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PANEL: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE ECONOMICS PROFESSION[‡]

Diversity in Economics Seminars: Who Gives Invited Talks?[†]

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In economics, as in many other academic disciplines, it is common for departments to invite external speakers to give research talks in academic seminars. These invited seminars are a primary way that academic economists (i) get feedback on their work, (ii) disseminate their work, and (iii) expand their professional networks. Given research on the importance of role model effects, the composition of invited seminar speakers coming through a department may also affect the trajectories of graduate students and junior faculty in that department (see, for example, Porter and Serra 2020). Despite the central role that invited seminars play in the economics discipline, we know little about who gives these seminar talks.

In this paper, we describe the characteristics of invited seminar speakers, using a balanced panel of 66 economics and economics-adjacent departments from August 2014 through December 2019. Our data are the result of a multiyear, ongoing effort to collect this information from the websites of a broad range of departments in the United States and abroad.

I. Data

We developed a list of economics and economics-adjacent departments in the United States and abroad, using a variety of sources. Beginning in January 2019, a team of research assistants accessed each department website and collected available information on seminar schedules. Each semester, we updated our data to include the new set of seminar talks posted online. Some departments maintain past seminar schedules on their websites, so we were able to collect that information; for this paper, we include all departments for which data were available from August 2014 through December 2019.

We restrict our sample to include only talks by scholars who had a PhD at the time (so we exclude graduate students) and external speakers (their institution must be different from that of the host department). We also restrict our sample to talks by scholars who are economists (defined as having an economics or economics-adjacent PhD or being affiliated with an economics department).

There are 66 departments in our sample, from a broad mix of colleges and universities. Sixty-two percent of the departments in our sample have a doctoral program. In terms of geographic location, 24 percent are in the US Northeast, 14 percent are in the US Midwest, 32 percent are in the US South, and 21 percent are in the US West. The remaining 9 percent of departments are outside the United States.

We use RePEc rankings of economics departments to classify the rankings of the departments

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in our sample.[1] Two-hundred-eighty-nine departments were ranked. For noneconomics departments at the same university, we use the economics department ranking. (For instance, Chicago Booth would have the same ranking as Chicago Economics.) 6.1 percent of departments in our sample were in the top 10, 7.6 percent were ranked 11–25, another 7.6 percent were ranked 26–50, 13.6 percent were ranked 51–100, 28.8 percent were ranked 101–289, and 36.4 percent were unranked.

We coded the demographic characteristics of the seminar speakers in order to consider the composition of speakers across gender and underrepresented minority (URM) status. To do this, we made our best guess based on individuals' names, photos, citizenship (if listed on their website or CV), and undergraduate institution location. We acknowledge that these are imperfect proxies for actual gender and URM status and are best interpreted as indicating how that person is perceived by others.

Coding URM status was particularly complicated, as reasonable people can and do disagree about what the definition of interest should be. We interpret the spirit of URM status as being whether someone grew up as an underrepresented minority facing the various disadvantages that this implies (fewer role models in economics who look like you and bias from peers, educators, and supervisors). For individuals born abroad but now working in the United States, it is not clear at what point someone should "count" as a URM scholar. In this paper, we show results using the following definition of URM status: Black, Latinx, or Native American and grew up in United States. When in doubt, we used the location of the person's undergraduate institution as an indicator of whether the person grew up in the United States.

II. Composition of Seminar Talks and Speakers

There are 6,997 seminar talks in our sample given by 3,458 unique speakers. Since any one individual can give multiple seminar talks, we consider the composition of speakers in two ways: (i) at the seminar talk level (so that the same individual counts multiple times if they gave multiple talks) and (ii) at the speaker level (so an individual counts once no matter how many seminar talks they gave).

A. *Seminar-Level Analysis*

Column 1 of Table 1 presents information on speakers at the seminar level. We find that 22.8 percent of talks were given by non-URM women, 76.1 percent of talks were given by non-URM men, 0.5 percent were given by URM women, and 0.6 percent were given by URM men.

31.9 percent of talks were given by junior scholars (those who received their PhD fewer than 6 years earlier). 24.6 percent were given by midcareer scholars (received their PhD 6–11 years earlier). 43.6 percent of talks were given by senior scholars (received their PhD 12+ years earlier).

20.8 percent of talks were given by scholars from the top 10 departments. 21.1 percent were given by scholars from departments ranked 11–25, 13.3 percent by scholars from departments ranked 26–50, 11.9 percent by scholars from departments ranked 51–100, 12.5 percent by scholars from departments ranked 101–289, and the remaining 20.4 percent of talks by scholars from unranked departments. (Note that unranked departments include those outside the top 289 as well as nonacademic institutions in industry and government.)

B. *Speaker-Level Analysis*

Column 2 of Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the sample of unique speakers. 22.0 percent of speakers were non-URM women, 76.9 percent of speakers were non-URM men, 0.4 percent of speakers were URM women, and 0.7 percent of speakers were URM men.

