

# **Department of Economics, Virginia Tech: *Application for the AEA Award for Outstanding Achievement in Diversity and Inclusion***

Dear Committee Members,

The Department of Economics at Virginia Tech has proudly worked to promote the spirit of community, diversity, and excellence that is necessary to further the University's objective to be a leading land grant university and promote the University's [Principles of Community](#), a charter of outlining values the University strives towards. We are dedicated to developing a community of leaders, engaged citizens, and researchers who value and promote a diverse and equitable society and who have the cultural competence to work with anyone on any problem. We believe that doing so requires expanding the field of economics by attracting students from diverse backgrounds. To this end, the Department has undertaken a series of initiatives to create a more inclusive environment, expand our course offerings, and introduce more students to the economic way of thinking about issues of diversity and inclusion.

The focus of many of our developments have been targeted at our undergraduate program in order to increase diversity within the economics profession. These efforts have been successful at attracting a more diverse set of economics majors. Compared to the 2015-2016 academic year, our majors are now more likely to be female (increased from 22 percent to 29 percent), underrepresented minorities (increased from 12 to 16 percent), and first-generation college students (increased from 12 percent to 15 percent). We have a small graduate program of 30 students from 9 different countries. The numbers for our 24 tenure-track and instructional faculty are almost identical. Forty percent of our recent hires have been female, one under represented minority (URM) faculty member and two of our recently promoted Full Professors have been women.

Below, we describe the processes and structures that we have successfully implemented and are continuing to develop that embody the AEA's Best Practices for Economists Building a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Productive Profession. We hope that by further developing these practices and implementing new initiatives, we will contribute to the development of a new generation of economists who appreciate the value of diversity and inclusion.

## **Action 1: Revised the principles curriculum to better reflect diversity, inclusion, and equity issues.**

The transition to online learning in Spring 2020 for our principles of economics classes provided the department with a unique opportunity to redesign our two-course principles sequence, which is taken by around 3,000 students each academic year. We revised these classes to be more inclusive and welcoming to students in line with the "Best Practices: Working with Students" guidelines. Changes include:

- Adoption of a new textbook that has more inclusive representation and up-to-date treatment of monetary policy.
- Increased coverage of poverty, inequality, and the role of race and racism in economic opportunities and outcomes, including a module on poverty and inequality in principles of microeconomics and expanded coverage of inequality in principles of macroeconomics.

- Using best practices in online course development, including encouraging students to lean into communication by providing explicit roadmaps of weekly expectations, expanding opportunities for instructor-student interaction in online discussion forums, breaking recorded lectures into manageable chunks, interspersing lecture material with moments of self-reflection, and strategic use of synchronous active learning activities to bolster understanding.

With the return of these courses to synchronous, in-person learning, most of the course redesign features described above were retained. Additionally, we now plan on having at least one section of each course in the sequence offered in an asynchronous format to accommodate students who may have difficulties attending an in-person section.

**Action 2: The addition of a first-year experience course that includes diversity and inclusion and professional ethics.**

First-year bridge programs can improve academic achievement well beyond the first year of college, in part by fostering a sense of community and belonging among students with a shared experience. When they are curricular based within majors, they also serve as an opportunity to lay out student expectations regarding course work, employment possibilities and the ethics of the profession. This year, the Department introduced a First-Year Experience course required of all incoming freshman and transfer students. We designed this course with the “*Best Practices: Working with Students: Build a sense of belonging*” and “*Serving as Colleagues: Discuss and enforce a code of conduct*” guidelines in mind.

In addition to required modules on the importance of diversity in inclusive environments, students worked in groups to do a close read of the AEA’s professional code of conduct and conducted in-depth discussions on what the code means, what it includes, and what behaviors it excludes. Finally, students were encouraged to go beyond the AEA’s code by contemplating their own personal ethical code.

**Action 3: The addition of formal coursework in diversity and inclusion.**

In a recent paper that examines how the Economics pipeline is failing many students, a suggested solution for making economics more welcoming is to “broaden the introduction.”<sup>1</sup> We combined this with the desire of students to learn about applying the tools of economic analysis to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion by the creation of three courses devoted to these dual goals:

ECON 1104: *Economics of Race*  
 ECON 1204: *Economics of Gender*  
 ECON 1214: *Economic History of Diversity and Inclusion*

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<sup>1</sup> Buckles, Kasey. 2019. "Fixing the Leaky Pipeline: Strategies for Making Economics Work for Women at Every Stage." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33 (1): 43-60. DOI: 10.1257/jep.33.1.43

In the first two courses, students explore the causes and consequences of gender and racial disparities and the impact of public policies on these disparities. In the third course, students are introduced to basic principles of economic analysis and economic history with a special emphasis on models of institutional change, economic growth, discrimination, inequality, migration, and indigenous economic systems.

These courses have no pre-requisites and are targeted to *all* students, not just economics majors. By reaching out to students who may not have otherwise shown interest in economics, we hope to highlight the breadth of the economics discipline and engage a diverse group of students. This aim is reflected in student enrollments, which indicate a high level of diversity and demonstrate the appeal of topics with direct applicability to real problems to a more diverse audience (see Table 1). It is also noteworthy that these courses are routinely taught at full capacity.

