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**U.S.**

## Economics Profession Turns Attention to its 'Race Problem'

American Economic Association, at annual conference, plans to examine lack of minorities entering the field and the challenges they face when they do

*By Amara Omeokwe*

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Economics professor Dania Francis researches topics such as racial and socio-economic 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 to 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,” she said.

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 broad 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.”

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A 2018 AEA report found that blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans 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 specific 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. Meanwhile, 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 were also 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 scheduled to speak on the AEA panel on race.

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—particularly introductory offerings—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, including during graduate school or while seeking tenure at a university.

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 because she was one of few black students in the program, 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.



Dania Francis says it took substantial encouragement from other black economists before she completed her doctoral studies.

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The profession has tried to boost diversity for years. The AEA established a committee on minority groups in 1968. Mentoring and training programs for students of color pursuing undergraduate and graduate studies in economics have existed for decades.

A newer, independent effort called the Sadie Collective seeks to provide support and resources specifically for black women in the profession because they must navigate both racism and sexism, according to co-founder Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman.

The group—named after Sadie T.M. Alexander, the first black woman in the U.S. to receive a Ph.D. in economics—is expecting about 200 people in February at its second annual conference,

which will include a career fair.

“The Sadie Collective is sort of forcing the profession’s hand here,” Ms. Opoku-Agyeman said. “We’re looking at them looking at us and saying, ‘You said that we don’t exist, but all of us are here, so it’s your turn.’”

Broad attempts at improving diversity in economics in the past seemed to eventually lose momentum, said Cecilia Conrad, an economist and managing director at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, who is also scheduled to speak on the AEA race panel. She said she is optimistic about the current movement.

“There’s a recognition that you have to move beyond a model that’s an individual deficit model, the notion that the problem is there’s not enough [diverse] people with the qualifications for studying economics,” Ms. Conrad said. “If you don’t also look carefully at classroom climate, at the curriculum, at the mind-set of not only the faculty but fellow students, then you won’t retain the people who have those skill sets.”

Several economists said the profession’s challenges also extend to how it perceives and conducts race-related research.

“We think about race as a variable in analysis...but we don’t think about race as an experience and we’re not thinking about race as something that is a mediating factor in terms of decision-making processes,” Mr. Logan said.

That leads to economic research, for example, that finds distinct economic behaviors or outcomes between races, but doesn’t account for how racism or historical factors might have contributed to the differences, he said.

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