

Economics for All

Women and non-white people are underrepresented in Economics, and all you must do is enter a classroom to see for yourself. I noticed this disparity among fellow students, as well as the instructors who taught me. The costs imposed on people who are shut out of the Economics profession are large and dispersed, as is the price we pay by restricting ourselves to a selected sample of research questions. In my role as a Graduate Student Instructor at the University of Michigan I have tried to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in three ways: writing diverse syllabi, promoting equitable access to insider knowledge, and fostering an inclusive classroom where students feel safe to explore ideas and encouraged to aim high.

Diversity in Content Taught

I had the privilege to teach as the primary instructor for the “Principles of Economics Experience” class to incoming first-year undergraduates at the Ross School of Business four times. The goal of the program is to help students from underrepresented backgrounds prepare for the rigors of a college classroom, in Mathematics, Writing, and Economics. As the instructor for Economics, I made a concerted effort to teach introductory Microeconomics with a focus on diverse topics and authors that are typically absent from introductory classes.¹ I taught students the basic tools of micro while focusing on markets for labor and studying three “gaps” between wages and wealth we find in the data: between poor- and rich-country workers, between women and men, and between Black and white people in America. Within each research question, I focus on developing their quantitative skills to be able to understand a key figure from the literature, and reasoning about the potential causes and consequences. I emphasize how segregation – at the border, in the workplace, or across neighborhoods – is common theme in perpetuating gaps in Economic outcomes that harm us all, and demand our attention as citizens and scholars.

I also feature the work of Economists like Lisa Cook, being real with my students about the hurdles she faced to make it in the Economics profession as a Black woman. For example, on the first day of class we listen to the National Public Radio (NPR) feature² “Story of a Paper” on Cook (2014), which estimates the impact of racial violence in America on patenting activity by Black people using a Difference-in-Differences research design.³ It illustrates the difficulties Lisa Cook faced in

¹ See [my website](#) for more details on this class, including my syllabus, lecture notes, and homework assignments.

² See the following link to listen for yourself: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/11/875445743/story-of-a-paper>

³ I study Difference-in-Differences research designs in my job market paper, which helps me navigate the nuances, both social and econometric, behind teaching Cook (2014) to an audience of young students of Economics who have just started building their quantitative economic reasoning skills.

getting her work published despite receiving encouragement from prominent Economists, ranging from ignorance by journal referees over definitions of what constitutes a slave to the classic derision that her conclusions are not sufficiently generalizable. I use this example to shed light on the problem of underrepresentation in Economics, but also to motivate my students to learn what it takes to understand the impressive methods used in Cook (2014). On the last day of class, we delve into Lisa's paper and contemplate what it means for our world today.

Equitable Access to the Hidden Curriculum of Economics

Another way I take seriously the task of making our field more inclusive for underrepresented people is by showing my students the institutional side of the Economics. For example, what does it take to contribute to modern economic work? How does an undergraduate connect with researchers to learn the trade? If they really love it, how do they get into grad school, and what do they say in their essays? These topics sample from a vast body of knowledge comprising the "hidden curriculum" in Economics. Students only see this if they have a parent in the field, or the wealth to attend a school with counselors possessing insider knowledge. I discuss these topics whenever possible and relevant in the classroom, and welcome my students to consider whether they could find joy and success in Economics, regardless of who they are. I also share resources from my journey as a student to help them navigate their own; for example, I share my statement of purpose when applying to graduate schools to prospective graduate students to illustrate what I believe admissions committees value in prospective graduate students.

When talking about what it takes to succeed as an economist, I emphasize that intelligence is neither sufficient nor necessary. Rather, a willingness to suffer through learning a difficult but important skill is the key ingredient to success. In this way, I hope to show there is nothing special about researchers besides how much we care about discerning truth. I advise my students to pursue research they care deeply about, and to consider their own lives and what matters to them as an effective way to uncover those questions. While some deride this approach as "me-search" I view it as critical to sustaining the arduous effort needed to follow through on a project that makes a meaningful contribution. My hope is to correct the implicit notions they may have of what it takes to make it in Economics and show that anyone can do it if they want to.

Inclusive Environment for all Students to Thrive

I seek to foster an inclusive and welcoming environment in my classroom for all students, promoting the trust necessary for them to freely contemplate and share ideas. I do this by

consistently welcoming questions and comments in lecture and faithfully integrating the ideas of all students brave enough to raise their hand. The only stupid questions are those that exist in our minds but aren't asked aloud, and I emphasize to my students the courage it takes to ask that one "easy-sounding" question that many other students also likely have. I try to be humble about what I know, how I came to know it, and what limitations I inherently face given my background. Again, there is nothing special about anyone we can reasonably discern through credentials, age, identity, or privilege. All it takes to contribute, either in a comment to the class or in a paper to a journal, is curiosity and sustained effort to learn a thing and then go out and teach it to the world.

In trying to promote a welcoming and safe environment, I devote serious attention to anonymous feedback and evaluations that students give me each semester. This is an important resource for me in learning about what works, what doesn't, and which needs exist among my students that I haven't sufficiently addressed. I ask them to be sincere in these evaluations, and to make the effort to write comments that address their needs. It has been extremely heartening to read their words of encouragement and praise over the years, but especially to hear out those students who answered my call to help me improve as an instructor by pointing out my areas for improvement. One way I try to make this process relevant to them is by being open about the role evaluations play in shaping academic careers, their potential misuse as a barometer of instructor popularity instead of effectiveness, and how they discriminate against women and non-white people.⁴ This highlights the institutional side of Economics once more, while being real with students about its on-going challenges to recruit and retain people it has historically shut out.

Sustaining Effort to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

I devote the last day of class in the Ross summer connection program to studying Cook (2014), an impressive paper which highlights not only the amazing power that economic reasoning enables, but also the substantial room still left to grow for Economics as a field. My last slide reviews all the "gaps" we study; the source of these disparities is well-understood, and the methods to close them are known. However, the most important questions that are still open relate to why.

Why don't we welcome more foreign workers in rich countries? Why don't we make having children a parenthood cost rather than a cost for women? Why don't we pay reparations to Black Americans harmed by slavery and systemic racism in the past and present?

⁴ For example, see Chisadza et al. (2019) *Race and Gender Biases in Student Evaluations of Teachers* who conduct a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) to study the impact of race and gender in student evaluations.

Elird Haxhiu

University of Michigan

haxhiu@umich.edu

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I encourage my students to ponder these questions and consider the role they could play in answering them. All they must do is care enough to summon the courage it takes to navigate a field known to be hostile to outsiders. As a white male living in a rich country, I have received many privileges that make me an insider. I have tried my best as an instructor and researcher to neutralize the costs our field imposes on women and non-white people, and I hope to continue learning how to do this better in the next phase of my career.