

Guidelines towards a more Inclusive and Equitable Economics Department at the Graduate Institute

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Dear Professors,

There is a well-known shortage of women and under-represented minorities in economics¹ --- one which in contrast to other STEM fields has been strikingly persistent, especially at senior levels (Ceci, Ginther, Kahn, and Williams 2014; Ginther and Kahn, 2021). Last year, the Women in Economics Léman Initiative organized several workshops to explore how gender issues affect research and the academic community. From this experience, we decided to take action and design a series of guidelines to make the department of economics of the Graduate Institute more inclusive. Starting from the main take-aways that emerged during the workshops, summarized in a background research [document](#), our goal is to make our department a pioneer in fixing the leaking pipeline. Economics departments can mitigate the gender gap by having a diverse faculty and student body, a collegial seminar culture, mentoring and senior professors who are aware of subconscious biases (Boustan and Langan, 2019). This is our starting point, though we detail a more complete motivation behind this proposal in our [manifesto](#).

The objective of this document is to suggest certain guidelines and accountability mechanisms for the economics department of the Graduate Institute to become more equitable and inclusive. Our vision is to generate a collaborative atmosphere where everybody, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sex, age, sexual orientation, ability, height, and socioeconomic background feels a sense of belonging and can voice their thoughts freely without having to worry about judgement or retaliation. Such a space has the distinct feature of not merely *tolerating* diversity but *embracing* it by rethinking the way we interact with each other and how this affects each individual of our community. For everybody to feel welcome and respected in the way they are, supervision, teaching and seminar interactions should focus more on empowering individuals through affirmation and empathy, rather than extracting effort through dominance and fear. It is imperative that personal boundaries be respected and accountability mechanisms for sexual harassment be taken seriously as an issue, specifically in a setting where steep hierarchies and relationship-contingent career prospects provide a fertile ground for abusive behaviour.

Of course, as white/brown/latin cis-gendered women, we do not claim to accurately represent all the “rare voices in economics” we would like be allies for. That we can be here is a huge privilege in and of itself and the absence of other minority candidates² pays tribute to the fact that we all operate under very different constraints and institutional barriers. Instead of judging talent or intentions from outcomes, we should try to better understand these constraints and vow to improve.

Laura Nowzohour, Carlotta Nani, Paula Gonzalez

¹ While around ⅓ of PhDs in the US are awarded to women, only 23.5% of tenured and tenure-track faculty are women (15% full professors and 31% assistant professors). URM (Individuals who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Black or African American) receive around 7% of PhDs and represent 6.3% of tenured and tenure-track faculty (4% full professors and 8.1% assistant professors) (Bayer and Rouse, 2016).

² Under-represented groups include (but may not be limited to): women, people of color, members of the LGBTQI+ community, disabled individuals, first-generation students, individuals from low-income backgrounds.

Priority Guidelines

Because change happens gradually, we chose to focus on three priority targets:

- (i) Fostering diversity among faculty,
- (ii) Facilitating constructive student-teacher interactions, and
- (iii) Promoting a supportive, inclusive and collegial seminar culture.

Target I: Fostering diversity among faculty: Mitigating bias in Hiring and Admissions

There is strong evidence that teachers' and professors' biases have consequences on students' careers and life trajectory (e.g. [Alesina, Carlana, La Ferrara, Pinotti, 2019](#)). Having a diverse set of backgrounds among faculty helps to create a sense of belonging and thereby greater empowerment and self-confidence for members of under-represented groups. Does this mean that one's support for minority students is useless if one does not belong to the minority? Absolutely not. There are many ways to be a role model and an ally and agent of change as we will outline in this section.

What are subconscious biases?

Bias is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way that's considered to be unfair. Biases may be held by an individual, group, or institution and can have negative or positive consequences.

There are two types of biases:

1. **Conscious bias** (also known as **explicit** bias) and
2. **Subconscious bias** (also known as **implicit** bias)

It is important to note that biases, conscious or subconscious, are not limited to ethnicity and race. Though racial bias and discrimination are well documented, biases may exist toward any social group. One's age, gender, gender identity, physical abilities, religion, sexual orientation, weight, and many other characteristics are subject to bias.

Subconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. **Everyone holds subconscious beliefs** about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing. Subconscious bias is far more prevalent than conscious prejudice and often incompatible with one's conscious values. Certain scenarios can activate subconscious attitudes and beliefs. For example, biases may be more prevalent when multi-tasking or working under time pressure.

