

U.S. News: Economists Grapple With Diversity Issues

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FULL TEXT

Economics professor Dania Francis researches topics such as racial and socioeconomic disparities and student-achievement gaps. But she recalls a moment during her graduate studies when a professor discouraged her from pursuing those interests.

"Don't be the black person that studies black issues," Ms. Francis recalled the person saying. "Study something legitimate first, so that people can understand you're a legitimate scholar and then go on to do [race-related research] once you've made a name for yourself."

For Ms. Francis, the advice represented one of the many challenges the economics field has with race issues, from a lack of minorities entering the profession and the career hurdles they face to how it approaches race-related topics.

"You can encourage as many [people of color] to enter the field as you want, but if when they get there they perceive hostility or they feel undervalued, they're not going to stay," Ms. Francis said. The economics field needs to consider: "What are the structures in economics that are discouraging minorities from being in those spaces and at those tables?"

The profession is grappling with such questions amid a larger conversation about how to bring more racial and gender diversity to the field. The American Economic Association's annual conference, which begins Friday in San Diego, includes a panel titled "How Can Economics Solve Its Race Problem?" It follows a similarly titled panel on gender at last year's gathering.

Former Federal Reserve Chairwoman Janet Yellen, the AEA's 2020 president, and other prominent economists have said a lack of diversity limits how the field analyzes issues and crafts policies that affect swaths of people. "The prevailing views are probably biased by the relative lack of women and minorities," Ms. Yellen said in October at a public event. She pointed to the gender earnings gap and discrimination as examples of research topics that "would receive more attention than they do with greater representation of women and minorities."

A 2018 AEA report found that black, Hispanic and Native American students were less likely to complete degrees in economics compared with all subjects.

People from those groups were awarded 16% of all economics degrees in 2017, up from 11.6% in 1995. Meanwhile, their numbers rose to 23.7% of degrees in all subjects in 2017, from 13.1% in 1995.

AEA's focus on race this year follows recent efforts to improve the profession's culture on gender. The association introduced its own moderated job forum over concerns about sexism on a popular career site and eliminated job interviews in hotel rooms during its annual conference.

An AEA survey found women of color in the profession face their own challenges, as do racial minorities generally. For instance, a larger share of nonwhite women than white women reported having taken steps, such as not applying to or turning down particular jobs, to avoid possible mistreatment by other economists, the survey found. Black, Asian and Hispanic survey respondents were more likely to report they had experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in the job market compared with whites. Black respondents also were far less likely than nonblack respondents to report that people from their race or ethnicity are respected in the economics field.

"We certainly know that we have a problem in terms of representation, but I don't think people really understand

the full depth of the problem that the profession has with race," said Trevon Logan, an economics professor at Ohio State University.

The AEA last year created a task force focused on attracting minorities through outreach and curriculum changes in high schools and colleges, including making economics courses feel more relevant to students' experiences.

"Most of our introductory classes abstract away from any notion of discrimination, inequality, things that you might hear more about in a sociology course," Ms. Francis said. "Many underrepresented minorities, coming from a background where they're interested in talking about those types of things or understanding those types of things, can be turned off."

She said minorities often feel unwelcome at every potential point in an economics career. In her case, it took substantial encouragement from other black economists before she completed her doctoral studies. Ms. Francis left a Ph.D. program at Harvard University after struggling to pass required comprehensive exams and battling feelings of isolation, she said.

Ms. Francis, who now teaches at the University of Massachusetts Boston, ultimately completed a doctorate in public policy and economics at Duke University. She thrived there, she said, in part because of mentorship from Sandy Darity, a professor who has gained prominence for his research arguing for reparations for blacks descended from American slaves.

Credit: By Amara Omeokwe

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