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Proactive Efforts to Increase Diversity and Inclusion

Elizabeth Klee

In 1996, then-CSWEP chair Rebecca Blank authored a report in the American Economic Association's Papers and Proceedings that showed the progress of women in the economics profession was meager at best.[1] A rejoinder in 1999 discussed some "cracks" in the glass ceiling of economics—the article suggested that some of the worse career outcomes for women could be explained by "inferior productivity" or "gender differences in preferences for research," and predicted that perhaps the tide has turned.[2]

Twenty years later, the problems remain. There has been some growth in the share of women in Ph.D. programs and some progress in the tenure outcomes for women in the profession. Still, the growth has been lackluster at best, and stalled in recent years. A woman has only a little better shot at a tenured position now than she did 20 years ago.

Efforts are underway to change all that. This edition of the CSWEP newsletter brings together reports on active steps taken to promote diversity and inclusion in economics. These include inclusion criteria for conference programs, clearly outlining criteria for promotion, and deliberately encouraging historically underrepresented groups to pursue careers in economics. Rather than relying on voluntary participation, these steps are consciously changing processes to foster inclusion. These steps help grow careers, so that "inferior productivity" is less likely to become an excuse.

There are three broad lessons from these efforts. ***First, information structures matter.*** In a world of imperfect information, choices may be less than optimal. Many of these efforts include conscious steps to make opaque processes transparent, particularly around career development. Imperfect information can also compound implicit biases. Thus, deliberate steps to reveal information or to limit biases can make a difference.

Second, size matters. Acting in concert and in scale can make tangible differences. The efforts described here have the potential to reach thousands of economists, and hundreds of would-be economists. Reaching far and wide is powerful and can change lives.

Third, success matters, but not always. As you'll see, some efforts to promote inclusion failed. But the act of trying to achieve primary aims generated positive spillovers and got things moving in the right direction.

On a personal level, I have noticed a change in the conversation. I have witnessed colleagues more willing to speak up than in years past, both at junior and senior levels. This speaking up has been not only about diversity and inclusion, but also about economics. Rather than focusing on "gender preferences," there is focus on including different perspectives when answering the problems of our times. Listening to only one voice for solutions runs the risk of missing something important. Only with diversity and inclusion efforts will we be able to attract the best talent, move the profession forward, and elevate the societal impact of our profession. ■

1 Blank, Rebecca M. "Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession." American Economic Review, May 1996 (Papers and Proceedings), 86(2), pp. 502-6.

2 McDowell, J., Larry D. Singell, Jr., & Ziliak, J. (1999). Cracks in the Glass Ceiling: Gender and Promotion in the Economics Profession. The American Economic Review, 89(2), 392-396.

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Proactive Efforts to Increase Diversity and Inclusion

CSWEP Focus **features articles originally published in the *CSWEP News*.**

A Perspective from the Federal Reserve Board
on Diversity and Inclusion in Economist Professional Development

Daniel Covitz and Karen Pence

The Federal Reserve Board is one of the largest employers of economists in the world, with more than 375 economists on staff, and hundreds more employed throughout the Federal Reserve System. Developing and retaining a broad and diverse base of talent is essential in order for us to carry out our monetary policy, regulatory, and financial stability responsibilities as effectively as possible. We sketch out here some of the principles underlying our ongoing efforts to ensure that all economists on our staff have the tools and opportunities to contribute fully to the mission of the Federal Reserve and thrive as professional economists.[1]

A core principle that informs all of our initiatives on staff development is transparency. In particular, we aim to provide clear, comprehensive, and accessible information on the types of skills, contributions, and behaviors we reward in performance reviews and with promotion, as well as the traits we are looking for when hiring new managers. We avoid vaguely stated characteristics that encourage purely subjective assessments. For example, that someone might be easy to get along with is not one of our criteria; instead, we assess whether someone creates positive externalities for the organization by helping colleagues advance their research or policy work or by helping to create a supportive and satisfying work environment.