Source: [Office of diversity and outreach. University of California, San Francisco](#)

1. **Reflect on your own subconscious biases:** Do you find yourself assuming that a woman/minority candidate is lower quality? Sometimes it can be hard to recognize bias. Try to think: would you judge the value of the CV or work in the same fashion if the candidate had a different gender or did belong to an under-represented group?
 - a. Acknowledge gender/minority bias in admissions, hiring, and tenure committees. Learn about the [conscious and subconscious bias](#) against women and people from minorities.
 - b. Take Harvard's [implicit association test](#) for gender and career. If you wish to take more IAT (on age, race, disability, etc.) click [here](#).

- c. Take these four steps to [burst subconscious biases](#).
- d. If you still are unsure about what subconscious biases are in a practical way, try this short experiment (adapted from [this TED talk by Valerie Alexander](#))³:

- Imagine you are at the airport to go to a conference (It's 2019). You are late to board your flight. You make it just in time and as soon as the door of the plane closes the pilot steps out of the cockpit to say 'hi'.

Once you arrive at your destination, you go have dinner at the hotel restaurant. At the table next to yours, there is a couple celebrating their anniversary.

The next morning you go to the conference, which is the main conference of the year in your field of research. The director of the economics department of the hosting university is in charge of the keynote speech.

- Now answer these questions: While you were imagining these situations (1) was the pilot of the plane south-east Asian? (2) Was the couple celebrating the anniversary of the same-sex? (3) Was the director of the economics department a woman?

2. **Push back against subconscious biases:** Candidates belonging to under-represented groups tend to be perceived as lower-quality candidates and see their work discredited because of that. For example, in research often [women get less credit compared to men](#). Do not assume that women and people from minorities are "diversity hires" or "diversity admits". They have had to climb a taller hill to get here.⁴
3. **Every step counts:** At every single step there are small and easy measures we can take to work for equality. Call out biases when you notice them, particularly in interviews and admissions settings. [Here](#) are eight ways to speak up and call out biases.
 - a. Push back against "supply side" arguments in hiring and admissions decisions. While by nature of the problem it is true that there are fewer minority than non-minority candidates, the scarcity argument is often used to justify the unsatisfactory status quo.
 - b. Do not overlook CV's from under-represented groups.
 - c. Avoiding groupthink in candidate assessment has been shown to reduce biases. Collect independent assessments of candidates' profiles and aggregate them instead of discussing and agreeing on a common rating.
 - d. Be conscious of gendered language in recommendation letters you read and do not use gendered language in letters you write. For practical tips to spot bias in recommendation letters see [here](#)

³ Universities, private companies, NGOs and international organizations are working actively to promote inclusion and diversity. The internet is full of resources. If you wish to learn more about subconscious bias, [here](#) is a short video to help you detect and overcome it. [Here](#) is a training on managing subconscious bias, held at Facebook. You can watch the full training (50 minutes) or the individual videos on specific topics. These are [strategies to address subconscious bias](#) developed by the University of California, San Francisco. Besides two 2 minutes videos, it provides bullet point hints to overcome individual and institutional biases.

⁴ For further practical tips to reduce sexism and bias in economics, look [here](#).

and [here](#). For an instant “bias in reference letters” calculator, see [here](#).

- e. Interview potential students and faculty in comfortable, professional settings. Avoid interviewing students at the annual job market meeting one-on-one in a private hotel room. This is not a comfortable position for anyone involved, especially women candidates.
 - This poses a logistic challenge, especially at big events like the AEA or EEA conferences. To mitigate the issue, we suggest avoiding one-to-one interviews and ensuring that the hiring committee is gender diverse.
 - If flying more than one interviewer is costly, hybrid skype calls with additional interviewers participating remotely can be an efficient alternative.
 - Whenever possible we recommend having a living-room style arrangement as opposed to a bedroom-style.
 - f. Do not request and do not base your hiring decisions on personal information such as age, fertility, marital status, or family background of candidates.
4. The following are practical suggestions to make the hiring process in the department more inclusive:
- a. Set objective evaluation criteria ahead of time and hold each other accountable to avoid falling in the trap of hiring based on “fit”.⁵
 - b. Individual ranking: each department member who sits in the committee should first review and rank candidates individually before meeting with the other members.
 - c. The department hiring committee shortlists 20 candidates to present to the other departments and the director. We suggest including a quota at this stage. Among the 20 shortlisted candidates, we would like the department to aim at a 50-50 division based on gender. Within each gender category we would like to have at least one-fourth of names from under-represented groups.

Target II: Facilitate constructive faculty-student interactions: Advising Equitably

While PhD students do exhibit a high level of independence, it should be kept in mind that cultural, and socio-economic differences as well as language barriers can affect access to resources and ability to speak up, be noticed, or catch opportunities. The goal is to take an extra step to close that gap and to focus on encouraging and empowering each individual to reach out and take space.

