



Open Letter to Students Regarding Anti-Racist Work May 2023

The Amherst College Economics Department is committed to creating a learning environment that is inclusive, that is anti-racist, and that supports open inquiry and debate about economic models, modes of thought, and structures.

We are deeply concerned about the realities of student experiences regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in our major. While we have been working to listen, change, adapt, innovate, and improve, we know there is much to be done. Our department is strongly committed to increasing opportunities for underrepresented individuals in economics, to creating anti-racist and inclusive spaces, and to making sure that all students feel welcome, comfortable, and appreciated.

We acknowledge the serious disparities in our department, our field, and the economy. Within our department, BIPOC students are underrepresented: in the past decade, 11% of Amherst students majoring in economics have been Black or Latinx, as compared with 25% of Amherst students majoring in other subjects. Women are also underrepresented in economics: currently, women represent 34% of economics majors and 55% of non-economics majors at the College. In addition to these sobering numbers, we hear from many BIPOC and women students that they often feel isolated, unseen, uncomfortable, or excluded in the economics major.

These disparities in part reflect the disparities within our field as a whole. Nationwide, while 57% of all bachelor's degree earners are women and 20% are BIPOC, among economics majors those numbers are 31% and 12% (Bayer and Wilcox, 2019). This continues into graduate school and academic faculties: Ph.D. programs in economics are 60% men and only 2.5% Black, and these numbers carry through to faculty positions.

Crucially, these inequalities mirror those of broader global economic structures and histories. Grave structural inequalities of wealth, income, access to education, access to healthcare, and access to clean environments are major challenges.

Recognizing these realities, we are working here in Amherst Economics to build environments in which everyone can thrive personally and academically. We honor differences and are committed to respecting everyone, their voice, and their identities. Like the *American Economic Association*, we encourage "perfect freedom of economic discussion" and strive to conduct respectful discourse in all spaces. Most importantly, we know that this antiracist work requires, as Ibram X. Kendi writes, "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination" (*How to Be an Antiracist*, p.23.) The department has engaged with the strategies set out by the *Best Practices for Economists: Building a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Productive Profession*. These practices are organized around: research, collegial interactions, hiring and the workplace, and working with students. (For a summary of these, check out the posters outside of Converse 302 or see them [here](#).)



These initiatives have informed and shaped our approach to teaching economics at Amherst. We are guided by a belief that all students should be able to study and thrive in economics. To that end, we have been working to create courses, policies, and environments that encourage growth, belonging, and a real sense of relevance to all students' lives. We have added courses to our curriculum that address issues of racism, inequality, and discrimination. We have also endeavored to take an actively anti-racist approach in several classes, both old and new. In all of our courses and in shaping our department spaces, we seek to incorporate effective and inclusive techniques that benefit all students and build a sense of belonging for all. We also understand that, in economics, some of our creative efforts should be directed towards substantive innovations and rethinkings.

In each of these areas, we have sought to improve. We have sponsored seminars and conferences that examine inequality and discrimination, and provided grants for students to attend conferences that address these issues as well as the culture of economics. We have endeavored to reframe our discussions and seminars with the intention to support everyone's participation and voice. We have established better means for mentoring faculty and established clearer and more transparent departmental policies and procedures. As we recruit and welcome new faculty, we have worked closely with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, including participating in the recent cluster hiring effort to contribute to the new Asian American Studies initiative. We continue to strive to improve our practices and look forward to continuing to work toward an inclusive and vibrant department for everyone.

To move forward in a positive and inclusive manner, we are considering several innovations to the economics major. These ideas emerge out of our own experiences teaching economics at Amherst, students' reflections on their experiences learning economics at Amherst, and our shared experience in colloquy with you. These ideas include: a different structure for our intro course, additional anti-racist content in existing courses, new requirements for engaging with other disciplines in conversation with economics, reducing class sizes, increasing our outreach efforts across campus, and continuing to build our own awareness and knowledge of student experiences.

We would love to collaborate with you in bringing these or other ideas to fruition. We recognize that this is an ongoing process and that we have much to learn in conversation with you. We plan to host open meetings early in the fall semester in which we can share ideas in progress, listen to students' experiences, and hear what you think about these ideas.

We look forward to working together to build an anti-racist economics space for all.

Sincerely,

The Faculty and Staff of the Department of Economics of Amherst College