

American Economic Association  
Ad Hoc Committee on the Professional Climate in Economics

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Interim Report

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### **Charge**

In January 2018, the Executive Committee of the American Economic Association (AEA) appointed the Ad Hoc Committee on the Professional Climate in Economics. This Ad Hoc Committee was charged with exploring the implementation of various proposals made by the Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct in its January 4, 2018 Interim Report, with a particular focus on the issues faced by women and minority groups in the profession. The Committee was also asked to consider additional ideas that might contribute to improving the professional climate in economics for women and members of underrepresented groups.

### **Recommendations**

- *The Committee recommends that the AEA conduct a professional climate survey to assess the status quo in the profession, and repeat this survey at regular intervals to monitor changes over time.*

The Committee believes a professional climate survey that systematically collects information across the profession would be a valuable first step. Currently, evidence of discrimination and harassment in the economics profession is mostly anecdotal. A representative survey would provide more comprehensive information on the extent and nature of these issues.

In order to be representative, the survey must have a high response rate. To maximize participation, the AEA should plan to allocate sufficient resources to follow up with non-respondents and, perhaps, to offer financial incentives for survey completion. To keep costs manageable, it may be better to start with a random representative sample of AEA members (stratified across various sub-populations of economists by field of employment).

Various survey instruments are already available and could be, we believe, easily customized to the needs of the AEA. In particular:

- The University of Michigan conducted a Campus-wide Climate Survey on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in 2016. See <https://diversity.umich.edu/strategic-plan/climate-survey/>. The survey was designed as a self-administered, highly interactive, web-based survey that would take less than 15 minutes to complete on average. Survey instruments were developed for

faculty, students and staff. This survey instrument would need to be tailored to account for the fact that many AEA members are not employed in academia.

- The AEA developed a discrimination survey in 2016/2017. While this survey was developed from an LGBT/queer economist perspective, this survey could easily be expanded to offer a perspective on climate from the perspective of a broader set of underrepresented groups in the profession.
- Besides the topics covered in the sample surveys, the survey could also include questions related to service obligations in departments, universities, and the profession and thus help provide more rigorous information on the common perception that women and minorities face a greater service tax.
- It would also be valuable to add questions that explicitly explore the relationship between socio-demographic diversity and intellectual diversity. We need to better understand whether respondents from underrepresented groups feel isolated intellectually (maybe because they tend to work on different topics), and the extent to which they feel their research is appropriately evaluated/valued by the profession.
- It is important that questions about sexual harassment and assault be included explicitly in this survey. The American Political Science Association's recent survey may serve as a model:

[https://www.bu.edu/polisci/files/2010/10/51.1\\_Sexual\\_Harassment\\_EditedProof1.pdf](https://www.bu.edu/polisci/files/2010/10/51.1_Sexual_Harassment_EditedProof1.pdf).

The survey should be contracted out to experts in survey methodology as well as those with experience in running surveys of economists and on diversity issues. The AEA could partner with The Survey Research Center and the Institute for Social Research – both at the University of Michigan - for this effort. Another option might be NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC recently completed a more open-ended professional climate survey for the Booth School of Business).

The AEA should play an active role in sharing the survey findings within the profession, including publicizing reports on survey findings on its website.

- ***The Committee recommends making available to AEA members a reporting platform, such as Callisto, that allows victims of sexual harassment to file a time-stamped report that can be linked to a directory to identify the offender.***

An online platform such as Callisto (<https://www.projectcallisto.org/>) aims to increase the likelihood that sexual misconduct will be reported by solving a coordination problem. Victims can use the time-stamped report as evidence if they decide to file an official complaint and can also be notified if anyone else identifies the same offender. The time-stamped report may enhance the credibility of evidence brought forward at a later date, and the “information escrow” structure of Callisto may increase the likelihood that victims come forward in an effort to save future victims from a serial offender (Ayers and Unkovic 2012). Ayres (2016) shows that a Callisto-like option increases respondents’ willingness to report sexual assault in a hypothetical scenario.