Being transparent about our promotion criteria also allows our economists to self-manage and self-advocate for promotions. Indeed, our economists maintain "internal curriculum vitas" in which they keep track of their accomplishments with respect to each of our promotion criteria. These criteria include excellence along four dimensions: Academic economic research, policy analysis, effective communication, and, as described above, interactions with colleagues. The requirement that economists maintain these vitas ensures that all economists are aware of our criteria and are having regular conversations with their managers to ensure that their careers are on track. The internal vitas also provide us with a way to make sure that we look at all eligible economists when we make promotion decisions, eliminating the reliance on a single person (i.e., one's manager) for upward mobility within the organization.

In addition to providing the information that our economists need to shape their careers, transparency may limit implicit biases in promotion decisions. A large body of research on implicit biases has shown that hiring panels unconsciously adjust their criteria in response to the candidates that they see in a manner that disadvantages candidates from underrepresented groups. Implicit biases also have the potential to corrupt promotion decisions. While the presetting of hiring and promotion criteria by itself likely helps mitigate these biases, transparent criteria are additionally if not critically helpful as they give our leaders an incentive to avoid unconsciously "moving the goalposts."

A second principle guiding our initiatives is equal access to professional opportunities. For example, we review the allocation of assignments to ensure that all economists have rewarding and challenging work. We aspire as well to be intentional about the distribution of service assignments so that no group bears a disproportionate load. We also allow more flexible work schedules and more telework, challenging the notion that career success depends on long hours spent physically at the office, and allowing a broader array of individuals to take on and thrive in demanding roles. Further, to address the possibility that some individuals might have better networks than others, and that this discrepancy might limit their opportunities, we host regular "New Connections" lunches to increase informal networking and information-sharing between more junior and senior staff.

Our third principle is that responsibility for inclusion rests on the entire community, not just traditionally under-represented groups. We hold monthly meetings of a Diversity and Inclusion Council, open to all staff, in which senior leaders and more junior staff reflect together on which of our initiatives are succeeding and which are falling short. We also galvanize the staff and develop a shared vocabulary and understanding of diversity and inclusion issues through town halls and conferences. For example, at a town hall held in November 2018, dozens of staff members gave short presentations on twenty different diversity and inclusion initiatives sponsored by the economics divisions. The list of initiatives includes outreach programs to high schools and colleges with significant populations of students from under-represented groups, training programs to prevent harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and collaborations on research conferences focused on diversity and inclusion with

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1 Across the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Reserve System, professional development and diversity and inclusion are priorities. Information on the Board's diversity and inclusion program is available at https://www.federalreserve.gov/aboutthefed/diversityinclusion.htm. The discussion here is about the efforts of the Financial Stability, International Finance, Monetary Affairs, and Research and Statistics Divisions at the Federal Reserve Board; these four groups tend to coordinate on their policies and procedures and hire the majority of economists at the Board. This article reflects the perspectives of two officers within the Research and Statistics Division and is not a statement of official Board policy. We thank our colleagues for helpful comments on this piece.

Applying Lessons from First-Generation Students to Women in Economics

Fernanda Nechio

Early in my career as an economist, I got used to being the only woman in the room. Most, if not all, of my colleagues were men. This was true when I was a summer intern in an investment bank during college, and continues even now as an established PhD when I participate in conferences.

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique and seems to be an enduring peculiarity of our profession. About a third of all economics majors are female and a little less than a third of doctorates in economics are awarded to women. These numbers have basically not changed since the 1990s. This contrasts with other male-dominated STEM fields where the number of women has slowly but steadily risen over the years.[1]

The reason economics may fall behind in this progress could begin very early on. When first deciding about their future career, young adults commonly resort to a pool of professions they can see in their surroundings, such as jobs of family members, neighbors, and close friends. This can be the first deterrent to a girl considering a career in economics. The lack of your "neighborhood economist" role model or a critical mass of female economists erodes the sense that this is a common career path for young women considering what to do when they grow up. Even later on, female students can study all the way through a degree program without ever considering being an economist, or perhaps even encountering one on campus. Moreover, the relatively few women who break that ceiling and decide to do a PhD in economics are faced with an environment that, at times, is seen as unwelcoming, as Princeton Professor Anne Case recently described in an interview.[2]

