

CLIMATE STUDY OF THE ECONOMICS PROFESSION: A REPORT OF FOCUS GROUPS OF ECONOMICS GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Any errors in this report similarly belong to the authors alone. Donna Ginther, in her role as principal investigator for this project, supervised the study and directed the analysis. Carolyn Caine organized and facilitated focus groups, analyzed data, identified findings, and wrote this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American Economic Association contracted the Institute for Policy & Social Research at the University of Kansas in fall 2024 to conduct focus groups with graduate students in the field of economics. The goal for these groups was to understand their perception of the climate in the field and identify strategies for improving issues with the climate. IPSR staff conducted 12 focus groups in January, February, and March of 2025 with 48 graduate students from the top 50 economics programs in the United States.¹

Methodology

Focus groups were stratified by program rank (Top 10 students, Top 25 students, Top 50 students). In some cases focus groups were sorted based on a specific demographic characteristic. For example, some groups had only female participants.

All focus groups were facilitated by an IPSR staff member, recorded, and transcribed. Transcripts were coded based on predetermined and inductive codes, and codes were analyzed based on frequency, co-occurrence, and occurrence across program rank stratifications.

Findings

We report on findings in four broad categories:

- Overall climate assessment,

- Challenges with the climate,
- Program elements that can create pressure, and
- Strategies to improve the climate.

Overall climate in economics

On the overall climate in economics, many participants characterized climate as varied based on subfield, department, and advisor. Participants also broadly characterize the climate as engaging, competitive, intense, and sometimes hostile. Many participants agreed that a cultural shift is needed in the field of economics.

Challenges with the climate

Participants identified several trends, ways of thinking, and norms in economics that create issues in the climate. Participants expressed the sentiment that elitism and hierarchical thinking influence several aspects of the field. Some noted that there seems to be a perpetually increasing bar for entry to economics programs and that this elevated standard does not seem to produce better outcomes. Another expression of elitism is the sense that economics is the only valid source of knowledge. Many participants indicated that they do not read papers outside the field of economics, for example. Other participants characterized economics elitism as creating a disconnect between economics research and real-world problems and people. This creates dissonance particularly for people who are excited about economics as a tool to address challenges and people who are interested in topics that relate to their own background. Another way that

¹ U.S. News and World Report. 2024. "Best Economics Schools." Accessed 21 November 2024 from <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-humanities-schools/economics-rankings>.

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elitism manifests in economics, for graduate students, is the priority that they see faculty place on academic career paths; participants feel that non-academic careers are discouraged and that once a student suggests an intention to pursue a non-academic career, faculty lose interest in them as trainees.

In thinking about issues with the climate, participants described feeling not valued or respected as individuals; students sense that they are expected to work all the time and that faculty in their departments do not take time to get to know them or express care for them. Participants also described the sense that economics has homogenous expectations for diverse people, and that what counts as economics or what is valued in economics is narrow, limiting exploration and flexibility in what topics students study and how they explore subjects.

A related issue is that, in a field where diversity is lacking in terms of demographic characteristics, participants acknowledged that they see what they describe as disparate treatment of and outcomes for people from minoritized backgrounds. For example, some participants describe disproportionate rates at which women do not pass milestones in the graduate program such as preliminary exams. Taken together with a lack of transparency from program leadership, these disparate outcomes can create a sense of mistrust among students.

Program elements and pressure on students

Certain elements in economics graduate programs can add to the pressure that climate issues create for graduate students. Focus group participants discussed

at length the significance of the advisor relationship. A good advisor offers a student multiple compounding benefits, and a bad advisor can become a source of fear and anxiety. Several students identified the first year and preliminary exams as challenging and frustrating. Some participants felt that the purpose of the first year was to identify people who should not be in economics graduate education and push them to leave the program. Some participants felt that they did not learn useful methods or material in their first year. At the other end of the graduate program, the job market structure, and especially the job market paper as a focal point of a student's graduate career, is a source of pressure.

Funding was a top concern among participants. Specifically, several participants noted that funding is insufficient, in some cases because of the housing markets local to their programs or because their programs fund them for five years even while it is typical for students to need six or more years to complete the program.

Strategies to improve the climate

Participants offered a broad range of ideas for improving the climate. These include overall trends and directions for the economics profession and some concrete, actionable steps that leaders in the field can take.

Participants implicitly and explicitly foregrounded the importance of community. Departments can and should facilitate community for students in multiple directions and at multiple levels, including informal peer support, connections to advanced students

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and alumni, student work feedback groups, graduate student organizations, identity-based groups, and connections across universities to other faculty and students.

In addition, departments can offer and facilitate support for students. Leadership should deliberately and purposefully consider whether and how they demonstrate that they value graduate students and believe admitted students are worthy of investment. This includes thinking through what kind of economics work is valued (for example, are students working on public health topics in economics receiving similar faculty time and attention as students in macroeconomics?) and considering how to support students who wish to pursue nonacademic careers.

As faculty-student interactions and advising are key parts of the graduate student experience, leaders should take steps to improve norms around these interactions and to incentivize high-quality advising. Department leaders should also identify ways that they can improve transparency and build trust with graduate students including through outlets to hear and respond to concerns students have.

AEA and others have taken steps to improve the climate and the discourse at economics seminars, and participants echoed the need to continue that work.

Participants also had broader strategies to address climate issues in mind, including connecting students to high-quality, affordable, accessible mental health services, improving student funding packages, and restructuring or eliminating predoctoral researcher positions.

Participants identified several specific tools that would help students navigate graduate school in economics. Some of these are as simple as ensuring that departments provide timely, complete information to their students about milestones and timeframes for achieving them or developing a series of profiles of economics to show the kind of work economists do. Other tools are more complex, such as offering more training on the research process for students and more infrastructure to support student research. One tool that especially resonated with students was the idea of a series via webinars and documents for students to learn how to navigate economics. These resources would be offered at the AEA level and would be available to all students in a regularly updated series.

Key Recommendations

- Build community in multiple directions and at multiple levels.
- Treat students as respected, valued members of departments and the field.
- Broaden thinking about what is valuable and important.
- Align incentives to goals.
- Provide resources to students to navigate department-level requirements and field-level expectations.

OVERVIEW

The American Economic Association contracted the Institute for Policy & Social Research in fall 2024 to conduct focus groups with graduate students in the field of economics to understand their perception of the climate in the field. IPSR staff conducted focus groups in January, February, and March of 2025 with 48 graduate students from the top 50 economics programs in the United States.¹ This report summarizes the methodology used for focus groups and data analysis, findings from those groups, and conclusions and recommendations drawn from those groups.

METHODOLOGY

Recruiting

IPSR staff used economics department websites to develop a list of all publicly-listed doctoral students in top 50 programs in the United States. In most cases, all doctoral students are listed on program websites with email addresses. However, some programs list only job market candidates on their website. Some students' email addresses are not posted online, so we did not contact those students.

We contacted all students for whom email addresses were available via email and included information about the purpose and process of the research study. Students were asked to complete a brief survey indicating whether or not they were interested in participating, providing optional demographic information, and noting whether or not they preferred to participate in a focus group sorted on certain identity characteristics. We offered students the option to express a preference in participating in focus groups sorted by gender, race or ethnicity, and classification as an international student versus an American student, asylee, or refugee. The survey also included consent information for participating in focus groups.

We received 216 responses to the survey, and 211 of those respondents indicated their interest in participating in a focus group. Of those 211 respondents, 200 provided sufficiently complete responses to allow their participation; the other 11 respondents did not complete the form confirming that they consented to the research study procedures. Of the 200 respondents who consented to participate in focus groups, we invited 112 to participate. A total of 48 participants from 28 institutions joined 12 groups. We offered a \$50 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate in focus groups.

¹ U.S. News and World Report. 2024. "Best Economics Schools." Accessed 21 November 2024 from <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-humanities-schools/economics-rankings>.