Callisto is available on 12 college campuses and early studies suggest that victims report assaults more rapidly, and that 15% of reporters match with another victim. The AEA could make this

platform available to economists more broadly, by linking it to the AEA directory to facilitate matches. This profession-wide approach would be particularly useful compared to a university-based approach, because cross-university misconducts (such as at conferences) can also be reported. The AEA would also receive metadata on reports filed.

The goal of Callisto is to encourage more victims to come forward and subsequently file formal complaints. It does not require that the AEA take on new investigative or sanctioning roles.

- ***The Committee recommends that the AEA develop and disseminate best practices for reducing bias in economists' professional conduct. This includes creating incentives, nudges, requirements, or procedures to ensure take-up across individuals, departments, and organizations throughout the profession.***

Conscious and unconscious biases deny equal opportunity to economists on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity and gender expression, and other personal traits. The AEA can reduce the effects of individual and institutional biases by providing all members of the profession with tools and training to adopt best practices in the following areas:

- Personnel, which includes recruiting, evaluating, promoting, and managing other economists
- Education, which includes admitting, teaching, advising, and recommending students
- Research, which includes refereeing and editing for journals, organizing and participating in conferences, and reading and citing others' work
- Serving as colleagues, which includes mentoring, creating opportunities, and acting as an effective bystander

A substantial body of knowledge about best practices in these areas already exists, some of it specifically tailored to meet economists' needs and standards. For example, [Diversifying Economic Quality](#) is a CSMGEP-sponsored wiki promoting inclusive, innovative, and evidence-based teaching practices in economics.

The main challenge will be convincing a large segment of the profession to adopt these practices. In addition to providing tools and training materials for managing bias, the AEA may need to play a more active role in creating incentives, nudges and requirements to improve the take-up of these tools and materials. It will be important for the AEA leadership to signal its commitment to these issues, and to clearly and consistently communicate its diversity and inclusion goals to its members.

Possible mechanisms for raising awareness of biases and providing training in best practices include:

- Posting relevant materials in a prominent section of the AEA website: This would provide information and also signal AEA priorities. Other disciplinary associations such as the [ABA](#), the [APS](#) and the [APSA](#), as well as [universities](#) supported by the NSF's [ADVANCE](#) program, provide examples.
- Organizing a regular session and/or special event at the ASSA meetings: CSMGEP and CSWEP have tried this approach. The sessions are excellent and well attended but did not

reach the larger profession. See, for example, [New Approaches to Improving Diversity in Economics](#) in 2016, [Best Practices in Recruiting and Mentoring Diverse Economists](#) in 2017, and [Best Practices in Mentoring Underrepresented Minority Women](#) in 2018.

- Sponsoring a high-profile conference or workshop: The Federal Reserve Board's [National Summit on Diversity in the Economics Profession](#) was very well attended and led several departments and institutions to explore and adopt best practices.
  - Offering training through the AEA Continuing Education Program: This program is an obvious venue for offering more intensive training, if attendance is robust, and the lessons are preserved via webcast.
  - Providing online training packages: Economists may be more likely to engage and learn if there is an interactive device, such as online simulations, to train them in best practices. This mechanism would allow us to collect experimental evidence on biases and evaluate the effectiveness of the training.
  - Establishing a credentialing or rating system: Departments and organizations could earn recognition for best practice implementation; such a system could provide useful information to potential students and job applicants and, ideally, spark a race to the top.
  - The AEA may also consider dedicating publication space in an AEA journal for papers on best practices in the profession: Such a commitment would signal the importance of remediating disparities in the profession and incentivize investigations of how best to do so.
- ***The Committee recommends that the AEA plays a more active role in drawing a broader range of the population into the study of economics by supporting pipeline activities, improving pedagogy and curricula, and increasing public understanding of economic research and principles.***

Economics lags behind other fields of study in both the level and progress rate of representation among women and minorities. Recent CSWEP and CSMGEP reports show that the shares of women and minorities majoring in economics has flat-lined or even drifted downward in recent years. Moreover, the economics major currently has a lower share of women and minorities than most STEM fields.

While the AEA should continue to support the high-quality targeted efforts run by CSMGEP and CSWEP, including the Summer Economics Fellows Program, the Summer Training Program, and the Pipeline Mentoring Program, it should also design initiatives to address two major obstacles.