1. **Reflect on your own subconscious biases and ask yourself—do I approach and treat women and men advisees differently?** Am I more accessible to some than to others? Do I hold preconceptions about one group’s ability over the other?

⁵ For an example, see [this article](#) in the AEA CSWEP newsletter on hiring at the Federal Reserve Board.

2. **Communicate clearly what you expect in the supervision relationship and what is important to you.** Ask your student to give you their inputs as well and keep this communication channel open as it may take a while for students to realize what works for them. Hold your student accountable but also try to approach their struggle with empathy and support.
 - a. Take the initiative and set up meetings with your supervisees. While some students will spontaneously come up to you, others may have more difficulty asking for your time.
 - b. Opt for regular constructive feedback to allow for a learning experience: offer feedback on actions and behaviours that can actually be improved. Focus on performance, not personality.
 - c. Students from minority backgrounds might struggle to feel a sense of belonging and legitimacy in the department and as a result may lack the self-confidence to try solving a hard task or stay motivated in the presence of setbacks. As their supervisor, seek to understand their experience in a non-judgmental way. Show empathy, set realistic goals and become an ally and agent of change.

3. **The mental health of your student is the single most important thing in both the personal and professional life spheres - and it is a huge yet little talked about issue among economics PhD students.**⁶ One in two postgraduate students experiences mental health issues during their PhD⁷ and only 35% of students with anxiety or depression find any useful help at their institution?⁸
 - a. As a supervisor, the expectation is not that you become the student's therapist, but rather that you be mindful of their mental health. Understand that being one of the very few people who is in a position to judge your students' work, your words matter, not only what you say but also how you say them. When a student falls behind on progress, you are probably only seeing a very small excerpt of what they might be going through. And communicating that you actually care about the mental health of your student independent of their research progress and that you believe they can do it, can go a long way in breaking a circuit of negativity and prevent adverse self-fulfilling prophecies from materializing. Note that this is perfectly compatible with *benevolently* holding your students accountable for their progress or lack thereof.
 - b. If your student does share something more, do not assume that you understand what they are going through because you have once gone through a similar situation - people and contexts are different. Seek to validate your student's reality and be supportive.

⁶ "(...) 24.8% economics PhD students experience moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety [during their PhD] —more than two times the population average. (...) Mental health issues are especially prevalent at the end of the PhD program: 36.7% of students in years 6+ of their program experience moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety, versus 21.2% of first-year students. 25.2% of economics students with these symptoms are in treatment, compared to 41.4% of graduate students in other programs. A similar percentage of economics students (40-50%) say they cannot honestly discuss mental health with advisers as they cannot honestly discuss research progress or non-academic career options." (Bolotnyy, Basilico and Barreira, 2021)

⁷ www.iflscience.com/brain/half-phd-students-suffer-psychologica-distress/

⁸ <https://www.nature.com/articles/nj7677-549a>

- c. Try to talk through different options for loading off some of the weight from the student's shoulders (this is not about the 'objective load' but about the 'subjective load' experienced by your student who may feel overwhelmed because of something else) and alternative sources of support (e.g. therapy).
 - d. [Here](#) you can find documents, videos and links on different issues related to health topics recommended by the institute that you could point out to the students. [Here](#) you can find information referring to the services offered to students related to physical, mental health and wellbeing.
 - e. Follow-up with the student to show that their mental health matters to you independent of the academic progress they may be struggling with at the moment.
 - We strongly suggest professors to organize yearly one-on-one meetings with their supervisees to discuss how is the PhD proceeding in terms of achievements but also struggles. This meeting should be the occasion to assess the goals set in the previous year and redefine the PhD path based on the expectations of both the student and the professors. We recommend having the first yearly meeting shortly after students' preliminary thesis defense (MPT).
4. **If you co-author with students, remember that you are interacting with someone who is likely less experienced.**
- a. State your objectives and expectations clearly and try to find a timeline that works.
 - b. If you are not satisfied with their performance, point it out in time for them to actually improve. Try to understand what is going on and ask how you can help.
 - c. Intimidation and comments that undermine your student's self-confidence damage your human connection with the student, make a performance rebound less likely and generate an environment of fear among other students.
5. **Off-campus meetings.** If you want to have off-campus casual meetings with your students, ensure women and students from minorities are included in these activities as well.
6. **When giving job market advice, bear in mind that individuals have different goals and this conversation is about theirs and not yours.** Avoid labelling non-academic jobs as 'alternative' careers and allow your students to openly express an interest in these as their primary goal. Only about 0.5% of PhD students will become a professor and as little as 3.5% become permanent research staff at a university.⁹

⁹ https://royalsociety.org/~media/royal_society_content/policy/publicatio

Target III: Promote a supportive, inclusive and collegial seminar culture

Ask tough questions but be reasonable and do it to help the presenter advance their research. This is not about you, but about everyone's learning experience.