Focus groups were stratified by program rank and, in some cases, by other characteristics. Many survey respondents indicated a preference to participate in a focus group sorted by gender: here, only female students indicated their preference to join a group with other female students. Many survey respondents also indicated a preference to join a group with students with similar racial and ethnic identities as theirs; here, only students who did not identify as White or European-descended indicated this preference. Many survey respondents indicated a preference to join a group with students with the same classification (international student versus American, asylee, or refugee) as theirs; this preference was expressed for both groups, meaning that some international students wanted to participate with only other international students and some American, asylee, or refugee students wanted to participate with only other American, asylee, or refugee students.

Based on findings from the 2019 American Economic Association Climate Study indicating that women in economics are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the climate in the economics profession than men,² we oversampled women in selecting survey respondents for focus groups. We similarly prioritized including participants who indicated that they have a race or ethnicity other than white or European descended because of the higher rates of discrimination and unfair treatment reported by Black, Asian, and Latinx respondents in the 2019 AEA climate survey.³

Data collection and analysis

One staff member facilitated all focus groups using a standard protocol, including standardized introductory and concluding remarks. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were deidentified, with the following identifying information removed: names of students, institutions—past and current—of students, locations of institutions, names of advisors or mentors students work with or know. For this report, quotations from participants are attributed to aliases and participants are associated with the ranking of their program; for example, quotations are listed as being from “Name (Top [number])”

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² Allgood, Sam, Lee Badgett, Amanda Bayer, Marianne Bertrand, Sandra E. Black, Nick Bloom, and Lisa D. Cook. 2019. AEA Professional Climate Survey: Final Report. Nashville, TN: AEA. <https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/member-docs/final-climate-survey-results-sept-2019>.

³ Allgood et al, 2019.

program)” In some cases program ranking is dropped if there is a concern that providing program ranking identify participants in light of other details included. Deidentified transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti, with both predetermined coding based on the questions motivating this study and inductive codes drawn from themes that emerged in the course of the focus groups.

Human subjects protocols

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board.

Limitations

Findings generated through this process are limited by a few factors. First, graduate students identified to participate in this study were recruited via email through their university email addresses. It is likely the case that some institutional email filters flagged invitations to participate as suspicious, and students at those institutions might not have received those email invitations.

Second, students who did participate in these focus groups self-selected based on information available in the invitation and intake survey, and students who elected to participate in this study likely have characteristics that distinguish them from a representative sample of graduate students in economics.

Third, the focus group format precludes anonymity, which likely shaped the ways that participants answered questions. Participants were offered opportunities to talk confidentially with the facilitator in a one-on-one setting. In a few cases, participants stayed on the call beyond the end of the focus group to discuss concerns with the facilitator. One participant contacted the facilitator after the focus group to express the sentiment that the focus group was a challenging forum for candid conversation given that the format precludes anonymity. A few participants commented during the focus group that they had troubling experiences or stories to share but could not do so because of the format and because the information would identify them or other people involved in the stories. No focus group participants contacted the facilitator to talk privately about their experiences.

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FINDINGS

This section of the report begins with demographic information about the 48 focus group participants and continues with a broad assessment of the climate. The report then addresses variance in climate and characteristics of the climate. We then discuss some specific dynamics that contribute negatively to climate outcomes, including elitism and hierarchical thinking, lack of value and respect for individuals, a mismatch between standardized expectations and diverse individuals, and disparate treatment and outcomes taken together with a lack of transparency. Findings next address specific program elements that can create pressure for students. The report then turns to strategies to mitigate some of the identified challenges and improve the climate for graduate students in economics.

Participant demographic information

Participant demographic information is shown in Table 1. There is a gap in the female-to-male ratio of participants in focus groups. Staff oversampled women in these focus groups given the documented record of climate issues in the economics profession for women. However, we note that women were more likely than men to complete the recruiting survey and they were more likely to accept an invitation to attend a focus group than men. We invited 65 women to participate in focus groups and 47 men, and as shown in Table 1, 30 women (or 48 percent of invitees) participated, and 18 men (or 38 percent of invitees) participated.

Given the expressed preference of students into groups sorted based on student classification, we anticipated that there might be some comments about patterns of issues with students of different classifications. Notable here is that some international students expressed concerns about issues particular to that classification and no American, asylee, or refugee students expressed concerns about their classification or about international students.

Students generally agreed that there are disparities in the treatment of women in the field and in the treatment of people from minoritized racial and ethnic identities. A few participants discussed the value of LGBTQIA+ identity groups and did not explicitly discuss disparate treatment of people with these identities. More on disparate treatment of and outcomes for people based on demographic characteristics is discussed in this report under “Challenges with the climate.”

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Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

PROGRAM RANK	COUNT
Top 10	18
Top 25	16
Top 50	14
GENDER*	COUNT
Female	30
Male	18
RACE AND ETHNICITY**	COUNT
African American or Black	2
Asian (East)	12
Asian (South)	9
Hispanic origin, or Latino, Latina, Latinx	7
White or European descended	28
Identified as multiracial or multiethnic	8
STUDENT CLASSIFICATION***	COUNT
American citizen, naturalized US citizen, permanent resident, refugee, or asylee	26
International student	22
<i>*Participants were also offered the options: Nonbinary, prefer to self-identify, prefer not to respond.</i> <i>**Participants were asked to check all that apply</i> <i>***Participants were also offered the options: Alaska Native, American Indian, or Native American; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; Southwest Asian or North African; prefer to self-identify; prefer not to identify. Participants are included in the count for multiracial or multiethnic identification if they selected more than one element from this list.</i> <i>Source: Graduate student focus groups, Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas</i>	

Overall climate assessment

Early in the focus groups, the facilitator asked participants to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most negative and 5 being the most positive, how they rated the climate in the economics profession. Most ratings were 3 of 5, and 3 was the median score for every subgroup analyzed. There was no significant difference in ratings based on program ranking, gender, race or ethnicity, or student classification.

One notable finding from this process was that in two groups, participants said they preferred to assess the climate twice: once for their own experience, and once for their perceptions of others' experiences. For those seven participants who rated the climate twice, all but one person rated their own experience higher than the experience of others.

One participant, Melinda (Top 50 program) commented that she had rated the climate a 3 because they were aware that things have been much worse in the profession, specifically for women in the past. She said: "I think for somebody with no frame of reference, a three might seem good. But I'm comparing it to something that's something that's even worse."

Responding to a prompt about what the most important thing that had been said during the focus group, Karina (Top 50 program) said:

I think the most important thing that was not necessarily said, but it was all of us holding up the numbers about the climate and economics because they were not as high as any of us, I think, would want them to be.

And they certainly differed by different segments of the population, even within this group. And I think that is something to note and also different geographies, different types of departments, it's all going to vary. And I think it would be nice to have some consistency on — for instance, I know if I go back to my master's department . . . it's going to be a much friendlier environment than if I were to go to departments in other parts of the country or even other types of departments.

And I think that AEA could do something about the consistency of that if we improve the climate overall.

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"I think it would be nice to have some consistency . . . and I think AEA could do something about the consistency."

Ben (Top 10 program) said, “I put up 3. I feel like there’s a lot of spread around that. And there’s some people for whom the system works really well and other people it works really poorly for.” Figure 1 shows all terms coded for “climate” in the focus group transcripts, with the size of the word keyed to the frequency with which it appeared in transcripts.

Figure 1. Climate Word Cloud



Source: Graduate student focus groups, Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas

Participants generally agree that climate varies

The theme of variation in the climate in economics came up in most conversations. Participants from Top 25 and Top 50 institutions talked more about variation than those from Top 10 institutions. Several participants noted that subfields are a source of variety in climate: most participants who raised this mentioned that macroeconomics has a more challenging climate than applied microeconomics. For example, Aom (Top 25 program) said that she was familiar with macro seminars, and when she first attended an applied micro conference, she was surprised that other people clapped at the end of the talk. Joanna (Top 50) institution expressed that she had

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not personally experienced issues with macro seminars yet thought that perceptions of issues with the climate in macroeconomics discouraged women from pursuing this subfield.

