

[This material was developed for the 26th distribution of *The Invisible Forces*]

This is the 26th distribution of *The Invisible Forces* (TIF). As such, I thought there might be some value in presenting the proximate origins of purposes of TIF. In doing so, I draw upon the practice of Dorothy J. Gaither and John Brecher, the wine columnists of *The Wall Street Journal* for 12 years, who would periodically remind readers of their approach. You might want to read their last column, since it provides a splendid example of how to exit with dignity:

(<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703523504574603982462666024>).

For many years I have been taken by the expression “the invisible forces.” Although most students have heard of Adam Smith and “the invisible hand,” it was not until the first edition (1994) of David Colander’s *Microeconomics* and *Macroeconomics* that the expression “the invisible forces” was used to summarize a more comprehensive set of factors—economic, legal, political, social, and historical—that influence human behavior. Although this immediately struck me as useful, it took a while for it to be more fully integrated into my thinking and teaching.

Eventually, I came to incorporate the invisible forces in a diagrammatic representation of the statement “All human behavior can be interested as an outcome of choice.” This rather provocative statement, inspired by James Buchanan’s *Cost and Choice* (1969) and meant as a working hypothesis, expresses the view that: human behavior results from choice; choice necessitates alternatives and valuations; and alternatives and valuation depend upon an environment. Ultimately, just as human behavior depends upon an environment, so the environment depends upon human behavior. From there it was an easy, although not instantaneous, step to include the invisible forces in the environment.

The next step grew out of the student learning outcomes of the Department of Economics, my appreciation of which flowed from six years served as the Director of UNC Asheville’s Center for Teaching and Learning. One outcome states that “All students who take course in economics will . . . Learn how to apply economics to issues of contemporary concern, including but not limited to the environment, globalization, diversity, and sustainability.” Toward that end I started bringing *Wall Street Journal* articles to class to read and discuss. The articles supported the learning outcome and lent interest and relevance to the class.

Having done this for a few semesters, I checked in with my students about the articles. Did they add to the class? Definitely! Do you have any suggestions? Well, two students said, the articles waste a lot of paper—just send out the links! I thought about this and decided to take a “hybrid” approach: some paper copies and some links.

The last piece occurred to me in April 2011, near the end of the spring semester. One of UNC Asheville’s University Student Learning Outcomes states: “Students are prepared to engage in lifelong learning.” Well, I thought, why not provide an opportunity for lifelong learning? Why do the learning opportunities I provide have to stop with the end of the semester? I quickly came to see that the same vehicle that I used to distribute articles during the semester could be used indefinitely. And, with that realization, *The Invisible Forces* was born.

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