Some of these hurdles are similar to those faced by first-generation college and graduate students, or "first gens." College and graduate studies can be an overwhelming experience for first gens. They start their academic lives with very

1 https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.30.4.221

2 https://qz.com/1165891/why-there-are-so-few-women-economists-according-to-princeton-economist-anne-case/

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the Bank of England and the European Central Bank. The presenters at the town hall came from all parts of the economics divisions, both in terms of the demographic composition of our workforce and of the different job families; the audience filled a large conference hall and was likewise representative of the full diversity of our organization.

Looking ahead, we are aware that our work is unfinished, and that creating a workplace where all staff have opportunities to thrive will require continuous attention and refining. We are also aware that this work is inherently difficult, complex, and nuanced. Despite our best efforts, sometimes we slip up. We aspire to be an organization where we can face these missteps head on and learn from them. Finally, we are aware that we work within a world-wide community of economists, and that our workplace is affected by the standards of that larger community. As such, we are grateful that the American Economic Association has established the Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Professional Conduct to consider these issues further, and look forward to the AEA's continued efforts to bring positive change to the profession.

Contributors

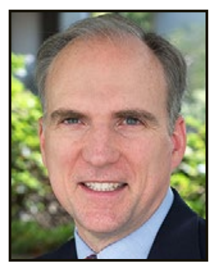
Shelly Lundberg, Leonard Broom Professor of Demography, Department of Economics, University of California, Santa Barbara

Daniel Covitz, Deputy Director, Research and Statistics, Federal Reserve Board of Governors

Elizabeth Klee, Associate Director, Division of Financial Stability, Federal Reserve Board of Governors

Fernanda Nechio, Research Advisor, International Research, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

Karen Pence, Assistant Director, Research and Statistics, Federal Reserve Board of Governors



David Romer, Herman Royer Professor in Political Economy, University of California, Berkeley

Justin Wolfers, Professor of Economics, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, and Professor of Public Policy, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

CSWEP News Staff

Shelly Lundberg, Editor
Kate Silz-Carson, Oversight Editor
Elizabeth Klee, Co-Editor
Leda Black, Graphic Designer

little familiarity and limited support from family members, who are also experiencing it for the first time through their children. Being unfamiliar with a new world can easily isolate a student from the numerous opportunities that universities offer. Choosing what to major in or which field to specialize in is much more challenging if a person does not have any background or role models to look up to.

In many ways, women in economics are similar to first gens. The career path has not yet become common, the exposure to the economics profession is limited, and the opportunities to get to know the field can easily be missed.

As a female economist and first gen myself, these challenges are quite familiar. College was an overwhelming experience, and the decision to major in Economics was a brave step into to the unknown. I frequently felt detached and that I was falling behind my peers. When "you don't know what you don't know," even asking the right questions is challenging. As a result, I had little guidance on curriculum choices and little information on opportunities and career paths. For example, I was not aware of teaching or research assistant positions, exchange programs, or scholarships of any kind. Almost by chance, I got a research assistant position—no one applied to a position that opened during the summer break, and the Economics department contacted students with the highest GPA.

In retrospect, this first job opened the door to a sea of opportunities and information, which, in many ways, set the stage for my future as a researcher. Most importantly, it was my first opportunity to work directly with a group of researchers that cared not only about their projects but also about the development of their students.

In my professional life, I gained enormously from the support of mentors along the way. They motivated and helped me seize opportunities such as research projects, internships, and networking events that otherwise I might have missed. More importantly, my mentors served as role models, showing me that their path was possible for me and providing a safe environment where I could openly discuss insecurities, challenges, and opportunities.