Participants also noted that their experience of climate varies widely depending on the focal point of a department. Participants who work in adjacent fields or joint programs such as development, health economics, or policy, find that the climate—even when dealing with economists—in non-economics departments and schools is friendlier than in economics-only spaces. Adam (Top 25) said “All the economists in the policy school are so nice to their students. They’re just like so much nicer because there’s just like a different norm in that other building.”

Others expressed that departments within economics vary in terms of climate. Daphne (Top 25), who is on the job market and has recent experience with a range of departments, said, “Some places are downright miserable and others are really lovely and supportive. And it seems like there’s almost a bit of a separating equilibrium that some departments become a little bit toxic and others don’t.” The same department will vary over time depending on hiring choices, as Asmaa discussed:

They hired a lot of young faculty who’ve been extremely approachable. They...take us out to lunch when we had those seminars with the speaker.... They were extremely, they were very, very efficient in what they did, but they were approachable at the same time. So it wasn’t that they, I think that helped with the barrier that helped a lot mentally too...If you were to ask someone from [this institution] from like who graduated in [recent year], it would be a very different story immediately.

Within a department, faculty broadly, advisors, and directors of graduate studies are all sources of broad variation in culture. And how the same faculty member or advisor treats a student may vary depending on their perception of that student. More on advisors is included under “Program elements and pressure.”

Variance in the climate came up much more often in focus groups with participants from Top 25 and Top 50 programs — roughly 10 times in each of those groups compared to 3 times in Top 10 programs groups. Figure 2

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“Some places are downright miserable and others are really lovely and supportive.”

Figure 2. Heat Map Showing Selected Codes by Participant Program Rank

	Top 10	Top 25	Top 50
Climate comments			
Climate varies	3	12	10
Climate is engaging	1	2	7
Climate is competitive	1	3	6
Climate is hostile	4	7	10
Cultural shift needed	5	4	3
What is important			
Advising is key	12	8	6
Faculty relationships are key	6	7	5
Peer support is key	10	4	4
Community is important	8	2	0
Problems			
Funding is insufficient	4	8	5
Funding is not guaranteed	0	1	7
First year is a problem	1	9	7
Elitism is a problem	13	7	5
Strategies			
Connection across universities needed	4	1	1
Incentives should be realigned	7	4	4
Information to navigate grad school needed	3	1	8

Source: Graduate student focus groups, Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas

shows a heat map of selected codes categorized by participant program rank. Frequency for each code, by participant program rank, is shown in the figure. For example, the sentiment that the climate varies was expressed 3 times among participants from Top 10 programs, 12 times by participants from Top 25 programs, and 10 times by participants from Top 50 programs.

In many cases, the broad variance in culture points to the reality that on one hand, some mechanisms can work together to create a positive climate. On the other hand, it is unlikely that changes in climate will be inevitable. Several researchers share this view,

noting fluctuations in the participation of women in the field over time⁴ and persistently lower participation of people from minoritized racial and ethnic groups.^{5,6}

Several participants commented on the need for a cultural shift, and four participants said that this need for a change in the climate was the most important thing discussed during their focus group. Melissa (Top 50 program), commented positively on the focus group as a valuable time for reflection and opportunity for growth: “Just the fact that we are here talking about this is really nice. I think broadly, at least as far as I’m aware within our field, there’s not a lot of opportunity for feedback like this and kind of assessing, you know, where are our problem areas. What can we do to be better? What do we need to work on?”

The climate in economics has positive and negative aspects

In assessing the climate in economics, participants used terms like “engaging,” “exciting,” and “passionate.” Participants noted that economists tend to be independent thinkers. Focus group participants characterized some of the way that economists interact with each other, such as in feedback sessions, as direct. Cormac (Top 25 program), described an early seminar experience: “I don’t think the discourse was mean in particular. It was very blunt.”

Participants used the term “competition” in different ways. Micah (Top 50 program) characterized competition as motivating: “There’s a feeling of competition between economists that drives us. . . . It keeps people disciplined in their work.” But competition also leads to issues, as Melinda (Top 50 program) expressed:

I’ve also had experiences where there are people who I think are just smart

4 Lundberg, Shelly, and Jenna Stearns. 2019. “Women in Economics: Stalled Progress.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33 (1): 3–22. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.33.1.3>.

5 CSMGEP. 2019. “Report of the Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP).” AEA. <https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=9030>.

6 Bayer, Amanda. Gary A. Hoover, and Ebonya Washington. 2020. “How You Can Work to Increase the Presence and Improve the Experience of Black, Latinx, and Native American People in the Economics Profession.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34(3), 193-219. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.34.3.193>.

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people who wanted to choose a field in which they could be smart and their whole goal kind of seems to be to prove to you that they're the smartest person in the room. And those are the people that I try very hard to like stay away from when I can. . . . I try very hard to choose to engage with the people who are on the same page as I am and try to limit my interactions with the people who are really just there to prove to you that they are the latest and greatest and smartest.

Cormac (Top 25 program) described: "It's a bit antisocial. I think it's a workplace. So you kind of go there and you do work. That's how it generally feels. And that workplace is incredibly competitive. It feels like a dogfight, kind of every day." And competition can drive bad behavior among students, as Camilla (Top 10 program) learned when another student took her idea and passed it off as their own early on in her career as a doctoral student.

Challenges with the Climate

Elitism and hierarchical thinking influence several aspects of the field

Elitism was identified in open-ended responses in the 2019 AEA climate survey as a concern for some respondents,⁷ and several of the issues focus group participants expressed echo this concern. Issues with elitism are described here in three broad categories, all of which reflect the foundational assumption that there is a universal best (best program, best ontology, best outcome) versus a contextual best (best program for this student, best ontology for this research question, best outcome for these specific goals). These categories are: sense of perpetually increasing qualifications for admission to economics programs, sense of economics as a sole source of knowledge, disconnect between economics research and the real world, and the value of academic versus alternative career paths.

Sense of perpetually increasing qualifications for admission to economics programs

Several participants raised concerns with elitism in the field of economics. These dynamics manifest in a few ways. First, several participants felt that

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"It feels like a dogfight, kind of every day."

⁷ Allgood et al, 2019.

required qualifications for admission to a doctoral program and sound positioning for a tenure-track faculty position had grown far beyond necessity or value. These expectations reflect that the profession values prestige to the detriment of its trainees. These qualifications were seen by participants as significant barriers. Mya (Top 10 program) said:

I feel like entering grad school, people are more and more like expected to be like baby economists. You walk in and you're like, 'I have a research agenda. I have a research question. I have this whole thing. I did a pre-doc. I did my RA ship. I did my master's. I did all of these things. So that way I'm able to just like hit the ground running when I enter.

And that's great. I loved my RA ship, but I also like loved it because I got to work and not be doing academics for a little while. Does that mean that the door to these things is closed to me forever unless I spend three years going to do pre-docs and get a master's and do all these things? . . . And I don't know, it seems like the people who are older than us are pretty smart and they all had a myriad of different experiences walking in. So it feels like we're kind of increasing the threshold to be able to enter. I don't know if that's really qualitatively doing much.

These perceived-to-be-required qualifications also caused concern for participants who feel that they need to prioritize rigorous, time-intensive training for a decade or more before securing a well-paying job. Concerns about elitism and hierarchy were particularly salient in discussions with participants from Top 10 programs, with 13 comments on this topic in those groups compared to 7 comments in sessions with Top 25 program students and 5 comments in sessions with Top 50 programs.