First, achieving a more diverse profession depends on having more economists encouraging undergraduates that belong to currently underrepresented groups to study economics and to mentor them. While Bayer and Wilcox (2017) offer specific guidance to individual faculty members and departments, constructing more active and pervasive outreach presents a challenge for an organization like the AEA, which is fairly far removed from day-to-day interactions between members of the profession and potential students. The AEA can support such local interactions by developing appropriate resources and activities.

Second, a big part of expanding the pipeline is generating broader interest in the economics profession among young people – especially high school students. Public outreach to high school students would have benefits in terms of diversity, but would also yield broader benefits such as improving the understanding and status of economics in the public sphere.

For these reasons, the committee recommends the following additional outreach activities:

- The AEA should actively seek partnerships with organizations such as the College Board (which administers Advanced Placement exams in economics), which play a role in setting the tone for how economics is perceived by high school students. It should also explore working with media organizations such as PBS to produce an educational series (e.g. “What is Economics?”) that would reach many new faces.
- The AEA should establish a competitive grant program that awards funding to initiatives that aim to increase the pipeline of women and minorities among potential economics majors and those interested in graduate study. A partial list of candidates for funding includes:
  - Symposia that highlight the roles and research of women and/or minorities in economics - for example, see this [“Women in Economics” conference](#) held at the St. Louis Fed.
  - The development of curricula and promotional materials that highlight research by economists from underrepresented groups and/or that communicate the relevance of economics to a broad range of students and correct common misperceptions about the discipline (e.g. showing that economists study issues beyond money and finance).
  - Travel grants to give lectures and talks at high schools, colleges and other venues about careers in economics and current research in the field.
  - Collaborations across institutions to develop and share strategies to enhance inclusivity in economics - for example, see this [collaboration involving eighteen liberal arts colleges](#). Relatedly, the AEA could sponsor partnerships and/or conferences with colleges and organizations that seek to bring underrepresented groups into the economics profession, with the goal of learning lessons that could scale more broadly to other settings.
- Finally, the AEA should consider devoting additional resources specifically to public communication and outreach. Existing efforts should be reviewed and revised as necessary to support the goal of diversifying participation in our field. The physics profession offers one potential model; its [Committee on Informing the Public](#), distinct from its Committee on Education, coordinates outreach on behalf of American Physical Society (APS) members and makes specific funding recommendations to the APS for outreach activities on a regular basis.
- ***The Committee recommends establishing a new AEA Standing Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Professional Conduct to implement and oversee the initiatives recommended in this report.***

This new standing committee should include representatives from CSWEP, CSMGEP, the new LGBTQ Economists group, AEACEE, and the Executive Committee. This configuration will

contribute to the representativeness of the committee, facilitate cooperation between the status committees, and integrate them more effectively with the central governance of the AEA.

It is particularly important that the AEA does not solely rely on representatives from minority groups for this new standing committee; all members of the profession are responsible for establishing and maintaining an appropriate and inclusive professional environment. More generally, the committee should be well-resourced with financial, human, and social capital, to signal the AEA's commitment and to realize its goals.

The committee should be initially tasked with implementing or coordinating the following projects:

- Commission, oversee, and report on the professional climate survey.
  - Develop and implement best practices in personnel, education, research, and collegial behavior, and promote adoption throughout the profession through an ongoing process of providing and updating web resources, organizing events at the meetings, providing training programs, and creating incentives.
  - Consider requests for the use of AEA data to investigate bias in the profession, and potentially decide on funding for such projects.
  - Consider requests for funding of research projects that evaluate the impact of various programs and procedures on equality of opportunities and fairness of treatment of underrepresented groups, as well as of initiatives that aim to increase the profession's outreach to underrepresented groups.
  - Sponsor conference sessions and other forums that feature diverse scholars and facilitate new collaborations and exploration in economic research.
  - Investigate the feasibility of setting up a confidential reporting platform for sexual harassment/assault complaints such as Callisto to assist economists in reporting misconduct; report on a regular basis on the metadata collected via the platform.
  - Oversee and monitor other aspects of the AEA Code of Conduct that were not addressed by this Ad Hoc Committee, such as issues related to conflicts of interest, honesty and transparency in conducting and presenting research, equal opportunity and fair treatment along other personal traits than those covered by this Ad Hoc Committee; recommend modifications or updates to the Code of Conduct if and when necessary.
  - Summarize findings and activities via annual reports that should be shared widely with department chairs and deans, large employers of economists, and relevant public agencies and not-for-profits.
- ***The committee recommends that the AEA further investigates the feasibility, design and expected effectiveness of creating a formal complaint process for issues concerning discrimination, with sanctions imposed by the AEA for violators.***

