

Disciplinary Contents Requirement: Academic Non-Tariff Barrier in Interdisciplinary Communication

When a foreign firm assembles cars or other machinery, it may be required that a certain percentage of the parts come from the country where the factory is located. This is called "local contents requirement" and is a tool for protectionism. It is one of the non-tariff barriers to free market trade.

When an author writes a manuscript for a journal in a discipline, it is usually required that he/she reviews others' relevant works in that field. This is a sensible requirement.

But it becomes a non-tariff barrier in interdisciplinary communication just like the local contents requirement in industry. It slows down and discourages interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. For example, an engineer may have something useful to say about how to facilitate coordination among assembly line workers. However, in order for him/her to write an article in a management journal, he/she is required to review some management theories and to demonstrate that the author's idea has advantages over existing management theories. This requirement may sound reasonable to the insiders. But for an outsider, it may take months to scan and identify relevant theories even before reviewing them. The author is likely to have no time for such a task, and even if he/she does, the books and articles to be reviewed may not be readily available at his/her place of work. The probability of his/her writing a manuscript to the satisfaction of the editor of the journal is very low. But even if the editor sees the uselessness of the manuscript

without substantial review of relevant theories, the manuscript has to go through the referee process, and the referees would be unhappy if their favorite theories are not mentioned in the manuscript.

Some editors are flexible and put the manuscript in the category of "comments" which does not require the referee process. But there is a limit. The editor cannot print a full-length manuscript as a comment. Not everything can go through the back door.

Interdisciplinary communication is highly desirable and necessary between some fields, for example between engineering, economics, political science, psychology and sociology. Some interdisciplinary-sounding journals exist with titles such as economic psychology, but they tend to be *subdisciplinary* rather than interdisciplinary, with narrower requirements on the contents and format of the manuscripts.

The academic non-tariff barrier is a disciplinary protectionism which hinders interdisciplinary communication. Since the "local contents requirement" is necessary for *intra-disciplinary* manuscripts, it cannot be eliminated. A solution is to make a new interdisciplinary section in each journal, where full-length articles by outsiders can be printed without having to meet the local contents requirement. This section serves as a "free trade zone" of concepts and research findings.

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