Sense of economics as a sole source of knowledge

Second, several participants described ways in which economics sees itself as a singular path to knowledge. Many participants said that they rarely read outside the field. For example, Jason (Top 25) said that while his work involves urban political economy and education, advisors and faculty do not ever encourage him to read policy literature. Emilia (Top 10 program), said:

I think that the economics professions sometimes are less respectful to the things other disciplines do. So it's very easy to hear kind of disdainful . . . comments about the research that, for example, is done in other disciplines,

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even considering that a lot of what other disciplines do is taken by economists and then used as the starting point for research.

Describing this same dynamic in which economists use research from other disciplines to identify research questions, Shakti said, “You can produce new knowledge by doing something which another discipline has already done if economics hasn’t done it. That 100% happens.”

Disconnect between economics research and the real world

Third, participants said that economics fails to meaningfully engage in the real-world problems it purports to address. Linda (Top 10 program) said:

We’re all here from top programs and I think that means that success is defined in like one very specific way. And so when you’re given advice, it’s for this one specific thing. And I think for me personally, I came into econ really idealistic that we could use these tools to make a policy difference. And I think the extent to which that actually happens, I think at least in my school, that’s a lot less discussed or like actually done, even by tenured faculty. That doesn’t mean that there’s not people at other places who are doing it. But I had to find that on my own.

Sofia (Top 10 program) extended this sentiment about the disconnection between economics and policy challenges to describe what she saw as a disconnect between economics research and the real people behind datasets:

I think with the obsession with the rigor comes that we forget that the data comes from real people. And, the research that we do affects real people. Being more aware of that would be very much would impact the way we approach the research and the way we talk about the conclusions or like the different programs that we might offer based on the research. . . . I think as economists, we often just think about the data as being data and not that it comes from, you know, it’s tied to real people. . . .

And I think that’s you know where we that disconnect happens and so I think more of that like reading outside of the field would like really improve the research and also just the way we approach it.

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“We’re all here from top programs and I think that means that success is defined in one specific way.”

“I think with the obsession with rigor comes that we forget that the data comes from real people.”

These tendencies toward elitism and hierarchy limit the field many ways: who can become an economist, the topics economists can study, the kinds of insights they can achieve, and what the knowledge they publish can accomplish.

Value of academic versus alternative career paths

There is also a clear sense of hierarchy in terms of career outcomes: academic careers are prized and industry careers are not. Melinda (Top 50 program) said, “I decided to focus on a career path that was different than what my advisors wanted for me and I have experienced a pretty dramatic shift in the way they have treated me since I decided not to follow their wishes for my life.” Cormac (Top 25 program) explained his perspective on this as being about what economics values and how faculty are willing to spend their time: “[if you say] ‘I will take a job outside of academia.’ . . . [Your advisor will] say, ‘Great, good for you. I don’t have any experience in the private sector. Your research is good enough for a Ph.D. tomorrow. What else of my time do you need here?’”

Adam (Top 25 program) agreed: “There is this clear internal sense [that] academia is a success and other things are a failure.” He also noted that in the current broad climate, many students are wary of academic careers. This concern is reasonable; policymaker support for higher education, including institutional funding and federal research funding, has changed in ways most had not imagined it could. Economics departments should consider these circumstances as they determine how to advise students, how to consider what a successful post-graduate placement looks like, and how to support students seeking non-academic career paths.

Participants describe a feeling that they are not valued or respected as individuals

Just as Sofia reflected that economists tend not to see the real people behind a dataset or engage with real-world issues in accomplishing their work, so too did many other participants describe the feeling that they are not treated like real people. Melissa (Top 50 program) said, “It’s easy to lose sight of the fact that grad students are people too, and they are starting out on this journey. I would have benefited from more times where I was asked

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“There is this clear internal sense [that] academia is a success and other things are a failure.”

questions about who I am and my life outside of econ just to feel like a person.” Camilla (Top 10 program) said, “At the end of the day, research really matters. Methodology matters, But I think the human doing the research matters a lot more.” Sandor (Top 10 program) described a more specific dynamic that he experiences:

There are occasions where you share something difficult about yourself or your past or where you come from or your identity. And a professor just doesn't know how to react to that because they've never thought about it, experienced that. And so the reaction is to ignore you because they don't know what to do. That leads to bad advising or just missing out on opportunities. And again, it might not be because they . . . disagree with this thing that you share but they just don't know how to deal with it.

These moments of friction contribute to a sense that some participants had that the faculty with whom they work do not always recognize that they are real people with real experiences and needs.

The sense that faculty overlook participants as people also came up in the context of expectations. Some participants noted the culture of constant work. Emilia (Top 10 program) said that this was, for her, the most important thing that had been discussed in her session: “Economists especially are kind of praising this workaholic culture . . . it's so easy to give in to this peer pressure or this imaginary standard that you need to work 24 hours, 7 days a week in order to just do something.” Nathan (Top 10 program) also said this was the most important thing that had been raised in his group:

...about defining work hours—what is the structure? What is the framework for my work environment? When does work start and stop? I think that's something that people like to ignore because in academia you're supposed to be passionate. This isn't just a job. This is almost like a lifestyle. And so I would appreciate a shift in the culture where we treat this like our job because it is still a job. It's not something I want to do my whole life.

This aspect of the climate, where graduate students sense that they are expected to work constantly, came up in a few different ways, including how participants experienced the first year.

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Economics has homogeneous expectations for diverse people

Several participants characterized the first year as intense, grueling, and high-pressure. A few participants also described the function of the first year as offering a standardized training program for all students – which was described as a strength – and acculturating students to a certain way of thinking – which may not be a strength. Aditi (Top 25 program) characterized the first year as “leveling the field in the sense that no matter what background you come from, after the first year, everyone’s going to be at the same ability level or they’re going to have the same knowledge.” In that same conversation, Aparna (Top 25 program) said, “I would direct that back to how they treat us in our first year. . . . They’re like, ‘This is how we learned.’ . . . The field is very homogenized in its expectations. I think there’s not enough room to be the flexible and creative person you want to be.” Both Aparna and Aditi characterized these sentiments as the most important things shared in their groups.

Linda (Top 10 program), in another group, expanded on this idea that early doctoral students are acculturated to a certain way of thinking about what economics is and what kind of work the field values: “Econ is super homogeneous in terms of what research questions there are and what is real economics is actually very narrow and it’s very heavily defended, which is . . . not good for scientific process, and I think not good for incorporating new people.” Moreover, when people with new ideas or creative thinking who want to expand the boundaries of economics drop out because they are discouraged from pursuing this line, this is seen as a positive thing. Linda said:

They’re really discouraged early on in the Ph.D. and sometimes they can drop out or leave academia, and then I talk to people who are older in the field, and they’re like, ‘Well, maybe that wasn’t a bad thing because maybe it wasn’t the right fit for them.’ . . . And that just makes me really sad because why does it have to be this homogeneous thing?

Akerlof argues that a preference in economics for studying topics that are difficult to execute creates negative incentives for economists to study

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“There’s not enough room to be the flexible and creative person you want to be.”

topics that are relevant or that are new.⁸ These concerns connect to the issues raised in this report on elitism; the notion that there is a singular standard for what is best to study, or a narrow understanding of what is valuable to study, inhibits the field and limits participation. Bayer, Hoover, and Washington likewise call for a broader range of “acceptable” topics as an important mechanism for broadening participation.⁹

Sofia (Top 10 program) connected these concerns to questions about diversity and disparity within economics, noting that people from backgrounds that are underrepresented in the field may bring new interests to economics. She said, “And in the research that we want to do a lot of the time, just because we might identify with communities that are impacted by the research that we want to do, it’s not considered actual research. . . . It’s really bad the way I have to mold myself to what’s expected.” Price and Sharpe similarly find that the failure of economics departments with doctoral programs to hire Black economists has constrained the field’s ability to generate policy-relevant research particularly on racial disparities.¹⁰

Disparate treatment of and outcomes for people from certain backgrounds is a broadly acknowledged problem

Focus group participants discussed disparate treatment of people from certain groups 26 times during the sessions. Mya (Top 10 program) said that “In a classroom or seminar space women generally speak less, and when they raise their hand, they are less likely to get attention.” Yue (Top 50 program) said, “Female students feel way less support in general. We do complain in our town hall every year that we don’t feel comfortable in many scenarios . . . and they’re not really doing something.” Judy (Top 25 program) agreed: “There seems to be a lot of hostility and negativity to seminar speakers that are younger scholars or are women.” Melinda (Top

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“Just because we might identify with communities that are impacted by the research we want to do, it’s not considered actual research.”

