

Who Is a Member of the AEA?

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The appointment of a new Secretary of the American Economic Association provides an opportunity for assessing the Association's memberships trends and "market coverage." Toward these ends, I have assembled information about trends in both aggregate Association membership and the proportion of academic economists who are members of the Association, and a snapshot of 1996 academic membership rates classified by academic ranks, types of colleges and universities, and individual institutions at which assistant professors earned their Ph.D.

Aggregate AEA Membership Over the Past Century

Total membership data are derived from Association records. They include regular, junior, family, complimentary, life, and honorary members, and are reported in Table 1. Membership does not include the institutional subscribers to the Association's journals, who are mainly libraries. Although the Association was formed in 1886, reliable data on individual membership are available only from 1893.

Aggregate membership is characterized by lengthy periods of stagnant growth, and a few bursts of rapid expansion. The most rapid growth occurred between 1908 and 1912, when membership tripled. That rapid growth, however, was straddled by two periods of stagnation, 1902–1908, and 1912–1922, when membership barely budged. After modest growth in the mid-1920s, membership growth stalled again from 1925 through the outbreak of World War II. Membership expanded steadily

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Table 1

Annual Membership (Regular, Junior, Life, and Honorary) of the American Economic Association, 1893–1996

<i>Year</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Members</i>
1893	572	1928	2,710	1963	11,973
1894	572	1929	2,766	1964	13,025
1895	572	1930	2,797	1965	14,127
1896	568	1931	2,705	1966	15,229
1897	563	1932	2,569	1967	16,675
1898	571	1933	2,384	1968	17,835
1899	578	1934	2,506	1969	19,061
1900	621	1935	2,544	1970	18,908
1901	800	1936	2,621	1971	18,080
1902	860	1937	2,713	1972	17,286
1903	835	1938	2,824	1973	17,933
1904	870	1939	2,966	1974	18,348
1905	877	1940	3,148	1975	19,115
1906	871	1941	3,462	1976	18,512
1907	NA	1942	3,671	1977	16,802
1908	868	1943	3,798	1978	17,741
1909	1,205	1944	3,961	1979	19,459
1910	1,519	1945	4,154	1980	19,459
1911	2,190	1946	4,662	1981	19,936
1912	2,466	1947	5,329	1982	20,086
1913	2,249	1948	5,902	1983	20,162
1914	2,149	1949	6,631	1984	19,886
1915	2,091	1950	6,936	1985	20,606
1916	2,120	1951	7,068	1986	20,106
1917	2,170	1952	7,267	1987	20,092
1918	2,222	1953	7,335	1988	20,647
1919	2,216	1954	7,486	1989	21,570
1920	2,301	1955	7,555	1990	21,578
1921	2,335	1956	8,450	1991	21,491
1922	2,406	1957	8,600	1992	21,273
1923	2,587	1958	9,186	1993	22,005
1924	2,798	1959	10,159	1994	21,649
1925	2,916	1960	10,837	1995	21,565
1926	2,640	1961	11,054	1996	21,056
1927	2,664	1962	11,285	1997	21,720

Source: Report of the Secretary, *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings*.

during the war years, and then took off in the immediate postwar period, more than doubling from 4154 members in 1945 to 8450 in 1956, and then more than doubling again to 17,835 members in 1968, as American colleges and universities expanded at breakneck speed. The 460 percent growth in the Association's membership over the quarter century immediately following World War II accounted for 70 percent of the Association's current number of members. In the succeeding quarter century, membership increased only a further 10 percent, from 18,908 in

1970 to 21,565 in 1995. Looking only at the last decade, there was a mini-surge in membership from 1988 to 1993, but membership has since subsided back to the level of the late 1980s.

