



Can a summer make a difference? The impact of the American Economic Association Summer Program on minority student outcomes

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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, the American Economic Association (AEA) was one of several professional associations to launch a summer program with the goal of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in its profession. In this paper we estimate the effectiveness of the AEA's program which, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to rigorously study such a summer program. Using a comparison group consisting of those who applied to, but did not attend, the program and controlling for an array of background characteristics, we find that program participants were over 40 percentage points more likely to apply to and attend a Ph.D. program in economics, 26 percentage points more likely to complete a Ph.D., and about 15 percentage points more likely to ever work in an economics-related academic job. Using our estimates, we calculate that the program may directly account for 17–21 percent of the Ph.D.s awarded to minorities in economics over the past 20 years.

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1. Introduction

Underrepresentation of minorities in higher education has been the focus of sustained attention in the U.S. for decades. Lack of preparation, information, and resources as well as residual discrimination have been identified as potential reasons for this underrepresentation, prompting policymakers and educators to adopt counteracting strategies such as affirmative action in admissions, scholarships, and enrichment programs. Perhaps the most controversial of these programs is affirmative action in admissions. Studies examining the impact of affirmative action bans generally find that these bans decrease the likelihood that mi-

nority students apply to and enroll in top-tier institutions (e.g., Backes, 2012; Dickson, 2006; Hinrichs, 2012; Long, 2004). At the same time, interventions in the spirit of affirmative action, such as quotas and preferential treatment in laboratory designs, suggest that this approach is effective at increasing gender and racial diversity (e.g., Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012; Niederle, Segal, & Vesterlund, 2013; Schotter & Weigelt, 1992).¹ However, given political and legal controversies surrounding affirmative action, many have turned to other strategies for increasing the representativeness of minority students in institutions of higher education.

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¹ In addition, several theoretical studies have examined the implications of affirmative action for college admission, future earnings, and wage inequality (see, e.g., Chan & Eyster, 2003; Moro & Norman, 2003; Arcidiacono, 2005).

Providing enrichment for students so that they are better prepared for further academic study is a well-established, though little-researched approach, to increasing academic diversity. For example, for the past fifty years the federal government has funded college preparatory programs, such as Upward Bound and Talent Search. While the research base for these programs is relatively thin, the estimated impacts on student educational outcomes (such as college attendance or the type of institution attended) have been surprisingly mixed (see, e.g., [Haskins & Rouse, 2013](#)). There is even less evidence on the effectiveness of enrichment programs to prepare students for graduate programs with the aim of addressing underrepresentation in specific professions, although such programs exist in several fields. For example, the American Economic Association (AEA), American Political Science Association (APSA), and the Public Policy and International Affairs Program (PPIA) have sponsored summer enrichment programs for the past 30 or more years.^{2,3}

It is straightforward to understand why the AEA elected to focus on increasing diversity in its profession: in the late 1970s only 3–5 percent of doctorates in economics received by US citizens and permanent residents were awarded to minorities traditionally underrepresented in the profession (African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans), or about 23 new Ph.D.s, each year ([Collins, 2000](#)). This lack of diversity was worrisome because economic analysis is likely to benefit from differing perspectives and priorities among those in the profession; in addition, a lack of role models in institutions of higher education may have been discouraging younger generations of minority students from entering the profession ([Chung 2000; Collins, 2000](#)) and may have adversely affected minority students' performance ([Fairlie, Hoffman, & Oreopoulos, 2014](#)).

² Other professions offer slightly different kinds of programs with the shared goal of increasing diversity. For instance, the American Sociological Association runs the Minority Fellowship Program that provides mentoring and financial support to minority applicants to graduate programs and current Ph.D. students. As another example, the Minority Legal Education Resources operates the Bar Process Management Program to assist minorities in passing the Illinois Bar Exam and provide them professional advice. Assessments, and especially those that attempt to ascertain causality, are rare. A less formal assessment of a public policy program appears in [MacAllum and Gallup-Black \(2003\)](#). The political science profession's efforts, which include the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute, are loosely but not causally assessed in [Monforti and Michelson \(2008\)](#).

³ Around the time that efforts were starting to increase racial and ethnic diversity in many professions, there were also efforts to increase representation of women. For example, the American Economic Association started focusing efforts on increasing the proportion of women in economics in the 1970s. Since then, the percentage of women receiving doctorates in economics has increased from 11 percent in 1975 to 35 percent in 2011, a trend that can be attributed to a variety of factors, including programs designed to address the imbalance ([American Economic Association, 1976; McElroy, 2013; Kahn, 1995; Ginther & Kahn, 2004; Hale & Regev, 2013](#)). Notably, [Blau, Currie, Croson, and Ginther \(2010\)](#) report findings from the first randomized study of the AEA's mentoring program for junior female economists. They find that the mentoring program had a positive effect on a number of professional outcomes, such as the number of top-tier publications, the total number of publications, and the number of successful federal grants earned by individuals randomly assigned a mentor compared to those randomly assigned to the control group.

Unfortunately, after some initial improvement, progress has stalled more recently. As shown in [Fig. 1](#), the percentage of economics Ph.D.s awarded to minorities has fluctuated around 8 percent since the mid-1990s, which means on average about 30 new Ph.D.s each year.⁴ As a sobering contrast, the percentage of minorities receiving doctorates has experienced a steady increase in other social sciences and in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

Given the lack of significant improvement in the racial and ethnic representativeness of doctorates in economics, a key question is whether the AEA's Summer Program has been effective at improving the diversity of the economics profession. To address this question and evaluate the success of the program, we use data from over one-third of AEASP participants between its inception in 1974 and 2010, and a comparison group of students who applied to the program but did not attend. While not a randomized control group, the comparison group enables us to assess the program's impact on a variety of graduate school and professional outcomes. Although we control for a variety of background characteristics, we note that there may be residual unobserved differences between the AEASP participants and those in the comparison group that bias the estimated impacts. That said, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first evaluation that uses a comparison group and controls for various background characteristics to assess an (summer) enrichment program that focuses on disadvantaged and minority groups.⁵

Overall, we find that the AEA's Summer Program participants were over 40 percentage points more likely to apply to and attend a Ph.D. program in economics, 26 percentage points more likely to complete a Ph.D., and about 15 percentage points more likely to ever work in an economics-related academic job. Using these estimates, we calculate that the program may directly account for 17–21 percent of the minority Ph.D.s in economics over the past 20 years. As such, the results from this analysis suggest that relatively intensive, but short, enrichment programs can be an effective tool for improving diversity in at least economics, and likely other professions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section we describe the AEA Summer Program and its student population. In [Section 3](#) we present the data, including our survey and its implementation and the estimation strategy. We present the results in [Section 4](#). [Section 5](#) concludes.

⁴ Similarly, the percentage of bachelor's degrees in economics awarded to minorities has remained around 10–12 percent since 1995 ([Rouse, 2013](#)).

⁵ In a related paper, [Price \(2005\)](#) examines the research productivity of Black American economists, and alternately using propensity score matching (on observables) and Heckman corrections (to control for unobserved selection), finds that conditional on being an economist, AEASP participants were somewhat more likely to have published in major journals, received support from the National Science Foundation, and to have NBER membership than those who did not attend. [MacAllum and Gallup-Black \(2003\)](#) survey attendees and unsuccessful applicants of public policy summer programs sponsored by PPIA and report differences in sample means from raw data covering survey characteristics. The sample size used in final analysis is around 200 and there are no controls for differences in background characteristics or tests of statistical significance.

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