8 Akerlof, George A. 2020. “Sins of Omission and the Practice of Economics. *Journal of Economic Literature* 58(2), 405-418. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20191573>

9 Bayer, Hoover, and Washington, 2020.

10 Price, Gregory N., and Rhonda V. Sharpe. 2018. “Is the Economics Knowledge Production Function Constrained by Race in the USA?” *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*. pp.1-16. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13132-018-0563-8>.

50 program) worried about the implications of a pattern she noticed in her department for her own future: “The women at my university who are on the tenure track who have young kids are not doing well. And that’s another layer—I’m watching people who are in this environment who are really struggling and that doesn’t bode well for me and my future.”

Sofia (Top 10 program) said that she sees most attention on expanding participation in economics as focused on gender: “Whenever we’re talking about climate, I think that’s most, at least from my experience at [institution], where they focus on diversity in terms of gender . . . but they don’t really think about other dimensions.” She explained that, for example, funding changes made during the pandemic had challenging impacts for her because she supports her family. She felt that other dimensions of her identity, including her first-generation student status and her ethnicity, were not considered or supported by her department.

A few students emphasized that people from minoritized communities are treated differently, and that there are patterns of difference in outcomes for these individuals. Adam (Top 25 program) said that in his department, attrition after the first year disproportionately affects people of color, and Daphne (Top 25 program) said that women in her program “fail at higher rates than anyone else.”

An area to explore further and consider in more depth are disproportionate impacts and different support needed for students from socioeconomic backgrounds, including but not limited to first-generation college students.¹¹

At the end of each focus group, participants were asked what, from the conversation, was said that was most important. Table 2 shows the most frequent topics raised during this part of the focus groups. The most frequently raised themes were that diversity is lacking (10 times), that funding is

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¹¹ Stanbury, Anna, and Robert Schultz. 2023. “The Economics Profession’s Socioeconomic Diversity Problem. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 37(4), 207-230.

Table 2. Codes Identified Most Frequently as Most Important

CODE	COUNT
Diversity is lacking	10
Funding is insufficient	10
Elitism is a problem	7
Students want more research training and support	7
Cultural shift is needed	5
Homogenized expectations for diverse people	5
Advising is key	4
Community is important	4
<i>At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to identify the most important thing said during the group. This list shows the most frequently cited most important items with a count of participants who identified the item as most important. Some participants identified more than one item</i> <i>Source: Graduate student focus groups, Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas.</i>	

insufficient (10 times), and that elitism is a problem (7 times).

Disparity and lack of transparency can create mistrust

This disparity is a matter of concern not only on its face but also because there is limited transparency in how preliminary exams are scored, creating some mistrust around the process. Marco (Top 50 program) said “for some people [not knowing if you will pass the preliminary exam] could be good at the end. It’s a bit discretionary if you pass or not.” Cormac (Top 25 program) described how requirements might be applied differently to different students:

Some of these rules are written on paper but they’re maneuverable and they serve as an excuse. These are kind of soft rules. It’s like if you’re being a bad person and you fail the exam, you don’t really get a second chance. Whereas if you’re really nice, you’re putting in that effort and you fail the exam, you get another try and so on and so on. And that would hold true for these performance requirements.

The concern here seems to be not only that departments have some discretion in how requirements are applied, but that this discretion can be paired with a lack of transparency about qualifiers. Adam (Top

25 program) said, “There’s this committee that oversees these sorts of questions about the graduate program, but it’s this very secretive thing and the faculty won’t even tell us who is on the committee . . . it’s all kind of word of mouth and gossip.”

Program Elements and Pressure on Students

The significance of the advisor relationship

Graduate student advisors vary widely in terms of how they work and whether they are sources of stress or support for students. When a student has a difficult advisor, they are in a tough spot. Participants described situations where they or close peers needed to break from their initial advisors and find someone else. In one case, an advisor was hostile to the topic the participant had selected. In another, an advisor encouraged a student to take questionable actions in analyzing a dataset. In another case, an advisor was simply never available to meet with the student. Madeleine (Top 10 program) said,

These advising relationships, there’s a power dynamic where you really want them to be your advisor. And I see other students working without getting paid or other situations where they’re being taken advantage of, but they don’t want to say that because they want the advisor to like them.

Shantae said, “Talking to friends in the department, I see that there’s such a range in the way advisors talk to their students. So for some people that’s their biggest support system. And for some that’s the thing they fear the most every week or whenever they talk to their advisors.” Frederick (Top 10 program) also described the difficulty—if not impossibility—of addressing bad faculty behavior: “It is exacerbated by the fact that certain faculty hold status. It’s the most important thing here, is this is such a status-driven field where somebody can really do terrible things by just being really prolific in their publications.” Students note that it can be hard to assess whether a faculty member will be a good advisor, and that in some cases they lack discretion to select a faculty member to be their advisor because of the topic they intend to study or department mechanisms around advisor-student matching.

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“For some people [the advisor] is the biggest support system. And for some that’s the thing they fear the most every week.”

The first year and preliminary exams

Participants commented on the first year of the program and preliminary exams 27 times during the focus groups, almost uniformly in a negative light. A few participants felt strongly that the first year sequence wastes time because it emphasizes outdated models. Aom (Top 25 program) said, “I understand why they wanted everyone to do it, to make sure you understand the core basics of the theories or models that you’ll be applying to your research. But at the same time, you’re taught such old models that no one really uses anymore.” One participant described her feeling, when she thinks about the first year, as “rage” because “it was a waste of time.”

Participants described the intensity of the first year: “For me, the hardest thing was the pressure,” said Edwin (Top 50 program):

Even if the department isn’t trying to cull people, there is a chance of not making it past the first year. And so even though I enjoyed some of the classes—just that looming – you know, this could be it. It was terrible. It was terrible. It was not a great year because of that. It’s hard to enjoy the work when it’s that high pressure.

Yue (Top 50 program) described a gap between expectations set about the first year and the reality of the first year: “The head of the department is going to tell you it’s going to be fine, the first year is going to be a struggle a little bit but you’re going to be fine. Almost one third of us dropped out after the first year . . . so a lot of us are not fine.” Several participants expressed that they saw the first year as a kind of “hazing” or that it was a mechanism designed to weed people out. Some participants said that this was not the case for their program and that they understood the program to be designed to support admitted students and did not expect or anticipate that students would fail qualifying exams or leave after the first year.

While researchers have found that performance in the first year is a strong predictor of outcomes in terms of job placements for graduates,¹² the authors acknowledge that the mechanism behind this connection is

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Several participants expressed that they saw the first year as a kind of “hazing” or that it was a mechanism designed to weed people out.

12 Athey, Susan, Lawrence F. Katz, Alan B. Krueger, Steven Levitt, and James Poterba. 2007. “What Does Performance in Graduate School Predict? Graduate Economics Education and Student Outcomes.” *American Economic Review* 97 (2): 512–20. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.97.2.512>.

unclear. Comments from the authors acknowledge that one possible reason for this connection is that students who perform well in the first year garner respect from faculty. Some focus group participants indicate that this selection mechanism might be self-reinforcing; that is, a student does well in the first year and thus gets more attention, time, and feedback from faculty. This treatment facilitates student success throughout the program and on the job market.