The American Philosophical Association (APA) provides an example of how a formal complaint process with sanctions may operate.

The APA has a non-discrimination policy: <http://www.apaonline.org/?nondiscrimination>. This policy somewhat overlaps with the Code of Conduct that was drafted by the Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct, but is different in three important ways. First, the APA policy is solely focused on issues related to discrimination while the proposed AEA Code of Conduct is broader, also touching at issues such as conflict of interest and honesty and transparency in conducting research. Second, the APA policy is much more explicit than the AEA Code of Conduct in its definition of what constitutes discriminatory behavior. Third, and most importantly, the APA policy explicitly states that the APA is committed to sanctioning institutions that do not abide by the policy. In particular, the bottom section of APA non-discrimination policy reads as follows: “*Advertisers in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers are expected to comply with this fundamental commitment of the APA, which is not to be taken to preclude explicitly stated affirmative action initiatives. Institutions that seek to advertise in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers will be asked whether they comply with the APA Nondiscrimination Statement. Ads from those that do not so indicate will not be run. The APA board of officers expects that all those who use the APA placement service will comply with the letter and spirit of all applicable regulations concerning nondiscrimination, equal employment opportunity, and affirmative action.*”

APA members then have the option to file a complaint to the APA in case of a suspected violation of the policy. Note that the APA only sanctions institutions, not individuals. Whenever a complaint gets filed, an ad hoc committee is created and this ad hoc committee reports on its findings and makes recommendation to the board of officers. The board of officers determines the final disposition of the complaint. If the board determines that a violation of the non-discrimination policy has occurred, both the complainant and the department or university responsible for the misconduct are informed about the reasons for the judgment, and sanctions are imposed.

In principle, the AEA could follow a model similar to that of the APA. This would require modifications to the Code of Conduct as currently drafted (see above).

There is no doubt that a process such as the one described above would demonstrate in the strongest terms the AEA’s commitment to tackling the discrimination and harassment issues, in that the AEA would be ready to sanction those it determines to have engaged in discriminatory practices (such as by limiting their access to JOE).

The Committee does not feel well equipped to make a recommendation on this, and hence suggests further investigation. In particular, the Committee does not have the expertise that is required to fully comprehend the legal environment and implications, or the financial implications (such as impact on the AEA insurance policy).

Furthermore, the Committee did not have the time to discuss how a process such as the one outlined above has been operating in practice and encourages the AEA to engage in conversation with other professional associations (such as the APA) that could directly report on their experiences.

One particular concern the Committee has about the formal complaint process is that it may not be an effective tool in getting victims to come forward, as they do not want to be caught in a “he said,

she said” situation. In this regard, and as we discussed before, an approach like Callisto might be more successful in getting victims to come forward.

Finally, the committee also felt that it might be better to start by collecting systematic facts (such as via the climate survey and other activities of the new Standing Committee) before committing to go down this path.

- ***The committee recommends that the AEA further investigates the possibility of creating an ombudsperson position for issues related to discrimination and harassment.***

Again, the APA provides an example of how this could work in practice.

The APA ombudsperson, whose name and contact information is easily accessible on the APA website, receives informal complaints about possible violations of the APA. The ombudsperson will then try to resolve the matter, and if the matter has been filed by an APA member and the complaint regards discrimination by an institution, the matter may then be treated via the formal complaint process outlined above.

The ombudsperson ordinarily sits on the ad hoc committees that review formal complaints.