The recent experience of other social science associations can provide a benchmark for the growth of AEA membership. AEA membership grew 11.6 percent from 1970 to 1996. This is only modestly less than the weighted (by membership size) average of the growth rates of the American Association of Geographers (+15.6 percent), the American Historical Association (+2.1 percent), the American Political Science Association (-5.2 percent) and the American Sociological Association (+59.8 percent).¹

The historically slow growth in AEA membership since 1970 coincides with the appearance and expansion of numerous associations and journals that focus on specific subfields of economics. More narrowly self-defined “disciplines”—such as econometrics, economic history, or labor economics—provide opportunities for economists to gain increased recognition as bigger fish in smaller ponds (Frank, 1985). They also allow economists to gain recognition for their achievements among those they consider to be knowledgeable peers, and are a natural consequence of the growth of the economics discipline in general. The increased balkanization of economics causes fewer people to identify themselves as generalists. Indeed, the concept of a generalist may even take on a pejorative connotation as different technical developments in subfields make it increasingly difficult for any one person to understand frontier research across the entire horizon of economics. A natural outgrowth of economists’ increased orientation toward subspecialties is a decline in their identification with umbrella organizations, of which the American Economic Association is most prominent. These events are consistent with the relatively slow growth in Association membership since 1970, and also with the growing membership problems of regional economics associations.

Postwar Association Membership Rates at Research Universities

Membership in the American Economic Association is affected by both the number of professional economists and the proportion of them who join the Association. Some short-term declines in membership over the years seem to have been precipitated by increases in membership dues,² although it is hardly likely that AEA dues are sufficiently high relative to professional economists’ incomes to have a substantial impact on membership. What is more likely to affect membership is the number of professional economists and the benefits of Association membership to them.

¹ Association membership data were obtained from selected *Directories of Constituent Societies of the American Council of Learned Societies*.

² For example, dues were doubled in 1971, rising from \$10 to \$20. Membership declined by 8.6 percent from 1970 to 1972, falling from 18,908 to 17,286.

To examine trends in the proportion of professional economists who join the Association requires a measure of the stock of professional economists. Such data are unavailable. Thus, I identified a particular stock of economists—those on the faculty of a fixed set of large American universities—and measured Association membership among that group periodically since World War II. The membership rate is derived by matching Association membership records with faculty rosters for 1947–48, 1955–56, 1962–63, 1973–74, and 1984–85 laboriously collected for me by friends at 24 universities. Most of the rosters were gleaned from old university catalogs, many located in university archives, and were checked by current staff at each institution and then by myself. The 1995–96 rosters were taken from Hasselback (1996).

Market coverage of the Association in each of the six selected years since World War II is reported in Table 2. The membership rate of faculty at the 24 universities rose rapidly from 40 percent in 1947 to about 75 percent in 1955, and has remained relatively constant since then. Over the (approximate) quarter-century from 1947–48 to 1973–74, the number of Association members at the 24 universities in the sample rose by 360 percent; actual AEA membership increased by 340 percent over the same period. Over the 23 years since 1973–74, Association membership among faculty employed at the 24 sample institutions declined by 5 percent, however, while overall Association membership grew by 20 percent. This suggests that the rapid immediate postwar expansion of Association membership was stimulated by the growth in numbers of faculty at existing academic institutions, while the modest growth in Association membership that has occurred since the early 1970s has been concentrated more among academic economists employed by comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges, and by government and business economists.

The data in Table 2 indicate that Association market coverage among faculty at American research universities has remained between 75 and 80 percent since the early 1950s. Because the size of these faculties has declined since the mid-1980s, Association membership at research universities has fallen proportionately.

The substantially lower overall membership rate at the 24 universities in 1947–48 is caused by younger faculty—assistant and associate professors. The data reveal remarkable growth in Association membership among younger faculty between 1947–48 and 1955–56. This source of new members appears to be more important than growth in membership spawned by the postwar expansion of higher education in the United States. Although many economists are employed to teach principles of economics in college and university general education requirements, the number of undergraduate economics degrees awarded did not grow much immediately after World War II, holding steady at approximately 9,000 from 1948 until the early 1960s. The proportion of total undergraduate degrees accounted for by economics has remained relatively constant at about 2.2 percent for the last half century (Margo and Siegfried, 1995).

