Encouraging Diversity

The Department of Economics is one of the most diverse departments at the University; only 43.5 percent of our students identify themselves as Caucasian compared with 55.3 percent in the whole university. Moreover, the methodology of economics is widely used to describe and explore topics relevant to diversity, such as sources of poverty and inequality in the US. Yet, as a discipline we still face challenges in demonstrating our relevance to many under-represented student groups and in attracting them to the study of economics. The challenges that we face in our discipline are common to all programs in economics, but the particular strengths of our department and the varied ethnic characteristics and international orientation of Washington State’s citizens, should allow us to take the lead in demonstrating the contribution that diversity makes to academic excellence.

Our department seeks to create a climate that encourages the success of each student. We pursue this goal while serving a particularly international student body, with differing educational backgrounds. Even among students educated in Washington State, our entering students arrive with wide differences in mathematical skills and analytical tools. We work intensively with students to fill in gaps in their foundation skills, but university-wide efforts clearly are needed to help many students acquire missing quantitative tools. Helping students to fill in gaps in their foundation skills would open doors to many exciting careers, including economics.

What activities do we undertake to encourage diversity?

1. Student Access and Retention

The Undergraduate Program

The Department of Economics has an open major, meaning that all students who complete the pre-requisites are admitted to the department, so the diversity of our undergraduate program depends on our visibility and relevance to a wide group of students. Our Academic Counselors play an active role in informing interested undergraduates about requirements and opportunities of the major. Prospective majors find accessible information through the department website and in the advising office. The Academic Counselors have advising hours every day to help individual students assess their preparation and construct a road map to their individual goals.

Some students—often minority students—petition to enter the major with weak academic records. These are usually serious students who struggled in their early academic work, who attempted (and often repeated) rigorous courses, and who eventually demonstrated sufficient mastery of fundamentals to succeed in intermediate economics. The traits these students demonstrate—their willingness to stretch out and study new, demanding
subjects, their determination in mastering difficult concepts, and their commitment to their own goals—are all indicators of their potential. During winter quarter, 2004, the Petition Committee approved eleven out of twelve special petitions, and we trust that all of these students will succeed by maintaining the level of commitment they have shown in the past.

Tutoring and individualized practice are especially important sources of support for students who, at first, find analytical problems-solving difficult. The Center for Learning in Undergraduate Education (CLUE) evening program of discussion and tutoring is a valuable resource for entering students enrolled in large, introductory courses. The Office of Minority Affairs tutoring program also provides essential support to students who benefit from working one-on-one.

The Economics Undergraduate Tutoring Program, provided as a volunteer service by seniors on the Economics Undergraduate Board, offers students walk-in help. Minority students, including the current chair of the Tutoring Program, are involved in tutoring as mentors as well as learners. For example, one of the most active contributors to the volunteer Tutoring Program is a self-supporting student who financed much of her college education as an interstate truck driver.

**Recommendations to Support Undergraduate Access and Retention**

As the number of our undergraduate majors has grown toward 900, class sizes have doubled and tripled. Innovative teachers design a variety of small-group activities to give students hands-on experience. However, with no classroom or laboratory space, the study groups sprawl into the halls. Some physical study space for economics undergraduates would help to integrate individual students, who currently feel isolated, into their disciplinary community.

Low-income students, who attempt to put themselves through school without other support, struggle to pay tuition and keep up with classes. The University needs greatly expanded programs of scholarships, student loans, and work-study programs to allow disadvantaged students to focus on academic success.

Tutoring provided by the Office of Minority Affairs, through the CLUE program, and through the Economics Undergraduate Board makes a significant difference and should be expanded, notably by providing funding to expand activities that are currently staffed by volunteers.

**Graduate Program**

Our graduate students are highly intelligent, well-trained economists from the US and from every corner of the globe. Their diversity and varied perspectives enrich our graduate program. As teaching assistants and instructors, these pre-doctoral candidates demonstrate the relevance of economic analysis to an understanding of domestic and global problems.
Published University statistics obscure the real underlying diversity of this group of international students. In fact, our foreign students come from top universities around the world—in Asia, South Asia, South and Central America, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe. Entering graduate students enroll with GRE scores that place them in the top one or two percent of all applicants. The life experiences and research interests of our graduate students invite our undergraduates to think deeply about difficult questions, such as sources of growth and inequality.

The international diversity of our graduate students reflects the strength of our programs in international economics and macroeconomics as well as the role that our Research Center in International Economics plays in linking our faculty with researchers around the world, particularly in Asia.