30.5 percent of speakers were junior scholars, 23.6 percent were midcareer scholars, and 46.0 percent of speakers were senior scholars.

16.8 percent of speakers were from top-10 departments. 16.4 percent were from departments ranked 11–25, 12.9 percent were from departments ranked 26–50, 12.1 percent were from departments ranked 51–100, 14.9 percent were from departments ranked 101–289, and 26.8 percent were from departments that were unranked. The differences between these numbers and the seminar-level averages in column

[1] Source: https://ideas.repec.org/top/top.econdept.html, rankings retrieved in August 2019.

Table 1—Sample of Seminars and Speakers

	Seminars	Speakers
N	6,997	3,458
Demographic group (percent)		
Non-URM women	22.78	22.04
Non-URM men	76.12	76.87
URM women	0.47	0.40
URM men	0.63	0.69
Years since PhD (percent)		
<6 years	31.87	30.50
6–11 years	24.58	23.55
12+ years	43.55	45.95
RePEc ranking (percent)		
1–10	20.77	16.80
11–25	21.09	16.40
26–50	13.31	12.90
51–100	11.88	12.15
101–289	12.53	14.92
Unranked	20.42	26.84

Notes: Sample includes all talks by PhD-economist speakers visiting from other institutions (column 1) and all unique PhD-economist seminar speakers who give at least one talk at a school other than their own (column 2). PhD years are from speakers' CVs, and RePEc rankings are of the speakers' home departments; these were retrieved in August 2019 and range from 1 (top) to 289 (bottom). If a speaker gave more than one talk, data in column 2 are based on his/her maximum and minimum years since PhD and RePEc ranking, respectively.

Sources: Department websites and authors' calculations

1 imply that a disproportionate share of people from the top 25 departments appear in our sample for more than one talk.

To be included in our sample, a scholar must have given at least one talk during this period. Conditional on giving at least one talk, each non-URM woman in our sample gave 2.1 talks on average (median = 1, max = 11), each non-URM man gave 2.0 talks (median = 1, max = 12), each URM woman gave 2.4 talks (median = 2, max = 7), and each URM man gave 1.8 talks (median = 1, max = 10).

III. Seminars at Top Departments

Opportunities to speak at top departments are of particular value to academic scholars. Where are the speakers who visit those departments drawn from?

Thirty-one percent of the 1,594 talks given by non-URM women were at top-25 departments. Among these talks, 59 percent were given by scholars who were themselves affiliated with a top-25 department; only 9 percent were by scholars at unranked departments.

Thirty percent of the 5,326 talks given by non-URM men were at top-25 departments. Sixty-one percent of those speakers were also from top-25 departments; 11 percent were from unranked departments.

Among talks given by URM women, 21 percent of their 33 talks were at top-25 departments. Eighty-six percent of those speakers were themselves from a top-25 department, while 14 percent were from unranked departments.

For URM men, 23 percent of their 44 talks were at top-25 departments, and 90 percent of those speakers were also from a top-25 department. None were from unranked departments.

IV. Trends over Time

The graphs in Figure 1 show the share of talks given by speakers in each demographic group. Observations are at the department-semester level. The solid line shows the mean across departments over time, and the dotted line shows the median. The top graph shows the trends for non-URM women, the second graph shows trends for non-URM men, the third graph shows trends for URM women, and the bottom graph shows trends for URM men.

For non-URM women, the mean hovered around 0.20 until 2019. We see an increase to about 0.23 in the spring of 2019 and to about 0.32 in the fall of 2019. The median is consistently lower than the mean, which implies a skewed distribution. There are some departments that invite an unusually diverse set of speakers, and their seminar compositions are pulling the average upward. At one department in our sample, zero non-URM women spoke during this period; at three other departments, close to 50 percent of talks were given by non-URM women.

For non-URM men, the trend looks fairly flat (the mean hovers around 0.73) from the spring of 2015 through the spring of 2018, at which point it begins declining (to about 0.65 in 2019). The median is consistently above the mean for this group, which again implies a skewed distribution. There are some departments that invite an unusually diverse set of speakers, and in this case, their seminar compositions are pulling the average for non-URM men downward. Most