Since 1955–56, there has been little change in Association membership by academic rank. The membership rate of assistant professors has remained just above 70 percent. Full and associate professor membership rates have slipped mod-

Table 2

Proportion of Faculty at 24 American Universities Who Were Members of the American Economic Association in Selected Years

	1947-48	1955-56	1962-63	1973-74	1984-85	1995-96
Entire Sample ^a						
Number of Faculty (24 universities)	403	469	542	721	773	713
AEA Membership (%)	38	72	77	76	79	73
Sample Including Only Economists ^b						
Number of Faculty (20 universities)	298	369	448	600	644	585
AEA Membership (%)	39	74	79	74	78	76
Sample Including Only Economists with Rank Available ^c						
Number of Faculty (16 universities)	199	237	298	443	473	440
AEA Membership (%)	43	75	80	73	79	78
Full Professors	69	94	138	217	246	254
AEA Membership (%)	74	89	86	81	79	82
Associate Professors	48	52	75	97	89	86
AEA Membership (%)	44	81	83	68	79	71
Assistant Professors	45	63	65	113	121	91
AEA Membership (%)	22	73	71	65	81	73

a. Includes those listed in notes b and c plus Duke, LSU, North Carolina, and Princeton. Faculty lists for the latter four universities included some non-economists.

b. Includes those listed in note c plus Colorado, Florida, Illinois, and Yale. Rank breakdowns for the latter four universities were not available.

c. Includes Auburn, Chicago, Florida State, Indiana, Miami (Ohio), Michigan, Northwestern, Oregon, Purdue, Stanford, Tennessee, UCLA, Vanderbilt, Virginia, Washington State, and Wisconsin.

Source: Data collected directly from institutions, periodic AEA membership directories, and 1996 Association membership list.

erately. In sum, there appears to be little change in Association membership rates of economists at research universities in the United States since the 1950s.

Association Membership Patterns in 1996

Substantially more information about Association membership is available for 1996. Membership rates for 1996 are derived by matching Association records with lists of faculty at American colleges and universities compiled by Hasselback in the *1996 Prentice Hall Guide to Economics Faculty*. The *Guide* identifies over 8,000 economists in departments of economics at about 850 U.S. colleges and universities. Hasselback secured the information directly from departments, so it should include

both AEA members and non-members alike. The Vanderbilt University entry, for example, was perfectly accurate.

The *Guide* includes only four-year colleges and universities. There are approximately 1400 such institutions in the United States (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987). About 950 of them offer an undergraduate major in economics (Siegfried and Wilkinson, 1982). Many colleges that do not offer an economics major do have economists on their faculty, however, and some of those colleges may have a “department of economics.” So most, but certainly not all of the American academic departments of economics are included in the analysis.

Missing from the *Guide* are academic economists who are: employed at two-year colleges and universities; located in departments other than *the* Department of Economics (such as those with appointments in Schools of Public Policy, Agriculture, or Business); and located in departments of economics that are not included in the *Guide*. Also missing, of course, are non-academic economists, graduate students, and foreign economists, whether academic or not. Thus, the tabulations in the *Guide* that are used for the analysis here pertain to only a subset of (roughly 20 percent of) Association membership.

In addition to faculty in departments of economics, the *Guide* lists the dean of the school or college in which the department of economics is located administratively. Most of these deans are not economists. Many departments of economics also contain faculty who specialize in subjects other than economics, like accounting, marketing, law, or another social science. Non-economists, whether deans or regular faculty, have been excluded from this analysis when they could be so identified in the electronic file.³

In addition, I eliminated those whose terminal degree was a master’s in business administration, master’s in public affairs, law degree, education degree, or in a field that suggested they were housed in a department of economics for administrative convenience rather than for disciplinary coherence. I undoubtedly have not succeeded in identifying and excluding all of the non-economists. Some business faculty, for example, were not excluded because some departments did not identify the primary areas of research and teaching of their faculty. The *Guide* also includes emeritus faculty who are economists. They too have been excluded, as there is no way to distinguish emeritus faculty who are still professionally active from those who are completely retired and, accordingly, no longer part of the population of active professional economists.

After the exclusions, 7,704 faculty remained in the Hasselback file, an average of about nine per institution. Of these, 130 were identified as deans, 566 as chairs, 3,052 as full professors, 2,019 as associate professors, 1,745 as assistant professors, and 192 as instructors, lecturers, and adjunct faculty.