In the 12th Federal Reserve District, the Economic Research division is taking a holistic approach to changing the culture in economics as a way to create a more diverse and inclusive environment. For example, to counter a tendency in economics to "score points" by immediately and aggressively challenging any speaker's point of view, Economic Research instituted a five-minute rule so that, when someone is presenting, no one is allowed to interrupt them for the first five minutes. In addition, we have introduced a mentorship program, pairing junior economists with senior ones who are not their managers. This choice of pairing is strategically designed to foster an open space for conversations without the fear that they will affect performance evaluations later on. Mentors have the opportunity to take classes to better engage in their new role, and therefore, they gain, not only from the additional interaction with their junior colleagues, but also from the enhancement of their management and mentorship skill set.

Moreover, we increased our efforts to reach out to undergraduates and correct the view that the Fed may be a "boys club." For recruiting research associates (RAs), we rolled out a campaign to better inform faculty and students across the U.S. about the inclusive work culture and diverse opportunities offered by the 12th District. These efforts included sending hundreds of letters to faculty, colleges and universities to let them know we are committed to increasing the female and minority representation in our department. In addition, we significantly increased our participation in events that support minorities in economics, visiting local schools and universities to better inform and promote our mission. We formed a recruiting team that fully embraces our goals to promote an inclusive and diverse work environment, and we make sure that our commitment to these goals are highlighted during interviews. Finally, we also told our story: we are a top-flight research environment; we are committed to training RAs and preparing them to pursue PhDs or other paths they may desire; and our alums go on to great success in a wide variety of fields. As a result of these efforts, we have increased the diversity and size of our highly qualified applicant pool, and the gender balance of male to female research assistants went from 80-20 to 50-50 in the past five years.

Of course, reaching a gender-balanced employee pool is only the first step to a more diverse and inclusive work environment. To enhance equal opportunity and engage our minority employees, we need to ensure they know what questions to ask. In other words, reaching out and providing information and a space for honest conversations is key. As one example of such efforts, internally, we hold special events for Fed research associates preparing to apply for Economics PhD programs, providing a space for participants to ask questions and, most importantly, to build confidence that they can make a difference in the field of economics.

As emphasized by San Francisco Fed President Mary Daly, "diversity is essential as a value and a practice."[3] To help break the cycle and change the culture to have a more diverse and inclusive profession, it is important to be proactive. The responsibility goes beyond hiring a larger pool of economists from minority groups. We need to promote an inclusive and diverse work environment. As leading economists in our

3 https://medium.com/sffed/stop-leaving-talent-on-the-table-achieving-diversity-with-no-excuses-c0719c60564b

Countering Gender Bias and Improving Gender Balance
Lessons from Our Experience at *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*

David Romer and Justin Wolfers

Introduction

Despite decades of effort to break down barriers to the success of women in economics, progress has been very slow. Thus it is important to think about how we could do better. This note reports on what effectively amounts to an informal experiment that could shed light on these issues from our time as the editors of the *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*. At the beginning of our tenure in 2009, we agreed that we were concerned about the lack of gender diversity in economics and that we would strive to make *Brookings Papers* part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Over the seven years of our tenure, we learned quite a bit about what worked and what didn't.

We report our somewhat informal findings in the hope they have broader relevance, even while recognizing that our observations are drawn from just one professional setting. To give some background: *Brookings Papers* is a journal at the intersection of purely academic research and policy applications; most papers are commissioned or solicited by the editors. Thus it differs from almost all other journals, and it differs even more from the myriad other activities that have far greater impact on the status of women in the profession than the policies of a single journal.

Before turning to what we learned, we should note that we are acutely aware that we are—literally—the embodiment of white male privilege, and thus that we were not ideally positioned to be addressing these issues. Moreover, in what follows it may sound at times as if we are patting ourselves on the back for our success in promoting gender equity. But as we will describe, we think a crucial lesson from our efforts is that we failed to level the playing field for women. Thus, please hold off on judging us for being self-congratulatory.

With that, we turn to what we learned.