The ombudsperson also plays an information role. In particular, the ombudsperson offers the following services: education about the APA non-discrimination policy to the association memberships; access to publicly available anti-discrimination resources for complainants; and help in gathering the employer’s (or prospective employer’s) relevant policies and procedures for complainants. It is explicit in the ombudsperson job description that he/she does not provide legal services.

Finally, the ombudsperson prepares annual reports including summary data on the number and types of complaints received, as well as anonymized information describing each complaint and action taken in response.

It is the committee’s sense that a position such as this is made much more relevant by the existence of the subsequent formal complaint process, with possible sanctions. The committee therefore believes that a final recommendation would require the AEA to first determine whether it is willing to put in place a formal process of complaints and sanctions. One could nevertheless envision creating such an ombudsperson with a narrower role focused on the information provision services.

### **A sampling of relevant efforts by other organizations**

American Bar Association

- Diversity and Inclusion Portal. <https://www.americanbar.org/diversity-portal.html>

American Physical Society

- Website resources, including documents on effective practices for recruiting and retaining women and minorities in Physics. <http://www.aps.org/programs/women/> and <https://www.aps.org/programs/minorities/>

- Report on LGBT Climate in Physics based on focus groups at APS meetings, a detailed climate survey, and a set of in-depth interviews.
- Self-assessments of female-friendliness of graduate programs. 150 posted online. <http://www.aps.org/programs/women/female-friendly/index.cfm>
- CSWP offers site visits to evaluate department climate and make suggestions for change. <http://www.aps.org/programs/women/sitevisits/index.cfm>

#### American Philosophical Association

- Website Resources on Diversity and Inclusiveness. [http://www.apaonline.org/?page=diversity\\_resources](http://www.apaonline.org/?page=diversity_resources)
- Position of Ombudsperson Concerning Discrimination and Sexual Harassment. Created in 1999. Role is educating complainant re. APA statement on nondiscrimination, advising complainant of publicly available resources, assisting the complainant in gathering the employer's (or prospective employer's) relevant policies and procedures. Prepares annual reports. <http://www.apaonline.org/page/ombuds>
- Procedures for making informal or formal complaints regarding violations of APA's nondiscrimination policy. Formal complaints result in formation of an ad hoc committee, which reports to board of officers, which issues judgement. Seems to apply to sexual harassment also. [http://www.apaonline.org/?discrim\\_complaint](http://www.apaonline.org/?discrim_complaint)

#### American Political Science Association

- Resources for Diversity Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement. <http://www.apsanet.org/diversityresources>
- Committee on Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms. Grievances can be filed with this committee. <http://www.apsanet.org/divresources/sexualharassment>
- Survey of APSA members on sexual harassment. [https://www.bu.edu/polisci/files/2010/10/51.1\\_Sexual\\_Harassment\\_EditedProof1.pdf](https://www.bu.edu/polisci/files/2010/10/51.1_Sexual_Harassment_EditedProof1.pdf)
- Meeting Ombuds - available only at APSA meetings, beginning 2017.
- Procedure for pursuing a complaint of sexual harassment through APSA; applies to APSA meetings. [http://www.apsanet.org/Portals/54/governance/FINAL\\_Sexual\\_Harass\\_Procedures\\_4-8-17.pdf?ver=2017-08-30-115125-640](http://www.apsanet.org/Portals/54/governance/FINAL_Sexual_Harass_Procedures_4-8-17.pdf?ver=2017-08-30-115125-640)

#### NSF

- In the process of setting up a portal for students/faculty members to directly report harassment to NSF. If university does not notify NSF of harassment investigations, grant holders can be held accountable. <https://www.nsf.gov/od/odi/harassment.jsp>

#### NAS

- Report on harassment. <http://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/cwsem/shstudy/index.html>

#### Federal Reserve Board

- David Wilcox has reported on changes in recruiting and candidate evaluation procedures to increase diversity and inclusion at the Federal Reserve Board. <https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=5524>

#### NSF ADVANCE grantees

- <https://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/advance/awards.jsp>
- Institutional Transformation projects compiled by Laursen and Austin (2014) <http://www.strategictoolkit.org>

## References

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