The benchmark for the analysis is the *Guide* file. Each economist in the *Guide*

³ Some are identified explicitly as non-economists in Hasselback’s electronic file, and others were excluded on the basis of their primary areas of research and teaching.

Table 3

Percentage of Faculty Who Are AEA Members by Rank, 1996

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Total Faculty</i>	<i>Percent Members</i>
Deans	130	46
Chairs	566	57
Professors	3052	59
Associate Professors	2019	50
Assistant Professors	1745	58
Instructors, Lecturers, Adjuncts	192	25
All Ranks	7704	55

Source: 1996 Prentice Hall Guide to Economics Faculty data disk and 1996 AEA membership list.

file was matched with AEA membership records, and identified as either a member or a non-member. The matching was done electronically. Name matching is not simple, as many names may be recorded slightly differently in the Hasselback file and the AEA membership list. For example, the Association's Treasurer (who *is* a member!) is listed as Hinshaw, C. Elton, in the Hasselback file and Hinshaw, Elton in AEA membership records.

Three patterns were matched: 1) complete names and ZIP codes; 2) last names (only) with full ZIP codes (which caught Hinshaw); and 3) last names, with first initial and the first two ZIP code digits. These matches revealed Association membership to be 55 percent of the Hasselback file. A careful manual check of the first 200 alphabetical Association membership records against the Hasselback file by Association staff uncovered only one Association member who had been overlooked—George Akerlof, whose address in the *Guide* was at California-Berkeley (on leave), but whose Association membership address in 1996 was at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. Slightly beyond the top 200 alphabetical listings is Orley Ashenfelter, editor of the *American Economic Review*, and an Association member, who also was not matched under any of the three criteria because the *Guide* misspelled his name. In addition to these two examples, there are undoubtedly other members who have been overlooked, and there may be a few false matches.⁴ The number of Association members matched to the *Guide* is 4,243 (out of a total of 21,056 active individual members in 1996). Because some non-economists remain in the *Guide* base, and because failures to match undoubtedly exceed the number of false matches, the proportion of *economics* faculty at the 850 institutions in the *Guide* who are members of the Association probably approaches 60 percent.

Membership propensity by 1996 academic rank is reported in Table 3. There

⁴ For example, if the two economists named Foster at ZIP code 37203 were both in the Vanderbilt economics department, they would both be counted as members even though only one paid Association dues in 1996.

Table 4

Percentage of Faculty Who Are AEA Members in 1996, by Employer's Institution Type

<i>Type of Institution</i>	<i>Total Faculty</i>	<i>Percent Members</i>
Research	2502	71
Doctoral	1206	59
Comprehensive	2993	41
Liberal Arts I	629	59
Liberal Arts II	205	37
Specialized	169	48
Total	7704	55

Source: 1996 Prentice Hall Guide to Economics Faculty data disk and 1996 AEA membership list plus Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: 1987 Edition*.

does not appear to be a relationship between academic rank and an economist's inclination to join the Association today, in contrast to 1947–48, as 58 percent of full professors and 56 percent of assistant professors are currently members. Associate professors are slightly less likely to be members. Somewhat surprising is the high proportion of deans who maintain their membership.

Membership propensity by type of institution is reported in Table 4, using the 1987 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classification. As would be expected, Association membership is highest among faculty at research universities. Almost all of the institutions that offer a Ph.D. in economics are among the 104 Carnegie-classified research universities. Association membership is lowest among faculty at comprehensive universities and less selective liberal arts colleges. These institutions include primarily regional public universities; private colleges and universities without graduate programs, which offer a majority of their degrees in professional programs; and private liberal arts colleges that are less selective in admissions.

Association membership could be arrested by shifts in the mix of academic institutions from those with higher to those with lower membership rates. This does not appear to explain the sluggish growth of Association membership over the past quarter century, however, since the types of institutions with the lowest Association membership rates (comprehensive universities and less selective liberal arts colleges) have lost market share to research and doctoral universities and selective liberal arts colleges over the period (Clotfelter et al., 1991, table 2, pp. 6–7).

