

Statement on Contributions to Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is central to my career and indeed is the very reason that I became a development economist in the first place. The world is a deeply inequitable place: the poorest Americans have living standards that far outstrip those of even fairly rich people from sub-Saharan Africa. Hundreds of millions of people still subsist on an income that amounts to less than two dollars a day. The global income distribution is not just unfair, it is characterized by stark racial gaps that reflect the structural legacy of racism, the slave trade, and colonialism as well as present-day discrimination. The poorest people in the world are overwhelmingly Black, and almost all live in former European colonies. They are excluded from the opportunities afforded to the residents of rich countries by virtue of the nation of their birth.

Moreover, the field of economics has serious problems with gender and racial diversity. Women make up just 15 percent of all tenured faculty in economics. The field is also overwhelmingly white, with especially few Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous scholars. People from these groups face severe barriers at all stages of the economics profession, beginning as early as their introductory economics courses first year of college. It is imperative that economists find ways to make the field more inclusive.

I seek to address these inequities and promote diversity and inclusion through my research, my teaching, and my service; I discuss each of these below, as well as my plans for the future.

Promoting DEI through my research. I am convinced that it is an absolute moral imperative to address the deep racial and national inequities in economic outcomes. To this end, all of my research is focused on helping people of color who live in some of the most disadvantaged places in the world. Moreover, I see these people not simply as research subjects, but as people—people I am trying to help, and people who have agency and should have the freedom to make their own choices about their lives.

Much of my research is motivated by the notion that people in poor countries deserve control over their own lives and can be trusted to make their own choices. My work on HIV and fatalism is fundamentally based on the idea that people should be given scientifically accurate information about disease risks. This stands in stark contrast with typical public health messaging about HIV, which overstates the risks in an effort to induce better behavior. The crucial upshot of my work on deferred income payments as a savings tool is that people are better off when we listen to their ideas and give them more control over the way they are paid. That research agenda was motivated in part by my own data collection staff in Malawi asking to be paid later, helping set off a five-year quest to find an actual firm that was willing to offer this option to their workers. In my current policy work on financial inclusion, I am seeking to convince more organizations to do the same thing.

In addition to trying to make the world a more equitable and inclusive place through the practical policy aspects of my work, I also try to do so through my scientific practice. I read and cite the literature very broadly and deeply, seeking out research by scholars from Africa and from fields outside of economics that can inform my own work. I regularly examine my references to ensure that I am not excluding female scholars whose work is relevant to my own.

Another way I try to promote diversity in the field is through coauthorship. Nearly half of the economists with whom I have coauthored papers are women, and over a quarter are from developing countries. Far from simply seeking out established economists with diverse backgrounds, I have actively sought to bring on my graduate students as coauthors as a way to help them build their careers. All seven of my student coauthors were born in developing countries, and four are female. In starting recent research projects, I have specifically sought out coauthors who are local to the countries where I am going to work.

Promoting DEI in the classroom. I strive to contribute to diversity in my teaching as well, in a wide range of ways. I take time in my courses to explain the “hidden curriculum” that insiders are aware of, but people from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be privy to. This includes things like telling undergraduates what a professor’s job is, how tenure works, and what office hours are for. It also includes explaining things to graduate students that they may be embarrassed to ask about (like how the publication process works and when they can call themselves “Ph.D. candidates”) and things they may not get trained to do in their classes (like how to write the introduction to a paper). My goal is to demystify academia for outsiders, because the children of academics are much more likely to know these things already and thus succeed in academic careers themselves. By clarifying how the process works for all students my hope is to give everyone a shot at succeeding in economics.

While teaching the material for my courses, I strive to make the subjects I am covering interesting and accessible for a wide range of students, so that more of them will see economics as an appealing field to study. One way I do that is to bring in a variety of real-world examples that will appeal to students who come from many backgrounds. When I am teaching about price floors, we talk about government cheese and agricultural price supports. When discussing the shapes of demand curves, I bring in real-world evidence on the demand for insecticide-treated bednets in Kenya (from Cohen and Dupas 2010). For Giffen goods, I refer to Jensen and Miller’s discovery of Giffen behavior with respect to rice in Hunan, China.