Noteworthy is that some participants started their programs during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, so they experienced unique pressures during their first year. For Melissa (Top 50 program), this experience was alienating. For Karina (Top 50 program), the expectation that students would perform to typical expectations became an important concern to raise to department leadership: “Professors were like, ‘[The first year] is supposed to be hard.’ I’m like, ‘Oh, really? In your first year, were you wearing a mask and afraid you were going to die at the grocery store?’ . . . My experience is a little bit unique but overall the department does a good job of making sure everyone has a chance to succeed.” Karina found leadership to be receptive to these concerns, which contributed positively to her experience of her program.

The job market

The job market paper is a significant milestone, and some participants felt that the threshold for quality for the job market paper is too high or that the emphasis on this milestone creates undue pressure. Mathieu (Top 50 program) said:

The message is that I will get judged on this one paper, my whole career, my first job, which is also correlated with your whole career, it depends on this one paper. That just makes it—when it’s already hard and research is already kind of personal, it even ties in more. So that’s where you think this paper is my whole personality. For me, it prevents me from learning more, from working on stuff that maybe I enjoy also but it’s not my job market paper.

Judy (Top 25 program) thought that the scrutiny on the job market papers exceeded the threshold of quality expected for top-tier journal publications. She said, “I think it adds a lot of pressure to students.” These dynamics also intensify the issues Akerlof identifies with regard to economists valuing difficult, highly specialized, closely focused research agendas rather than broader and

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more policy-relevant topics.¹³

Funding

Participants had several specific concerns about funding. First and most broadly, many students felt that their funding is insufficient particularly for the competitive housing markets in which their programs are located. Nine students said that insufficient funding was the most important issue affecting the climate in economics. Nina (Top 25 program) said, “A lot of times there is not enough to live. . . . In some cases, students are forced to work, for international students, illegally because you can’t afford to live in the city with PhD funding.” They found faculty and department leadership to be unsympathetic to their concerns about funding. Sofia (Top 10 program) said, “We brought up a lot of the issues we were experiencing from a financial perspective, like [local area] is very expensive and our stipends are low. . . . The way [department leadership] reacted was very much scolding and being angry at us for even bringing up these issues.”

Several participants pointed out that funding is often guaranteed for only five years although it is common for doctoral students to need six or more years to complete the program. Some acknowledged that sixth-year students often find another source of funding but felt that the gap in funding versus typical degree progress patterns create unnecessary pressure and anxiety. A few participants said that funding was not guaranteed in their programs for even the first five years and that this created significant uncertainty and pressure.

Strategies to improve the climate

Facilitate community at multiple levels and in multiple directions

When describing what they needed and what worked for them, several students emphasized the importance of community. Mya (Top 10 program) said that this was the most important thing that had been discussed in her group:

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“Everybody wants more community.”

¹³ Akerlof, 2020.

Everybody wants more community: between grad students, between grad students and professors, between grad students and postdocs. Everybody wants different ways to connect with people that are like them, but a little different, people that are completely different to them. This is between schools, within schools. I think we're all just looking for more ways to learn about each other and from each other. That is also a thing that has been really important because in many ways community with people is also how I've learned the best. . . . I've been really helped by community. And so I think that's the most important thing is people are really looking for that.

Sofia (Top 10 program) described a process in which she felt alienated and unsupported and eventually determined that she would need to set out to build the community that she needed: "I put it on myself . . . to find that community. . . . I started going to different groups on campus to find that community and so I got very lucky and I did find a community that also identifies with some of my different backgrounds." Through this network, Sofia became aware of campus resources and supports for graduate students and now shares that information with other graduate students in her program.

Informal peer support

Departments can play a role in facilitating peer connections. Patrick said that his department hosts open events with food and drink to attract students to spend time together. Shantae said that her institution offers students subsidized housing so that students to live in proximity to each other and build relationships. Rashmi's department encourages students to form study groups early on. Micah's program assigns students a shared office space that is far enough away from faculty offices that students can discuss concerns with each other candidly while in the office. These peer connections are important. Guo said: "One of the most important things is just get a very supportive community where you can be open about your struggles, especially when you're able to have a closer group of friends. . . . That has been really helpful and I have been able to rely on them when navigating new things."

Connections to advanced students and alumni

Participants also found more advanced students to be helpful sources of support and information. Mateo (Top 10 program) said, "Something I always found useful was communicating with other students in particular, maybe inside my cohort but it was particularly useful when I was able to exchange opinions

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or knowledge with older students.” Judy (Top 25) institution agreed: “I think for me, the biggest resource is talking to older students, but these are very informal relationships.” Students varied in their sense of the value of programs that matched new students to more advanced students: some described these as awkward or clumsy. For others, having an identified student mentor is a great resource:

One thing that [my institution] does that I feel like has been pretty cool so far is they’ll match us with upper years as mentors. . . . It’s really great to get one-on-one advice from people who were in your position maybe one or two or three years ago. Not just about, let’s say, how to prepare for the qualifying exam but also just what it’s like to be in the department, what you need to keep an eye out for, what other resources you can reach for. (Rashmi)

Advanced students might be in a good position to help students avoid or

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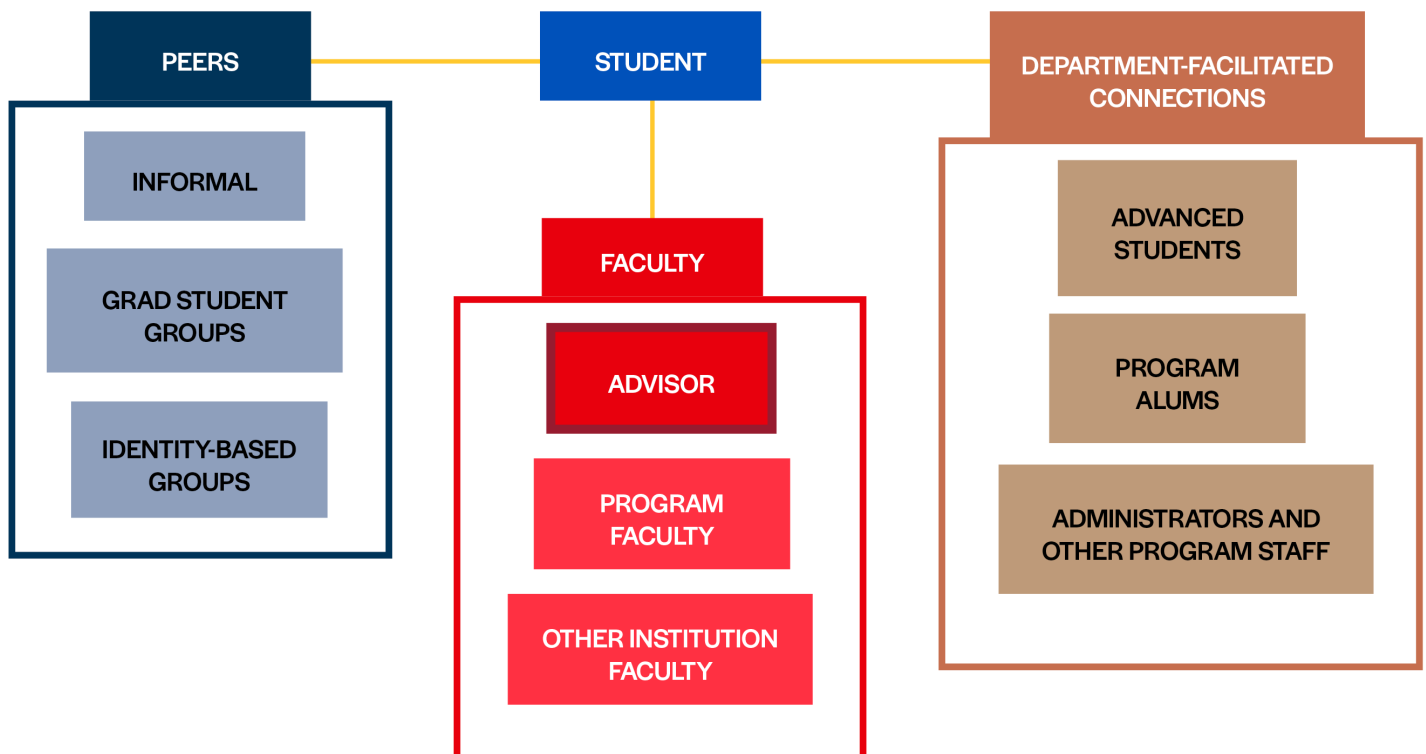
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Figure 3. Sources of Support for Graduate Students



Source: Graduate student focus groups, Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas.

mitigate some of the challenging situations that come up with advisors.