The percentage of faculty at specific colleges and universities (with at least 20 faculty) who are members of the Association is reported in Table 5. None has 100 percent Association membership.⁵ Among institutions with 20 or more faculty listed

⁵ Of institutions with ten or more faculty, both Babson College and Swarthmore College have 100 percent Association membership rates.

Table 5

Percentage of Faculty Who Are AEA Members, by Institution with Twenty or More Faculty, 1996

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Number of Faculty</i>	<i>Percent Members</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Number of Faculty</i>	<i>Percent Members</i>
North Carolina State	24	92	Colorado	27	70
Stanford	38	92	George Mason	22	68
Auburn	20	90	Houston	25	68
Dartmouth	21	90	Kentucky	25	68
Maryland	40	90	Rochester	25	68
Delaware	27	89	Georgia State	28	68
Virginia	22	86	Illinois	47	68
Michigan State	41	85	Univ. of Washington	47	68
MIT	37	84	California-Davis	27	67
Purdue	23	83	West Virginia	27	67
Syracuse	23	83	Princeton	33	67
Washington University	23	83	Carnegie Mellon	23	65
Brown	24	83	South Carolina	23	65
Vanderbilt	29	83	Boston University	37	65
Connecticut	30	83	Texas	31	64
Northwestern	40	82	Rutgers-New Brunswick	35	63
Harvard	51	82	California-Irvine	21	62
Southern California	21	81	Massachusetts	24	62
Florida State	27	81	Iowa	26	62
Arizona State	25	80	American	23	61
Minnesota	29	79	California-San Diego	28	61
Ohio State	38	79	Wisconsin-Milwaukee	31	61
Boston College	23	78	Pennsylvania	38	60
Illinois-Chicago	22	77	Georgetown	22	59
California-Santa Barbara	26	77	Chicago	29	59
George Washington	30	77	CUNY-Queens	21	57
Texas A & M	31	77	Arizona	30	57
Georgia	20	75	Temple	30	57
William & Mary	24	75	Utah	23	56
Florida State	28	75	Virginia Tech	23	56
Indiana	28	75	California-Santa Cruz	20	55
UCLA	28	75	Howard	20	55
Miami-Ohio	31	74	Northern Illinois	22	54
California-Berkeley	38	74	Cornell	26	54
Yale	43	74	Villanova	21	52
New York University	46	74	Notre Dame	25	52
Penn State	30	73	South Florida	24	50
Michigan	47	72	New Orleans	21	48
Columbia	60	72	Illinois State	20	45
Duke	21	71	SUNY-Albany	20	45
Hawaii-Manoa	21	71	DePaul	22	45
Northeastern	21	71	Utah State	24	42
Iowa State	24	71	California-Long Beach	20	40
Pittsburgh	28	71	Texas-Arlington	24	38
North Carolina	35	71	South Dakota State	24	33
California-Riverside	20	70	Middle Tennessee State	25	32
Missouri	20	70	California State-Los Angeles	23	30
Wisconsin-Milwaukee	20	70	CUNY-Baruch	24	25
Tennessee	23	70	St. John's	31	23

Source: 1996 Prentice Hall Guide to Economics Faculty data disk and 1996 AEA membership list.

in the *Guide*, Association membership is at least 90 percent at Stanford, North Carolina State, Auburn, Dartmouth, and Maryland; it is at least 80 percent at Delaware, Virginia, Michigan State, MIT, Brown, Connecticut, Vanderbilt, Purdue, Syracuse, Washington University, Northwestern, Harvard, Florida State, the University of Southern California and Arizona State. Among universities with at least 20 faculty, AEA membership is less than 40 percent at St. John's, CUNY-Baruch, California State-Los Angeles, Middle Tennessee State, South Dakota State, and Texas-Arlington. The lowest Association membership rates among highly-ranked Ph.D. granting research universities (with at least 20 faculty) are at Cornell, Chicago and Pennsylvania (each with membership rates between 50 and 60 percent).