Our Center for Research on the Family also prepares graduate students pursuing research relating to diversity. It co-sponsors an interdisciplinary seminar series, which brings to campus researchers working on ethnicity and job market access, poverty, inequality, and child welfare. Together with the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology, the CRF finances Research Assistantships and fosters graduate student research on economic diversity and development.

2. Relationships with the External Community

The Department of Economics enjoys an amazingly supportive community of alumni whose efforts provide endowed professorships and help us to retain world-class faculty members. Their support expands our ability to invite distinguished American women and minority scholars as well as researchers from all over the world to present the results of their work and to mentor our graduate students.

Our local alumni community is diverse. Their willingness to lead career workshops on campus and to meet with seniors individually provides a continuing reminder that leaders of the business, professional, and policy making communities bring diverse experiences to the table. For example, recent graduates of the department who are professionals in high-tech industries have organized a discussion group, called ThinkEcon. They meet monthly with our honors undergraduates to discuss a policy issue. Their varied, international backgrounds and their social concerns foster thoughtful discussion and build a network of economists of all backgrounds.

The Department enjoys links with policy makers in Washington State, in federal agencies, and in international agencies. One faculty member served on the Committee to Review the Adequacy of Washington State Funding in 2002. The director of that research effort in the Washington State Office of Financial Management is a Department of Economics PhD. That Washington State official is currently mentoring one of our honors undergraduates to undertake a study of the taxation of web-based retailing.
Faculty research projects and an extensive network of departmental graduates in federal
government agencies, the regional branches of the Federal Reserve Bank, and in
international organizations, such as the World Bank, IMF, and Asian Development Bank
give our students access to internships, research databases, and, ultimately, careers that
allow them to play a leadership role in the nation and in the global economy.

Recommendations to Support Student Activities in the External Community

Impersonal, web-based exchange of information overwhelms public agencies and
employers with hundreds of resumes and candidates, causing them to turn to traditional
networks of personal contacts to identify students with the specific skills they need. We
need to work actively with individual students from under-represented groups to assure
that they invest in the skills and internship activities, which will open doors to future
opportunities and to assist them in matching their skills with opportunities outside the
university.

3. Staff and Faculty

Staff

The Department of Economics has an experienced and dedicated staff, which manages a
rapidly expanding student enrollment, research contracts, international conferences,
workshops and seminars, and an active schedule of visiting speakers from all over the
world with apparent ease and efficiency.

The obvious diversity issue facing staff is the under-representation of men in
administrative roles. The department environment is open and welcoming, and student
assistants from many countries of the world help the Department to maintain essential
administrative functions. This training helps position them for permanent university
administrative positions, if they choose that career path.

Faculty

Minority faculty and, especially, women are underrepresented in economics departments
around the country. On both dimensions the Department of Economics displays much
greater diversity than is common in most PhD-granting departments in economics. Our
faculty of 27 reflects our commitment to diversity.

Women Faculty

Nationally, the field of economics does a poor job of attracting minority and women
scholars to the study of economics. The deficit is startling in the case of women. In their
Annual Report for 2001, the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics
Profession (CSWEP), a sub-committee of the American Economic Association noted that
there has been no increase in the share of tenured women at PhD-granting universities in
spite of a steady rise in enrollment of female graduate students and increased
employment of women at the Assistant Professor and Instructor levels. Although women are now approximately 30 percent of all new PhD recipients and about 32 percent of all first-year PhD students, nationally, women account for 13-15 percent of tenured Associate Professors and only 6 percent of Full Professors.

Seen against this national deficit, the representation of women on our faculty is almost three times larger than the national average. Almost 26 percent of our regular faculty are women. One faculty member focuses her research on gender issues. She has developed an advanced undergraduate course on the Economics of Gender, which we offer in cooperation with the Woman’s Studies Program. Another woman faculty member holds an endowed professorship and heads the Center for Research on the Family, which funds Research Assistantships relating to the Center’s efforts and collaborates with other social science departments.

4. Curriculum and Research

Curriculum

Economics is an empirical social science. In their courses, students acquire tools for exploring alternative explanations about economic outcomes and they observe the economic consequences of policy choices. The tools of economics underlie our search to understand who we are in America, the sources of social problems, and the potential impact of alternative policies. For example, in the study of labor markets, students survey a wide body of scholarship investigating sources of difference in market wages. In econometrics, they acquire the skills to undertake their own investigation of the same questions. Learning is linked to scholarship. In a recent article, “On the Persistence of Racial Inequality,” in the Journal of Labor Economics, April 1998, two of our faculty, Shelly Lundberg and Richard Startz investigate the role of market factors and discrimination in accounting for wage differences.