1. **Representation matters.** Reserve presentation slots for women and other under-represented groups.
 - a. We believe that the department should aim at a gender balance among speakers invited to present at the seminars, however we are aware that it poses some challenges. While we aim at a 50-50 representation of male and female speakers, we do not want this to result in an imbalance in terms of topics, seniority of the speakers or number of speakers per hosting professor. Therefore, instead of a balanced pool of invited speakers, we would like to create a balanced pool of suggested speakers.
 - For each male speaker suggested, professors should suggest a female speaker (and vice versa).
 - If professors want to rank their suggested speakers, they should ensure gender balance: the top 2 positions should be given to a male and a female speaker.
 - b. Professors should be mindful of other underrepresented minorities when suggesting seminar speakers.
 - c. Do not *only* suggest the top women/minority speakers that probably already have a full agenda. The European Economics Association's [WinE directory](#) offers a list of female academics in European universities and institutions. IDEAS RePEc offers a [search engine](#) to find seminar speakers that allows you to filter your search based on gender, seniority, field, location.
 - d. We would like the faculty members to welcome suggestions from PhD students, as well as inviting more PhD students to join the lunches or dinners with invited speakers.
2. **Set the tone at the beginning of the seminar and be prepared to gently intervene should the rules not be followed.**
 - a. Include in the invitation email to the presentation, a sentence to remind that seminars take place in a constructive environment where comments, clarifications and questions should be asked in a polite and respectful way.
 - b. Establish a 10/15 minutes embargo to questions at the beginning of a presentation, or until the introduction is over (depending on what is shorter).
 - c. Designate a Q&A session at the end of the presentation in addition to allowing questions during the presentation to encourage people to wait to see if their question is answered rather than interrupting the flow.
 - d. Questions should be asked by raising hands. Having individuals interrupt freely may add to a pre-existing disparity in propensity to interrupt/be interrupted by different groups.
 - During in-person seminars, the speaker can manage the audience and invite who raised a hand to ask their question.

- During online seminars, speakers with slides in full-screen mode are not able to keep an eye on the chat and the electronic hands. The hosting professor should be in charge of monitoring the audience and allowing questions.
 - In both cases, speakers are allowed to tell the audience to ask questions by simply unmuting themselves, or by interrupting the presentation.
- e. The hosting professor should set the tone of the discussion by interrupting distracting side conversations that go beyond a simple clarification question. The hosting professor should be ready for soft-touch interventions to make the discussion move on if someone from the audience interrupts repeatedly or refuses to accept an answer to a question.
3. **Mitigate power dynamics in seminars.** If a junior and a senior person are about to ask a question at the same time, the senior person should let the junior go first.
- a. If the question from a junior person is dismissed or forgotten, more senior people (and in particular the hosting professor) should try to bring the question again to the attention of the speaker.
4. **Remember that, as a participant, the primary objective in attending a seminar is to learn from the speaker.** The audience can also collaboratively help the speaker improve the quality of their scholarship. The objective should never be to prove that you are the smartest person in the room.
- a. Don't be difficult for the sake of being difficult. Ask yourself whether, with a speaker of different gender or level of seniority, you would ask
 - i. the same question,
 - ii. in the same way.
 - b. Only repeat questions if you expect it to lead to fresh and useful dialogue: do not hammer the same point when the speaker has clearly not had time to integrate the critique.
 - c. Be aware that questions asked and points made by women and members of under-represented groups are more likely to be dismissed and/or repeated by someone else who will then take credit for it. Work against that tendency by repeating valid points that may have been passed over. Make sure to give appropriate credit to the original speaker.
 - d. Other examples of counter-productive contributions from seminar audience members (partly from the *AEA Best practices for economists*, paraphrased below):
 - i. Overly technical questions, either to tear down or to show off
 - ii. Expecting norms from a different subfield to be applied
 - iii. Making the seminar about themselves
 - iv. Extended back-and-forth digressing from the main topic
 - v. Talking between audience members
 - vi. Typing on your laptop during the presentation

Finally, remember that the **form is key**. Tough questions can be helpful and constructive. This does not mean they should be asked in an arrogant or demeaning way. Tough questions are impactful when asked respectfully. For example, "I don't see why someone would study this" can become "Could you please state again the motivation behind this research question?"

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