Steps that either hurt our efforts or contributed little

Being disorganized or rushed had negative consequences for gender equity. In cases when our procrastination meant that we had to scramble to find a last-minute discussant, or our failure to notice that an author was not going to produce an acceptable paper in time meant we had to try to solicit a paper very late in the process, we tended to go with the first names that came to mind or to turn to people with whom we had personal connections. Unfortunately, those people were generally men. A behavioral economist might link this to "availability bias," and we suspect the greater availability of men's names reflects both a personal element—we are both men—and a systemic one—we are in a male-dominated profession.

Good governance practices had no effect on gender equity. Shortly before our tenure started, *Brookings Papers* posted an open call for paper proposals and circulated it widely, and there was an easily accessible way for anyone to submit a paper proposal without any solicitation from us. Such steps toward openness and fairness are surely desirable, and we received some fine proposals through these channels that led to excellent papers in the journal. But there was no tendency for those proposals to come disproportionately from women (or from other underrepresented groups or from scholars at less established institutions).

Engaging "superstar" female economists had little effect on gender equity. Of course it made sense for us to try to get

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Lessons from First-Generation Students ⬆

profession, we are responsible for growing the pipeline of a diverse group of future economists.

To do so, we need to reach out to girls and minorities at different ages and introduce them to the possibility of being an economist and the different career paths available in the field. Moreover, mirroring the increasing efforts of schools and other organizations to better engage and help first gens to develop cultural capital,[4] we should apply similar efforts to our pool of minority students and employees—amplifying our efforts to provide information, support, and guidance and discuss opportunities and career paths. Finally, acknowledging the importance that mentors played in our own professional lives, we need to serve as role models and mentors ourselves.

The set of actions undertaken at the 12th Federal Reserve District and the significant improvements in gender balance suggest that we are moving in the right direction. Going forward, our efforts to build an environment of trust and a safe space for honest conversations will, hopefully, help shape the career paths of younger professionals and plant the seeds for them to play the same role as they mature in our profession. ■

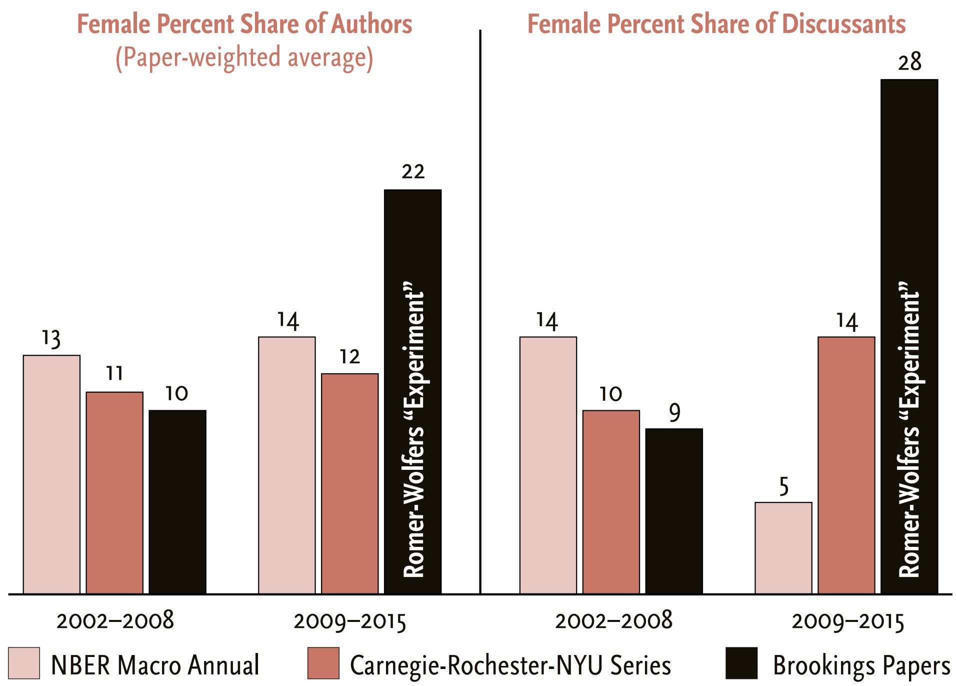
4 For example, the efforts by UC Davis and Vanderbilt University are summarized at https://firstgen.ucdavis.edu/student-resources and https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-first-generation-college-students/, respectively.