**Table 1: Enrollment in percentages**

	Spring 2021		Fall 2020	
<b>Percent of Enrolled Students who Were:</b>	<i>Economics of Race</i>	<i>Economic History of Diversity and Inclusion</i>	<i>Economics of Gender</i>	<i>Economics of Race</i>
<b>Female</b>	41.67%	18.18%	46.43%	26.92%
<b>Underrepresented Group/Minority</b>	62.50%	72.72%	75%	69.23%
<b>First Generation</b>	16.67%	27.27%	25%	11.53%

**Action 4: Creation of a Diverse Perspective major requirement and a Minor on the Economics of Diversity and Inclusion.**

Our broader initiative to increase enrollment of underrepresented students in the department by expanding our course offerings also presented the opportunity to reconsider what should be included in an economics major. The department recently introduced two new major “options” to attract students from a wide variety of backgrounds. These options require dedicated coursework that go beyond what is typically required of economics majors, including computational methods and policy analysis. In recognition of the need for all students to understand issues of diversity and inclusion, students choosing to major in one of these two new options are required to fulfill a Diverse Perspectives component. The courses listed above in Action 3 fill this requirement.

Additionally, the Department has developed a new, innovative minor targeted at students majoring in fields outside of Economics: *The Economics of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity* (EDIE). This

multidisciplinary minor is designed to develop knowledgeable and pragmatic thinkers who understand the range of human experience and how to evaluate the causes, consequences, and policies that impact those experiences. The curriculum is grounded in economic coursework through the courses described in Action 3 above and exposes students to varied perspectives and methodologies for understanding issues of identity, race, ethnicity, social stratification, sexual orientation, religion, and/or disabilities.

While this minor is currently going through the University Curriculum Approval process, our Dean and the College are very supportive. We are confident that it will be approved. We have also vetted the minor with economists who are active in diversity and inclusion issues in Economics, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

#### **Action 5: Active recruitment of new faculty to expand representation in the department.**

The Department is active participant in the University's *Future Faculty Development Program* (FFDP), which is a special program that has separate resources for hiring URM faculty. Although we have not been successful in being able to recruit through this competitive program for the past three years, this year we have been able to extend an offer and are hopeful of making our first successful hire.<sup>2</sup>

In its traditional hiring the Department has always reached out to economists who are actively engaged in the Committee on Status of Minorities in the profession to help diversify and broaden our recruitment efforts. In the past the Department has been successful in recruiting one URM faculty member through such efforts.

Currently, the Department is also seeking to hire a Post-doc scholar who studies issues of diversity and inclusion in Economics (<https://tinyurl.com/4uppr8xk>). In particular, we seek scholars who are committed to fostering an environment in which faculty, staff, and students from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and personal experiences are welcomed and can thrive. The explicit goal of this person will be to assist with our new Minor on diversity and inclusion.

The Department also follows a similar strategy when it comes to recruiting graduate students. We reach out to economists who are involved in teaching in the AEA's Summer programs and those involved in the Committee on Status of Minorities in Economics.

#### **Action 6: Including diversity training in preparation of graduate students for teaching.**

We implemented a semester-long course in pedagogy to develop graduate students' teaching abilities. Part of this course includes classroom policies and other considerations to ensure classrooms that are welcoming to all students. Students on the job market this year have found this training to be extremely beneficial.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting the Department receives substantial support in this endeavor from the College of Science at Virginia Tech, which strongly encourages the recruitment of women and minority scholars.

## **Action 7: Engaging with the broader Southwest Virginia community on issues of diversity and inclusion.**

Faculty members have engaged in public outreach on these topics, including engagement with local senior citizen groups, preparing educational lectures for voting groups, and highlighting the differential impacts of Covid-19 and the complex history of race in Virginia at events aimed at the general public. Faculty have also written op-eds for publication in the local newspaper and Virginia Tech publications.

While the major steps have been identified above, the department is continuously engaged in a number of other activities to promote diversity. A number of our faculty are engaged in research on topics such as gender equality, discrimination and the economic history of slavery and reconstruction. Consequently, students also engage in research on such topics, and we invite speakers working on these themes. Recently, the Department has dedicated funding to participate in the University's Multicultural Academic Opportunities Program (MAOP) to increase the probability of recruiting URM graduate students. The Department is also sponsoring a visitor to *Mozaiko*, a living-learning community at Virginia Tech where American and international students live together in a diverse community, learn about each other's cultures, immerse themselves in language practice, and prepare for a lifetime of intercultural leadership. The Department has become a member of ASHE (American Society of Hispanic Economists). In fact, to ensure continuity of these practices we have set up a webpage (<https://econ.vt.edu/initiatives-for-diversity---inclusion.html>) that lists our activities in the area of diversity and inclusion. An interesting item on this page is a conversation the Department leadership recently had with our undergraduate and graduate students about the best practices for economists (also on Twitter). To sum up Department of Economics firmly believes in Virginia Tech's motto of *Ut Prosim* (That I may Serve) and is strongly committed to promoting diversity and inclusion both within the University and the larger community of Southwest Virginia.