To investigate further differences in membership propensity among younger economists, assistant professors at the 850 institutions in the *Guide* were grouped on the basis of the university from which they earned their terminal (usually Ph.D.) degree. Association membership percentages by *terminal degree university* are reported in Table 6 for larger Ph.D. programs. There are some substantial differences. Among the larger Ph.D. programs, graduates of Princeton are most likely to join the Association (87 percent), followed by graduates of MIT (77 percent), California-Berkeley (75 percent) and Stanford (74 percent). In contrast, only 44 percent of recent Cornell graduates, 48 percent of Massachusetts, 50 percent of California-San Diego and Notre Dame, and 54 percent of recent Indiana and Minnesota graduates have joined the Association while they are assistant professors. The differences are even more dramatic among smaller programs (each with at least 10 graduates in the sample, however). Eighty-six percent of the assistant professors who graduated from the University of North Carolina and Washington University are Association members, as are 80 percent of the graduates of SUNY-Buffalo and three-quarters of those from Boston College. In contrast, membership rates among assistant professors who graduated from Tennessee and the New School for Social Research (29 percent each), Houston (31 percent), Texas (35 percent), Pittsburgh (42 percent), and Penn State (44 percent) are quite low.

Conclusion

Over the past century the American Economic Association has experienced lengthy periods of stagnant membership periodically punctuated by rapid growth spurts. Almost three-quarters of the current size of the Association materialized over less than a quarter of the Association's history during the immediate postwar years. If the Association took it as a goal to increase membership, what are the most prominent targets of opportunity? One obvious approach might be to make efforts, perhaps through peer pressure or notices (like this article), to raise the AEA membership rate at those institutions where it is relatively low. However, even if all the institutions in Table 5 with AEA membership rates below 75 percent were raised to that level, this step alone would represent a potential membership increase of only

Table 6

Percentage of Assistant Professors in 1996 Who Are AEA Members, by Institution of Terminal Degree, for Institutions with Twenty or More Graduates

<i>Terminal Degree Institution</i>	<i>Number of Assistant Professors in 1996</i>	<i>Percent Members</i>
Princeton	38	87
MIT	39	77
California-Berkeley	40	75
Stanford	66	74
Northwestern	37	73
Michigan State	21	71
Virginia	21	71
Chicago	47	70
Harvard	66	70
UCLA	23	70
California-Davis	21	67
Michigan	33	67
Ohio State	20	65
Wisconsin	60	65
Duke	25	64
Illinois	49	63
Columbia	27	63
Pennsylvania	44	61
Rochester	23	61
Yale	42	60
New York University	21	57
Minnesota	33	54
Indiana	28	54
California-San Diego	32	50
Notre Dame	22	50
Massachusetts	25	48
Cornell	25	44

Source: 1996 Prentice Hall Guide to Economics Faculty data disk and 1996 AEA membership list.

255. A more significant membership increase would have to come from beyond this group.

Since 1993, the geographic and employment distributions of members have been available from the Association's periodic Surveys of Members. Responses from 17,461 members listed in the 1997 Survey of Members indicate that approximately 79 percent of Association members reside in the United States. It is also apparent that the Association is primarily an organization of academic economists. The reported employment distribution of members in 1997 is: academic, 64 percent; government, 9 percent; business and industry, 8 percent; consulting, 7 percent; research institution, 3 percent; international agency or organization, 3 percent; and retired, 2 percent. Increasing the membership significantly would presumably involve attracting economists at colleges and universities that focus more on teaching

than research (that is, at comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges), as well as at non-academic institutions that hire a number of professional economists.

Reaching out to these institutions might be done indirectly, through the universities that grant terminal degrees in economics. Among those universities with ten or more Ph.D. graduates among the assistant professors in the *Guide* file, the correlation between faculty membership rate and recent Ph.D. graduate membership rate is 0.44, which is significantly different from zero at the 0.01 level of significance. Higher AEA membership among faculty at the Ph.D.-granting institutions might lead to higher membership of former students after graduation, especially if efforts were made to recruit new members around the time of their graduation. The Association is currently experimenting with an offer to some individuals who earned a Ph.D. in economics from a U.S. university between July 1996 and June 1997 of a \$40 discount toward one year's regular membership. The Association might also seek to reach out more directly to those groups that have in the past been relatively less likely to become AEA members.

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