Lessons from Brookings

the most accomplished women economists working in areas relevant to the journal to write papers for *Brookings Papers*—and indeed, some of the most important papers published in *Brookings Papers* during our tenure came through that channel. But those authors have many other excellent opportunities, and it would have been incompetence on our part not to approach such economists, regardless of gender. These papers would likely have been written and published in high-profile outlets with or without our editorial decisions. Thus it was hardly a major contribution to breaking down gender barriers.

Figure 1

The Effect of Romer-Wolfers "Experiment" on the Share of Female Authors and Discussants



Notes: We counted updates, symposium papers, and keynotes as equivalent to half a paper.

Steps that helped

Making an explicit decision to be concerned about these issues and to think consciously about them had the biggest impact on gender equity. Based on our experiences in other activities, our own observations, and formal studies, it is clear that the approach of simply trying to be gender-blind is insufficient. Trying to avoid conscious discrimination under the presumption that implicit bias only afflicts the judgment of others is a recipe for gross gender imbalance and a playing field tilted heavily against women.

Having decided to be proactive, the most important thing we did was incredibly simple and straightforward: ***In thinking about authors and discussants, we tried to avoid making snap decisions or to presume that the "obvious" names were the best ones.*** Taking the time to pause and to try to think broadly and creatively often led to a long list of strong candidates, many of whom were women.

Our experience also taught us that ***it is valuable to think about gender fairness from the outset***—at the stage of choosing subjects for papers, rather than waiting until it was time to think about possible authors and discussants. Just as going with the first names we thought of tended to push us toward heavily male-dominated programs, so too did going with the topics that first came to mind. There are many subjects that fall within the scope of *Brookings Papers* where the best work is being done disproportionately by women. Unfortunately (but sadly, not coincidentally), those were often areas where we knew less about the work being done. Thinking broadly about topics and trying to ensure that we included work from those sub-fields where women are less underrepresented led to a more diverse set of topics and a more diverse set of participants.

Having some minimal numerical guidelines was helpful. We tried hard to avoid ever having an all-male author line-up, or an all-male or virtually all-male set of discussants. (This was before either of us had heard the word "manel.") We would have viewed either of those outcomes as a three-alarm warning that there was considerable room for simultaneously improving quality and diversity. When we appeared to be potentially heading toward a manel, we stepped up our efforts to invite women to be on the program. The pressure we created on ourselves from those guidelines clearly improved the representation of women. While our numerical guidelines might strike you as disturbingly low (and we agree!), they still helped, because they ensured that we would never *unthinkingly* create a program that was not at least somewhat diverse.

More important, however, was to ***avoid satisficing: we viewed our numerical guidelines as floors, not as something to be happy with achieving.*** Sometimes it was clear early in the process that a meeting would have a respectable representation of female authors (relative to comparable journals or conferences), or that we would have quite a few female discussants. In such situations, we tried to still continue to think of good female participants. The result was that some of our meetings had (again, relative the prevailing standards of the profession) a very large number of women economists on the program.

Something else that helped was to ***push each other to do better.*** Having agreed that these were issues we were concerned about and committed to trying to address, we each felt a personal stake in contributing to this effort. As a result, if one of us confessed to having trouble coming up with female candidates for some role, the other felt spurred to try to come up with good names; if one came up with several names, the other tried to come up with even more. These efforts often led us to excellent female authors and discussants.

A final thing that helped was ***institutional support and concern.*** As a public-facing think-tank, the Brookings Institution was very favorably disposed to our efforts. The *Brookings Papers* is funded by an array of grants, and the grant-makers not only gave us cover, but pushed us to do better. Our sense is that the general public is more supportive of gender diversity than narrow corners of the economics profession are, and these institutions gave useful voice to those views, and support to our efforts.

