each make for essays of their own. But it seems as if we won't be able to expect classes like Peak Oil 1101 available throughout all universities to freshmen anytime soon. This is no light topic, and requires deep, thorough analysis and discussion. But I think this is a good start to put issue out there. I would also like to open this up for discussions on how to get the ball rolling in many universities through the help of the excellent contributors we have here in TOD. I know we already have some faculty here on board, so it would be great to hear from them!

Gail the Actuary's [University](#) syllabus seems like a good start for any potential classes regarding Peak Oil. I will try pushing harder in my own university to see if we can crank up some sort of seminar, at least. With any luck at all, I'll be able to register for some Peak Oil-ish class before I graduate. Please leave your opinions!



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