Two participants discussed the value of connections with alumni. Karina (Top 50 program) said that she had good experience with reaching out to program alumni to ask them the same kinds of questions as she would a more advanced student in the program. Rashmi expressed interest in that kind of connection because she has a specific career path in mind and would be able to pursue that goal more effectively if she could connect with others who have followed that path.

Student work feedback groups

Another valuable structure at the department level are graduate student feedback groups. Eunji (Top 25 program) and Nina (Top 25 program) described several informal opportunities in their departments for students to present research and solicit feedback. Some of these are situation-specific, like workshops for job market candidates to practice their presentations, and some of them are topically-focused, like a graduate student seminar series on labor economics. Edwin (Top 50 program) said that his feedback group intentionally excludes faculty to mitigate pressure on presenters: “It’s not that the faculty don’t want to be there. We don’t have faculty there on purpose so that grad students can share research without pressure and can get initial feedback, and just a grad student space, which has been nice.”

Figure 3 depicts the various sources of support for students. Advanced students and program alumni may be an underused source of support for students, and departments are key in facilitating connections among students and these groups.

Graduate student organizations

Participants described the value of graduate student organizations in a few different ways. Mateo (Top 10 program) said, “For me [the graduate student committee] was quite useful just to discuss some type of maybe requirements, like second year sequences. . . . But it often became a chance to . . . try to say ‘Okay, let’s put on the plate what we think are some issues.’” He described issues that might be pervasive throughout the

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department but that are hard for a single student to identify or understand as such. These committees meet regularly with or even include faculty representatives. Frederick (Top 10 program) sits on a similar committee:

I'm on the graduate student committee that we have here, which is a wonderful thing that meets with the administration regularly and is a very positive thing for our culture because we bring up all of our issues to our chair. This is one way we can always communicate with them and they're very receptive to hearing this. That being said, they selected into that role.

Other students characterized their groups as student-organized and focused on the value of student-driven programming, although in some cases they reflected that energy and involvement in such groups can vary over time.

Identity-based groups

Some participants described identity-based student groups, such as groups for women in economics and groups for LGBTQIA+ students, as important sources of support. Madeleine (Top 10 program) spoke highly of support she gets from other women in the program:

I feel like the women in my cohort and in the program in general are a good support system for each other. We'll have a separate group chat, or one time we had a meeting where we kind of discussed our experiences and it felt very validating that we felt the same and we all felt supported by each other.

In some cases, these groups are student-organized or informal and in other, departments help support or facilitate these connections. Mya (Top 10 program) said: "I feel very lucky that we have a formal women in economics group. There's also an LGBTQ+ in economics group and actually, the department gives them funding to do stuff. And I think it helps to forge this very informal relationship across all the PhD students." Mya also speculated that it would be helpful to connect with students from other universities through identity-based groups, mentioning, for example, special poster sessions at conferences for students who identify as members of certain groups.

Connection across universities

Three participants mentioned that they attended an economics summer camp and found it useful for the connections they made and for the material

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"[Econ summer camp] helped me realize that the discipline is so much larger than the 20 people I see."

they covered. Minjun (Top 25 program) said that this was a good opportunity to meet students across departments and fields. Shakti said, “I found so many other types of people that were perhaps more aligned with my values or who I want to be friends with within the discipline. It was great. I think that it really helped me realize that the discipline is so much larger than the 20 people I see.”

Departments can offer and facilitate support for students

Valuing and investing in students

Several participants described the importance of investing in students early in the program. They felt that if programs and faculty operate from the assumption that students who are accepted in the program should persist and succeed in the program — and they treat students accordingly — students are more likely to succeed. Jason (Top 25 program) thought a virtuous cycle would emerge under these circumstances: “if you can change graduate culture than graduate students can lift themselves up to some degree. And I think if faculty recognize that grad students are doing better they’ll be more interested in investing in graduate students.”

This idea echoes the growth mindset, the idea that intelligence is not fixed and is instead possible to cultivate through practice, new approaches, and support.¹⁴ A growth mindset advances the idea that students who do not perform to a standard level of expectation can be helped until they do, and that simply being aware of the possibility that one can increase their capacity can help increase capacity.

Participants identified department administrators and staff as another potential support and connection for students. “We have a great admin. . . . We are out of luck if she leaves,” said Karina (Top 50 program). While people are often hired to these positions on the basis of their capacity

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¹⁴ Yeager, David S., Jamie M. Carroll, Jenny Buontempo, Andrei Cimpian, Spencer Woody, Robert Crosnoe, Chandra Muller, Jared Murray, Pratik Mhatre, Nicole Kersting, Angela Lee Duckworth, Gregory M. Walton, and Carol S. Dweck. 2022. “Teacher Mindsets Help Explain Where a Growth-Mindset Intervention Does and Doesn’t Work.” *Psychological Science* 33(1), 18-32.

and experience working with faculty, they can also help students. Even if not in an advising position, departments should consider whether to select hires based on relational skills and their motivation in supporting students and communicating that support to students. Hiring for relational skills can have powerful effects on an organization.¹⁵

Expand the range of value in economics

Broadening recognition of what counts as economics, how economists can learn (that is, from other disciplines), and whether economics work can connect to real-world challenges and people will advance several aims. First, it will improve inclusion of economists from diverse backgrounds who pursue economics because they want to solve problems. A majority of participants said that they became interested in economics because they loved math and wanted to apply math to the real world. Second, it will improve the robust conversations taking place in the field. Some subfields, participants pointed out, already use literature from multiple disciplines. Faculty can consider ways that their departments reinforce a narrow view of economics and success in economics and how to expand these views. Related to this concern is the matter of supporting non-academic careers, including by continuing to work earnestly with students who express an intent to pursue a non-academic career.

Improve norms around faculty-student interactions

“What’s made or broken my time at various points has just been the mentorship. . . . I don’t think my first year of the PhD any professor ever talked to me. I think that was really a missed opportunity for someone to just check in and see how I was doing,” said Brittany (Top 10 program). Camilla (Top 10 program) agreed that checking in with students on a regular basis would greatly improve the student experience: “Just care about people in your department . . . like, actually checking in maybe on a quarterly basis, on a semester basis with your students, and then be open to feedback.” Students recognized that they could reach out to faculty, and they felt in some cases that faculty should initiate these conversations. Marco (Top 50 program) said: “If you are proactive, you

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“What’s made or broken my time at various points has just been the mentorship.”

¹⁵ Gittell, Jody Hoffer. 2016. Transforming Relationships for High Performance. The Power of Relational Coordination. Stanford Business Books.

can find support with some advisors but in many cases you are not proactive so you are on your own and very isolated.”

Aparna (Top 25) described a dynamic in which faculty often do not communicate that they are receptive to outreach from students, especially when students are early in the program:

People are extremely protective of their time to the extent that it feels like you're abusing someone of something very precious to them. And I just felt that on multiple occasions when talking to professors especially as a younger or as like a junior student in the PhD program—I think when you're further along, they take you a bit more seriously—but when you're not far along, it's very difficult to feel like you're not doing something wrong by just getting 20 minutes of their time. So I think if people did not treat it as such a precious resource and just were more willing to share their time with students that would make such a huge difference.

