



ENGAGE TO ACHIEVE MORE

Discussing Race and Inequality in the Economics Classroom

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Introduction

Economics degrees in U.S. higher educational institutions skew significantly toward white students. In 2019, over 44 percent of all economics degrees were awarded to white students, while only 3.8 percent were awarded to Black students. Hispanic and Latino students fared a little better, earning almost 10 percent of the economics degrees awarded in the country.

These numbers are even more troubling when evaluated over time, and compared with other areas of study. Looking at STEM disciplines as a whole, the number of minority students earning degrees is on the rise. Looking at just economics, the number is actually going down.

It is clear there's a pipeline problem within the discipline as a whole, but ways to improve diversity within economics will most likely only work if they come from professors themselves.

It's troubling that most incoming freshmen have exposure to an economics class as a requirement, yet so many turn away from taking a follow-up course, or engaging in the discipline as their major.

What happens from that first introduction to turn so many students off, and how can we begin to repair the underlying issues causing the problem to begin with?



Removing Old Perceptions

The biggest barrier to minorities entering into economics as a major is the discipline's history of dealing with diversity questions. It just doesn't. The intolerance may stem from a lack of personal connection between those who often teach economics, and those who may want to study it. It may also be a result of the perception that discrimination doesn't "live" in economics.

However, students today want to bring their personal experiences into their studies, and for some discrimination is very much alive and well within economics. They've experienced it first hand, and when their questions are met with unwelcoming environments and dismissive answers, they're discouraged. No more economics majors.

Removing this rigidity and clearing away these assumptions is the first step to changing the educational environment around economics. Professors need to allow conversations involving lived experiences to happen in the classroom. Even better if they can apply them within the context of the class itself.

There needs to be a shift from saying the market is something that "fixes itself," to admitting it's something that is inherently unfair.

Making sure conversations like these happen often and early can potentially entice more students to stick around and select economics as a major. Reframing conversations will help students appreciate economics, and what their professors and economists are saying.



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Expanding Potential Possibilities

Another perception that makes economics less accessible takes the discipline beyond earning the degree. It's what you do with it afterward. Many students believe their only option in studying economics is to become an economist. They don't understand the potential of this area of study, and nobody is really explaining it to them.

Since most first year students, at least at larger schools, have a Principles of Economics requirement, you've got a perfect audience for demonstrating what economics really is. And, they haven't declared a major yet.

Showing these students the wide variety of opportunities that exist for someone with an economics degree could greatly change the game. Making sure they know that studying economics isn't limited to a career in the stock market (unless they want to) could be eye-opening to students who would have never given the discipline a second thought.

Most businesses have staff members with an economics background. This means students could work in any industry, from Wall Street to Major League Baseball.

Better exposure to this wealth of opportunities could help students who feel unheard to really see potential in this particular degree.



Deconstructing a Hostile Environment

The stringent set of rules associated with economics is often a huge turnoff. Nobody wants to be told what they “have” to do to succeed. Students want options, and economics has historically not been so great at presenting those.

This again circles back to admitting the existence of discrimination in the discipline. Professors need to stop claiming it's too rigid for discrimination to exist when personal experiences are saying the opposite. It's an immediate turnoff for students who know it's there to be told it's not. The professor arguing this will immediately lose all credibility with those students, and they'll be off to find another major that tells them the truth and gets their questions answered.

What's even more frustrating is that this rigidity goes against the very foundation of economics: analysis. There's always room for rigorous discussion and analysis—it's how findings are made. To put a cap on what those skills can get used for limits what questions can get answered, and that does not have to be the case.



Connecting with Economists Like Themselves

Breaking down existing barriers regarding how questions are addressed in economics sets a great foundation to bring new students into the major. But once there, it's equally important that those students see themselves within the discipline.

Connecting to mentors with a similar background, who've made it through, not only gives current students someone to talk to, it provides a prominent example of the success they can have. Especially with minority students working through the PhD program, having a mentor like themselves can create a sense of community they might not be able to find within their actual program. And, having a community makes a huge difference when it comes to setting and achieving goals.



Making Way for a Different Approach to Economics

Economics provides a toolkit to help people with questions use modeling to find answers. However, for a great many students, today's toolkit isn't answering today's questions. Some students may try to look harder, but if they still don't find their answers, they're going to give up.

Addressing the questions students have, and understanding that economics doesn't have to be this so rigid, can help erode the barriers that keep minorities out of the discipline. This will make economics more accessible and relatable from the moment their first economics class begins.



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