“May the Lord grant that many scholars and economic experts take on the Economy of Communion as a viable resource to shape a new shared world order!” Cardinal Tarcisio Bertoni, Vatican Secretary of State, said in his homily at Chiara Lubich’s funeral on March 18, 2008. He was calling for the involvement of members of the academic community in bringing ahead the Economy of Communion in Freedom (EoC), an innovative economic system based on a culture of giving – instead of a culture of having – and applied in more than 700 businesses worldwide (www.edc-online.org).

The urgency of these “marching orders” was made more explicit by Pope Benedict XVI in his latest encyclical, Caritas in Veritate. Observing that “the traditionally valid distinction between profit-based companies and nonprofit organizations can no longer do full justice to reality or offer practical direction for the future,” the Holy Father identified “a broad intermediate area ... between the two types of enterprise.” He placed the EoC in this context, describing “a broad new composite reality embracing the private and public spheres, one which does not exclude profit,
but instead considers it a means for achieving human and social ends.” The EoC may be seen as both an answer to the challenges of our current economic problems and as fertile ground for exploration and development by the academic community.

The role of academia has traditionally been three-fold — to propose and develop research into new areas of knowledge, to engage students in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, and to contribute to transform the ways and structures of society. The EoC offers many opportunities in these areas and has resulted in a significant number of research efforts worldwide since 1991.

The EoC may be viewed through many filters, including, but not limited to, the perspectives of management and corporate governance, leadership studies, communication, psychology, Catholic social doctrine, and corporate social responsibility. Certainly some of these viewpoints are best suited for a secular environment, while others may be offered within a mission-driven program that is affiliated with a Catholic university.

There is a course at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, titled “Corporate Social Responsibility and Human Values.” It is offered once a year, meets weekly for 15 weeks, with a usual enrolment of 25 students. The goal is to introduce students to a new way of thinking in their future roles as employers, employees, colleagues and customers — the culture of giving, within the context of corporate social responsibility.

Offered in a university that was founded within the Presbyterian tradition, but that may be regarded essentially as a secular university, this is the only permanent course offered on the EoC in North America, although there have been one-time offerings and intensive workshops at a number of other institutions, including a collaboration with St. Mary’s University, a Catholic university in the same city.

Students begin the semester with an exploration of the role of business. Is it simply to maximize profits or does it have a responsibility to members of society? There are a number of developmental and integrative elements used throughout the course. For example, students are given two short readings prior to the first class representing a range of thought — Milton Friedman and Pope Benedict XVI.

The course’s syllabus clearly states: “Please note that the EoC has its genesis in a faith-based initiative, but that this course is not a religion course and that the initiative is not limited to members of any particular belief structure. The course is intended as a place for dialogue and
exploration of alternatives for the development of corporate social responsibility and human values.”

The development of the course takes the student from a profit-centered to a corporate social responsibility perspective, using specific companies as models. Other foundational topics include social enterprises and the UN Global Compact [www.unglobalcontact.org]. As the course develops, students are exposed to a number of resources, including academic and experiential articles and videos. An electronic discussion board is used to maintain contact between class meetings, with students posting their reflections in response to one question each week.

This process of introduction and inquiry is also founded on a modeling within the classroom of the guidelines of an EoC business, so that when the EoC is introduced in the fourth week of the course students have already experienced the aspects of reciprocity, communication, mutual respect, and other elements of the life of an EoC environment, albeit in the context of a classroom.

The result is a wide and wonderful range of projects that reflect student passions and interests, and that link to the EoC. For example, students have created a class web site, Youtube channel and Facebook group; a bibliography of EoC materials; a group for microcredit lending; a yet unpublished children’s book on the EoC; and a piano composition to accompany lyrics from Chiara Lubich’s meditation on unity.

“The economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, nor inherently inhuman and opposed to society,” Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical. “It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner.”

The course aims to provide a new perspective on the economic sphere, with a focus on corporate social responsibility. Ultimately, however, we all influence that economic sphere, whether as employers, employees, colleagues or consumers. We can all make a contribution toward bringing the “culture of giving” into our society.

Linda B. Specht is the director of the accounting program at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. She teaches financial accounting and auditing courses, as well as the course on Corporate Social Responsibility and Human Values. For information e-mail lspecht@trinity.edu.