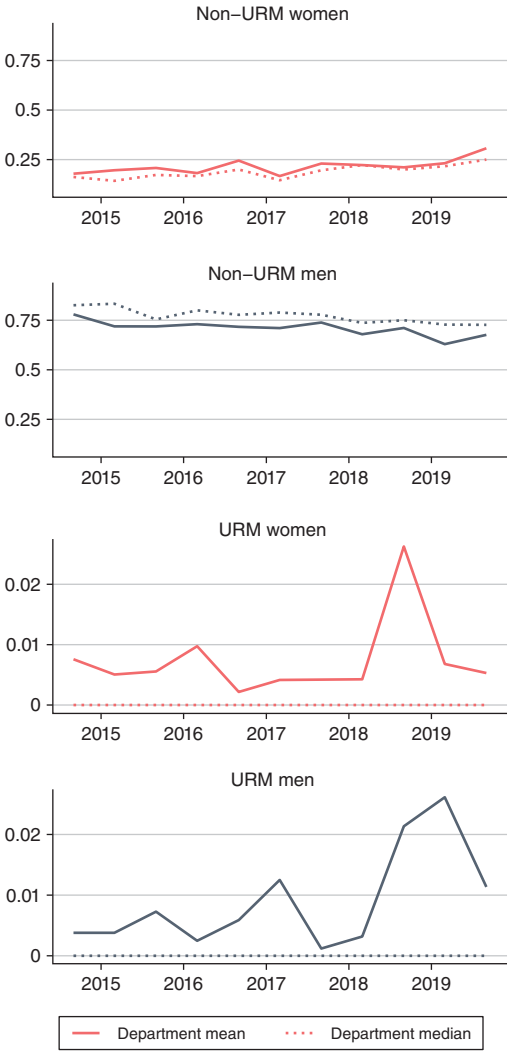

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF TALKS GIVEN BY EACH GROUP OVER TIME

Notes: Each graph shows the mean and median number of talks given by speakers in the specified demographic group. The *y*-axis shows the share of talks given by speakers in that group across all departments in a particular semester.

Sources: Department websites and authors' calculations

departments are inviting a less diverse set of speakers than this group's average would suggest. At 2 departments in our sample, fewer than 50 percent of speakers were non-URM men, but at 3 others, at least 90 percent were non-URM men.

The trends for URM women and men are very different: For both groups, we see low, flat averages (around 0.005) through the spring of 2018. Beginning in the fall of 2018, we see increases (to about 0.025) in the average share of talks given by URM women and URM men. For URM women, the average declines again to the original level the following semester; for URM men, the average stays elevated through 2019. It is striking that the median share of URM speakers is zero for the full time period for both groups. Forty-three of the 66 departments in our sample did not invite a single URM woman to speak during this period; 39 did not invite a single URM man to speak.

V. Discussion

How should we interpret the numbers presented above? Are seminar series sufficiently diverse, or should departments try to invite more women and URM scholars to present their work?

We do not yet have a clear answer to this question. One useful point of reference is the current composition of the profession. The best numbers on the share of economists who are women or URM come from surveys conducted by the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession and the Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP), respectively. The numbers we would like to know are the shares of the full pool of active economics researchers in each demographic group. These surveys do not quite tell us this, but they provide several metrics that are useful proxies.

In 2019, 21.2 percent of all tenure-track faculty were women, and 24.3 percent of all faculty were women (Levenstein 2020). This does not include women economists who work outside of academia in government, industry, or think tanks. Many of those economists work on academic research and so should be considered part of the pool of potential speakers. For this reason, the total number of economics PhDs granted might be a better reference point. In 2019, 32.2 percent of all economics PhDs were granted to women; this number has held roughly steady (if anything it has fallen a bit) since 2010 (Levenstein 2020).

We find that about 22 percent of the seminar speakers in our sample are women. This is about the same as the share of tenure-track economics

faculty who are women, but it is much lower than the share of new economics PhDs granted to women.

In 2018, 9.9 percent of new economics PhDs were awarded to URM scholars (Hoover and Washington 2020).[2] 6.8 percent of new economics PhDs were awarded to URM women (Hoover and Washington 2020). The best data available suggest that 7.3 percent of full-time faculty are URM scholars (Hoover and Washington 2020).

We find that about 1.1 percent of speakers are URMs. This number is low relative to every metric above. And, as highlighted in the text, about two-thirds of departments did not invite any URM scholars to speak during the entire sample period.

All that said, our view is that the optimal target for the share of seminar speakers who are women or URM is not the current composition of the profession but the composition we *aspire* to achieve. There are many reasons to believe that the current lack of diversity in the economics profession represents a highly inefficient equilibrium (Doleac forthcoming, Hengel and Moon 2020, Lundberg and Stearns 2019). Many have lamented the status quo. The question facing all of us now is: how do we change it (Buckles 2019)?

Given the role of invited seminar talks in improving and disseminating research, building scholars' networks, and connecting graduate students and junior faculty with role models who look like them, it is likely that the composition of seminar talks is a cause (not simply a consequence) of the composition of the profession.

To the extent that seminar talks have a causal effect on scholars' trajectories within the profession, one relatively low-cost way to provide women and URM scholars more opportunity to succeed in economics is to invite more scholars from underrepresented groups to give seminar talks.[3] We do not yet know how much of an effect this could have; this will be an important area for future work. But we suspect that increasing the diversity of seminar series in economics departments in the United States and abroad could be a highly effective way to reach the new, more diverse equilibrium we desire.

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[2] The CSMGEP report defines URM as Black, Latinx, or Native American scholars who are US citizens or permanent residents—a slightly broader definition than the one we are using here.

[3] This may require external funding from professional organizations like the American Economic Association to internalize the positive externalities that departments are not currently considering.