In my PhD teaching, I am very cognizant of the demographic breakdown of the authors of the papers that I cover, and make sure my students are aware as well. In my first lecture, I present statistics on the genders of the authors of the papers in the course: 36 percent are female, which is above the fraction of women in the economics profession, but development economics skews female. I also call attention to the lack of diversity in terms of geography. Virtually all the authors are based in developed countries, and most were born in the developed world as well; a decent number were born in South Asia, but other regions are much less well-represented. I work to improve those statistics every year. I have made particular progress in terms of adding authors from Africa to my syllabus, but I need to continue to work to improve in this area.

Promoting DEI through service activities. Another approach I use to promote diversity and inclusion is to encourage the top 10% of the students in intermediate microeconomics to pursue a career in economics. This group generally skews female, and last fall the single best performer on the final was a woman who is very interested in pursuing a career in economics. She took me up on this encouragement and my offer to talk about graduate school, and we had an extensive conversation about this in early 2022; we have since stayed in touch as she has pursued this goal.

I have had repeated success in encouraging women to pursue economics with this approach, which had very similar effects in the fall of 2020 as well. This strategy also reaches other under-represented groups: one of my top students in the fall of 2020 was a non-traditional student who is passionate about public policy. He and I also talked about his career goals, and I helped to mentor him through some of his academic issues to help him pursue a career that uses his skills in economics. I am particularly heartened by his strong performance in the class this time around because I had a front-seat view to some of those issues: he had previously taken my course and did not just struggle but stopped attending entirely. It was fantastic to see him turn things around and do so well this time.

My interactions with undergraduate students from under-represented backgrounds often grow into long-term mentoring relationships. One such past student used me as a recommendation writer for her application to the McNair Summer Research Opportunity Program. Another female student had me write recommendation letters for her applications to graduate programs. The effects of this commitment to promoting diversity are evident in demographic breakdown of the students for whom I have written recommendation letters: over half are women, and over half are students of color.

My efforts to promote diversity through my teaching in the past have paid dividends—I have successfully helped a number of students to pursue careers in economics who are not the typical white American males that dominate the profession. Two of my past success stories reached out to me to thank me for my help last year, both of them women: one is now a Transportation and Logistics Business Analyst at Cargill, while another is now an Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office and is in the process of applying to PhD programs. The latter student also asked me for referrals to work at CBO, which could potentially lead to future opportunities for my students—opportunities which I will continue to make sure I make available to my students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I also promote diversity through my mentoring of doctoral students. The vast majority of my direct PhD advisees have been BIPOC people, and a large fraction have been female. In the department more broadly, I make a particular effort help students from Africa find research and funding opportunities, and to mentor them in their graduate careers. This extends beyond students whose committees I am on, and indeed beyond the boundaries of our department. For example, one African alumnus of our program (whose committee I was not on) still regularly sends me his papers for my comments, which I always provide.

I have also built connections to other African scholars who lack the professional networks they need in order to succeed as development economists, working to provide feedback on their research and connect them to opportunities such as J-PAL's African Scholars Initiative (ASI). As part of that effort, I currently serve as a mentor for ASI, and am working to guide two African scholars through the development of a randomized trial that they are planning to conduct. I meet with these mentees monthly to review survey instruments, provide feedback on grant proposals, and help them navigate the ups and downs of field research.

Finally, I have also successfully promoted diversity through my role in inviting seminar speakers to present in our department. I was tasked with organizing the department's Trade & Development Seminar on my own for Spring 2020, because my senior colleague Paul Glewwe was on sabbatical. The talks were all canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but my speaker invitations were rolled over into the fall term. I was thus successful in organizing a slate of speakers for Fall 2020 that was entirely made up of people who are female, from developing countries, or both. This was an explicit goal of mine because of the problems with representation in economics—and because of the large numbers of people from both groups who work in international development.

Plans for the future. My efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion are an ongoing process. I intend to continue the activities outlined above, and also build upon them. One specific goal I have for the future is to incorporate the promotion of DEI into my other service roles—for example, when weighing in on my employer's hiring decisions, or when working on efforts to recruit new students into my department. This is crucial because achieving real gains in terms of diversity requires looking for opportunities to expand our horizons in general; these challenges cannot be solved solely via specialized DEI committees. One specific plan I have is to make use of my skills as an empirical social scientist in order to encourage the use of effective, evidence-based interventions that have been proven to improve diversity, equity, and/or inclusion. There is an extensive body of research on promoting DEI, and it is under-utilized in actual policy. I plan to help correct that, to make sure that both my employer and I are doing as much as possible to promote diversity in economics.