Evidence about success and failure

There are two ways to describe the results of our efforts.

The first is that we were somewhat successful in creating a journal that better represented the voices of women economists. Figure 1 shows that the share of women authors in the papers we published more than doubled, rising to be 22% during our 2009-2015 tenure as editors (a number that slightly exceeds CSWEP's estimates of the share of women among faculty at "top twenty" research departments through this period).

With the help of Austin Drukker and the support of Brookings, we also compiled data for two comparable policy-related conference series, the *NBER Macroeconomics Annual* and the *Carnegie-Rochester-NYU Conference on Public Policy*. No such change is evident in either of these comparison groups. There is a similar pattern in the representation of women among discussants: the share of female discussants at *Brookings Papers* conferences tripled, while there was little change at the other conferences. Thus it appears that making diversity a priority can have a measurable effect.

To this point, it may sound as if we are bragging about how wonderfully successful we were in leveling the playing field, or maybe even—for once—producing a playing field slightly tilted toward women (at least in the narrow context of decisions at the journal, and leaving aside the many barriers to equal access to the playing field to begin with). But there's a second perspective that we find more convincing, and that perspective suggests we failed to achieve either an efficient or an equitable level of gender diversity.

Basic economic logic suggests that the relevant question is not whether *Brookings Papers* had greater representation of women economists than similar journals. Nor is the relevant issue the average quality of the papers and discussions by male and female contributors, since the relevant decisions are at the margin. Rather, the appropriate test is whether the contributions of the marginal male and female participants were of comparable quality. Looking back at our programs, our judgment is that that they were not. In fact, the contributions of the female participants that we had thought of as reflecting the marginal choices for being on the program were stronger than those of the male participants we had viewed as marginal. That is, despite our efforts, we failed to achieve gender fairness. We had thought we were tilting the scale toward women; the reality is, we had simply put a thumb rather than a fist on the scale for men.

Conclusion

We see two broader lessons from our "experiment." The first is easy: If efforts like ours are not enough to even achieve equal treatment, they should be thought of as an absolute minimum, not as exceptional or as raising any issues of tradeoffs and possible unfairness. A corollary is that over the range where we pursued them, our efforts improved both quality and diversity. Given that our efforts revealed no diversity-versus-quality tradeoff, it is hard to think of any reason not to pursue such an approach.

The second lesson is more challenging: We thought we were doing a lot, but it turns out that we should have done more. The question is what. One strategy, which is almost certainly desirable, is to follow the policies that we did but to do so more forcefully. But in light of our experience, we wonder if that is enough. Perhaps a deeper change in approach is needed—not just in the narrow setting of *Brookings Papers*, but in any settings where these issues arise. One possibility would be to make issues of gender equity and gender balance more central to the process at every stage—that is, to make the strategy mentioned above of thinking about gender equity from the outset central to the entire process. A related possibility would be to adopt more ambitious numerical guidelines and to view them as more serious constraints. In our case, for example, outcomes would probably have been better if we had moved from the (embarrassingly minimal) near-absolute rule that we would never have an all-male author lineup at a meeting to a (still quite modest) absolute rule that every program had to have at least two female authors. Yet another possibility would be to set up from the outset a formal process for reviewing our efforts to increase diversity. We probably would have found such a process annoying and viewed it as an imposition, but we suspect the benefits would have well outweighed the costs.

Finally, it is worth noting that this note only reports our experience with trying to redress the underrepresentation of women in economics. We were also deeply concerned by the underrepresentation of African-Americans and other marginalized voices. While we strove for improvement on those dimensions as well, the underrepresentation of some groups is so severe that reporting statistics or broad conclusions would be misleading, because in reality, we would be reporting anecdotes disguised as data.

In the end, we view our experience as a cautionary tale. In a setting where it should have been straightforward to achieve gender equity (again, conditional on the many prior sources of inequity), actively engaging with the issue and taking a range of general and specific actions was not enough. This strengthens the case for redoubled and more ambitious efforts. ■