At all levels, we link the study of analytical models and methods to real-world applications. We offer service courses, such as Benefit-Cost Analysis and Price Theory and Public Policy, which allow economics undergraduates and graduate students in other programs to write research papers applying economic theory to real-world problems. We offer an Honors Research Seminar, which allows undergraduate honors students to pursue a year-long research project, applying economic analysis to a real-world empirical issue. For example, current research topics of these undergraduate researchers include a study of Washington State efforts to collect child support from non-custodial parents, the environmental effects of markets for “rights to pollute,” and alternative mechanisms to supply pharmaceuticals to low-income countries. We are expanding our offerings in econometrics and computational economics, which give the students the skills to function in a state-of-the-art research and policy-making environment.

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1 CSWEP, 2001 Annual Report <www.cswep.org>
Recommendations for Giving Students in Under-Represented Groups Access to Learning Tools

It is a particular challenge to give self-supporting students and students from under-represented groups access to new inquiry-based initiatives. These students are more likely to have to divide their time between work and study. They also have less access to computer technology and to the hands-on skills that are acquired in routine learning-by-doing activities on the computer. The Chemistry Department laboratory provides a model for linking course work with self-paced problem-solving. With almost 900 undergraduate majors, one of our goals should be the development of additional computer-based resources allowing all students to engage in group research projects and self-paced problem solving. Such efforts will require additional resources and space.

Research

The department has a distinguished, internationally-renowned faculty whose research contributions cover a broad range of fields. Whether focused on domestic problems or international issues, their economic research builds fundamental knowledge of human behavior and social and economic institutions. The empirical studies of several of our faculty address issues of inequality in the domestic economy and across the world. The Center for Research on the Family, mentioned earlier, engages faculty and graduate students on empirical research in topics relating to inequality, poverty, job markets, and family behavior. The Research Center on International Economics links scholars working on growth, international trade, and globalization. Some of the topics addressed in this work are why some countries grow and others do not, and the impact of risk on aggregate and individual well being.

The research of our faculty and graduate students addresses some of the most puzzling questions we face as social scientists. For example, a look at the dissertation topics of the 14 graduates completing their doctoral dissertations this year, provides a list of major economic issues—the economics of health, corporate governance, environmental management and natural resource use, macroeconomic policy, international trade, and the sources of growth. The careful analysis underlying their studies provides the basis for informed policy discussion. The resumes of these newly-minted scholars display their diversity; their numbers include scholars from the US, Europe, Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.

The University’s Response to New Diversity

Our efforts to foster diversity need to respond to what we know about the changing demography of our state. Our rapidly changing demographic mix in Washington State requires us to meet the needs of new groups of students, including more than 10 percent of our students who speak English as a second language. The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Grutter v Bollinger et al.*, published in June 2003, affirms that diversity is a compelling interest in higher education, but requires us to foster the benefits of diversity
without establishing quotas for individual groups or putting members of certain groups on
different admissions tracks.\(^3\)

How will the Office of Minority Affairs respond to the challenge of the new diversity?
Even the categories we use in our reports lag behind the reality of our community. For
example, the University of Washington Diversity Report on the web is missing the
considerable group of our students who identify themselves as multi-ethnic.

Students who are interested in the sources of inequality in society can find in economics
both a wealth of careful empirical work and the tools and techniques to investigate
questions on their own. Increasing the links between Ethnic Studies and the empirical
social sciences would give students of diversity greater ability to ask incisive questions
and to explore alternative explanations.

5. Academic Climate

The departmental environment is welcoming and supportive of all our students and staff.
The advising staff works closely with other college units to assist students, to advocate
for their concerns, and to help them solve individual problems on the road to achieving
their academic goals.

The Department seeks to model support and accountability in our relationships. For
example, we sponsored a presentation by the University Ombudsman on employee rights
and appropriate methods of dispute resolution. We also provided a seminar by the
University Counseling Office to inform faculty of the resources available to assist
students who are experiencing serious academic stress. We have seen this assistance play
a supportive role in helping students get through a discouraging time and to succeed in
their goals.

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\(^3\) Jonathan Alger, “Summary of Supreme Court Decisions in Admissions Cases,”
<http://www.umich.edu/~urel/admissions/overview/cases-summary.html>.
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