

DATE:

TO: Executive Committee, American Economic Association

FROM: John Haltiwanger, Chair

American Economic Association Committee on Economic Statistics

RE: Annual Report for 2017

The current members of the Committee on Economic Statistics (AEASat) are: John C. Haltiwanger, University of Maryland, Chair; John M. Abowd, Cornell University; John Cawley, Cornell University; Carol Corrado, The Conference Board; Janice Eberly, Northwestern; Martin Gaynor, Carnegie-Mellon University; Steve Landefeld, BLS (retired); Josh Lerner, Harvard Business School; Edward Montgomery, Western Michigan University; Emi Nakamura, Columbia University; and Hal Varian, Google. Kitty Smith Evans replaced Dan Newlon as the AEA Committee staff person. Andrew Reamer, George Washington University, assists Smith Evans in the staffing duties of the Committee.

The committee met 11 times by telephone this year to discuss recent developments and what activities it wished to undertake.

This report first describes sessions on economic statistics that the Committee organized for the AEA Meetings. It then describes its educational activities in support of economic statistics, and activities that advance methodology or technical aspects of economic statistics for the economics profession. There is an action item on a one-page summary of Principles of Economic Measurement, which is described in a separate memo. There are no action items in this memo.

Sessions for the January 2018 AEA Meetings

As it has in the past, the AEA Stat committee issued a call for papers for the 2018 AEA meetings on topics related to economic statistics. The call went out in March 2017 along with the general call for submissions and stated that up to three sessions would be selected, and one could be recommended for inclusion in the May 2018 Papers and Proceedings.

The Committee received 4 session submissions and 5 individual paper submissions, many of which were high quality.

The Committee selected the first two of the following three sessions from those submitted, and organized the Panel Session that is its third session (complete details of each are in the AEA January 2018 program):

1. The Dynamics of Income: Celebrating 50 years of the PSID
(Chair: David Johnson, University of Michigan)
2. Measuring U.S. Business Dynamics
(Chair: John Haltiwanger)

3. Challenges, Threats, and Opportunities for Economic Measurement
(Chair, David Wessel, Brookings Institution)

Educational Activities in Support of Economic Statistics

The AEASStat also undertakes educational functions, mostly in Washington, through formal and informal activities that provide information about specific economic data sets as well as issues arising that concern economic statistics and statistical agencies in general. It focuses on those data sets and statistical agencies that are relevant to the scientific interests of the members of the AEA, and its activities are kept consistent with the charter of the AEA by not taking positions on questions of economic policy, budgets, or on any partisan matter.

The Committee engaged in the following activities during calendar 2017.

1. Developed a one-page statement on Principles of Economic Measurement and drafted a longer report on Principles of Economic Measurement that would be used for a number of reasons as a vehicle for communicating to congressional, executive branch, and other policy decision makers at various levels of government the rigorous and methodical nature of acceptable economic measures. It is hoped the documents will describe a benchmark against which new expressions of economic measures can be compared. There is an action item concerning the one-pager on the Executive Board's agenda. The Committee's plan is to have a polished version of the longer document available as an AEASStat/AEACGR White Paper by April 2018.
2. Dan Newlon and Kitty Smith Evans arranged a site visit with the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) and facilitated an NCSES expert panel that included Committee-nominated economic researchers. In so doing, the Committee helped to assure that NCSES would accommodate both an expanded number of disciplinary fields, and statistical accuracy for longitudinal analysis of findings from the agency's Survey of Doctoral Recipients.
3. AEASStat sent a letter on the importance of the BLS Commissioner to Loren Smith, the head of the Trump Administration's Department of Labor landing team. Copies of the letter were also sent to a range of economists. The letter is posted on AEASStat's website:
<https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/economic-statistics/news>
4. AEASStat sent letters of congratulations and introduction to newly appointed Secretaries of Commerce (Wilbur Ross), Labor (R. Alexander Acosta), and Health and Human Services (Tom Price), emphasizing the importance to AEA members of the work of the statistical agency(ies) under their direction. The letter to Secretary Acosta is posted on the AEASStat website.
5. Committee Chair John Haltiwanger and Kitty Smith Evans were part of a small group that met with Department of Commerce Senior Policy Advisor, David Langdon, at Langdon's invitation. A positive discussion about Census and BEA statistics ensued, and Langdon assured the group

that Secretary Ross was a big supporter of the Department's statistical agencies and their professionalism.

6. Committee Chair, John Haltiwanger, Kitty Smith Evans, and Andrew Reamer were part of a small group that met with Department of Labor Deputy Chief of staff, Molly Conway, to discuss the value, uses, and users of BLS statistics. She opened the meeting by describing Secretary Acosta's commitment to maintaining the independence of BLS. She also raised the issue about the possible consolidation of the federal statistical agencies (specifically BEA, BLS and Census).
7. AEASat drafted and signed, along with the AEACGR, a letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee on the value of economic statistics and the general need for adequate funding of federal statistical and science agencies. The letter, which is posted on the AEASat and AEACGR websites, was also distributed to other members of the Appropriations Committee and to selected Senate staff.
8. AEASat drafted and signed, along with the AEACGR, a letter to Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray to express support for the findings of the Commission on Evidence Based Policymaking, describe data synchronization in the context of those recommendations, and encourage forward movement on legislation that codifies the Commission's recommendations. The letter, which is posted on the AEASat and AEACGR websites, was also distributed to Chairs and Ranking Members, and staff of the authorizing committees that will be considering legislation that carries out the Commission's recommendation.
9. The Committee was asked and declined to co-sign letters sponsored by the Census Project, COPAFS, and other associations in support of the statistical agencies because the letters requested specific budgetary funding levels, advocated particular partisan positions, or endorsed a specific candidate for a government leadership position.

Activities Advancing the Employment of Data in Economic Research

1. The AEASat Committee and the Census Bureau jointly planned and will hold an informal working lunch January 6, 2018 at the AEA Annual Meeting. About 20 economists with experience in the field will tackle issues around the data and statistics needed to measure units of automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, and to measure these technologies' impacts on the labor market.
2. The AEASat Committee is working with several potential principal investigators on a grant proposal to be submitted to the Sloan Foundation Economics Program. If funded, the project would make the Committee an incubator in developing standards (for such things as metadata) and standard operating procedures (as for agreements with private firms on sharing data) that would support a network of centers and individual economists employing administrative data for research purposes.

Other Activities Supporting Economist Participation in Statistical Committees and Processes

1. The Committee reorganized the AEASat webpage, and is now posting comment opportunities on federal data collections relevant to economic research, and prepared a primer providing guidance on how to respond.
2. John Haltiwanger is a member of the Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee.
3. Kitty Smith Evans and Andrew Reamer routinely attend the meetings of and stay in communication with the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics, an organization for which Julia Lane (NYU) and Peter Rousseau are AEA member representatives.