Paola (Top 25 program) said that she has noticed that faculty and students are distant from each other, and limited opportunities for casual social interactions creates some barriers to student-initiated contact: “Maybe if we had more informal gatherings, conversation can start flowing more easily and without so much pressure on having an idea. Because of course people are super busy so their time is more valuable.” Departments considering informal events with faculty and students should assess whether community norms or more proactive interventions are needed to ensure that informal events do not become sites for inappropriate or hostile behavior.¹⁶

Shantae agreed that there is a barrier to talking with faculty for students who may feel that they need to be very well-prepared in order to take up any faculty time: “A lot of people feel like they have to have the perfect idea or well-formed idea before they can talk. I think it would be useful to just get advice. Go talk. These people aren't scary. It's okay. It's going to be a process.”

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“When you’re not far along, it’s very difficult to feel like you’re not doing something wrong by just getting 20 minutes of their time.”

¹⁶ Bayer, Amanda, Şebnem Kalemli-Özcan, Rohini Pande, Cecilia Elena Rouse, Anthony A. Smith Jr., Juan Carlos Suárez Serrato, and David W. Wilcox. 2019. Best Practices for Economists: Building a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Productive Profession. American Economic Association. <https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/best-practices>, accessed March 24, 2025.

Address advising incentives

Some participants suggested that a challenge with advising is that incentives to be a good advisor are insufficient or misaligned. Amin (Top 50 program) suggested a reconsideration of the scope of this relationship: “I think some sort of a structural change where certain powers would be taken away from the advisors or at least shifted to the department would be helpful for the climate and for the sake of the students.” In another group, Linda (Top 10 program) said:

There are some people who are known to be very, very, very, very, very good advisors. Or they're really, really, really smart in terms of emotional intelligence. So not only are they advising their students, they're providing mental health services for half the students in the department. And I guess that either getting rewarded for that or getting some sort of less teaching because they are holding the culture of the department on their back—it would be nice if they could get some help.

In response, Shakti (Top 10 program) said, “I absolutely love that. I think that fully aligns with this idea of you need to give people incentives and reward them when they are good actors.”

In another conversation, Zixuan and Cormac (Top 25 programs) discussed how advisors invest time in students at different points in the program. Zixuan said, “I’ve heard that apparently it’s considered uncommon for even your own PhD advisor to read your dissertation from start to end even once. . . . If your advisor does that, that’s considered good.” He related a story about someone whose advisor misunderstood her project based on their verbal conversations, and the misunderstanding was not uncovered until a milestone point. Cormac noted, however, that advisors’ incentives are aligned to dissuade them from taking time to carefully review work especially from junior students: “All of the incentives mean [the advisor] needs to continue doing big research and stop worrying about these third year students who don’t know what they’re doing.” Advising is time-intensive, so for departments to support quality advising means a realignment of incentives will help improve advising without leading to faculty burnout.

*Demonstrate receptivity to student concerns**Methodology**Findings**Demographics**Climate Assessment**Challenges with the climate**Program elements and pressure****Strategies to improve****Conclusions*

“I’ve heard that apparently it’s considered uncommon for even your own Ph.D. advisor to read your dissertation from start to end even once.”

Department leaders can build transparency and mutual respect with students through transparency and receptivity to student concerns. Seven participants talked about forums in their departments for students to raise concerns to faculty members. As described in the previous section of this report, some departments have graduate student groups intended to surface and address concerns. Other departments have town hall-style events to air issues. The value of these town halls depends on how receptive the department leadership will be to concerns. Melissa (Top 50 program) said, “When we come with question and complaints and things like that I haven’t found as helpful. It’s kind of more, we submit anonymous questions and they can get a little heated. And the answers are typically non-answers. I haven’t found that very useful.” Edwin (Top 50 program), by contrast, has a very open department chair:

[Department leadership] have taken to doing a yearly feedback session with grad students, which partly works because of the personalities of these faculty. . . It’s been a very candid discussion of ‘How are grad students feeling about the department? Here’s things that the department is doing or can’t do for the grad students.’ And just a lot of very frank back and forth about how things are going. Again, that partly can only be done because they have a good reputation and good relationships with grad students.

Key to the successful dynamic Edwin describes is transparency: “There’s absolutely a balancing act to it because he’s very clear on ‘Here’s what I can and can’t do.’ But there’s an openness, which is great. You never want to wonder why they’re not doing anything.”

On a related note, in departments where communication between students and leadership is poor, participants perceived minor efforts from department leadership to improve climate badly. Participants mentioned that leaders sometimes focus on matters not important to students. For example, a department chair might announce that they had set up a lounge area with magazine subscriptions for students as a way to build community or that they are working hard to get telephones for student offices. This kind of effort, if students are concerned about insufficient funding or poor advisors, feels out of touch with their needs and priorities.

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Department leadership can build trust and mutual respect with students through transparency and receptivity to student concerns.

Assess funding packages

Department leaders should consider processes to check funding levels against local cost of living and regularly assess whether funding is sufficient and funding packages should be restructured or increased.

Change seminar norms, and prepare students for seminars

As discussed in a previous section of this report, students have different experiences with and perceptions of seminars. One minor adjustment that a participant raised is that they have seen seminars where there is a norm not to ask questions in the first 15 minutes. That participant described seminars with this norm in place: “It feels less distracting. Because if people are asking questions on the first slide, then you’re not really able to listen to the speaker or absorb their idea at all but you’re absorbing the question, which is not the point of the presentation.”

Two participants said that mentors or leaders communicated seminar expectations to them. Mya (Top 10 program) said that senior economists told her “what to expect in seminars and what kind of behavior is not okay.” Adam (Top 25 program) said that his department sets expectations for seminars with students: “[They say] ‘This is the sort of thing we’re going to expect from you, and if we ask you hard questions, it’s not because we don’t like you, it’s because we want you to get hard questions from us instead of someone else down the road.’” He mentioned that this curbs negative behavior in seminars from other students, which is important as three participants said that other students are a primary source of hostile, aggressive behavior in seminars in their departments.

AEA currently identifies as a resource a document outlining expectations for participants at MIT economics seminars.¹⁷ These expectations includes strategies like “share the floor” where attendees are thoughtful about not asking several questions, “raise your hand” so that presenters can facilitate a conversation more easily, and “avoid sidebar conversations” to limit disruption. This document also calls on organizers to “be prepared to intervene in real time if necessary”; it might be valuable for departments to

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¹⁷ MIT Department of Economics. 2019. “Guidance for a Constructive Culture of Exchange in MIT Economics Seminars.” https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Pf9fYEtDLg-lboxHraO8tPL5I9GW5vxG-TW_CmQBcE/edit

think through who takes on that role, how they are prepared for it, and how they will be supported if others express indignation when someone intervenes.

Connect students to mental health services

Mental health was an important theme across focus groups, coming up 25 times in these discussions. Students agreed that it is helpful for departments to share information with students about mental health services available to them and to encourage students to use mental health services when needed. However, several students said that when they tried to use these services, they find that there is a long wait time or limitations for use. Asmaa (Top 50 program) said, “We always have an email from our department about our mental health. So they want us to go and get those sessions with a therapist if you want to. The problem with that is because it’s university-wide it’s very hard to get an appointment.” Participants who had good experiences with mental health services credited those experiences to their high-quality health insurance.

Restructure predocs

While beyond the scope of this study, one group related strong concerns about predocs. Students expressed that these experiences are structured in such a way that the predoc is beholden to a single faculty member with limited recourse in the event that issues arise. This problematic structure is indicative of power issues in the field of economics and departments should consider how their predocs are set up in order to mitigate potential issues.

Students want to learn more about navigating graduate economics

Departments can provide more information to students

Some participants felt they did not receive clear, upfront information about milestones, requirements, and timelines. Micah (Top 50 institution) said:

I feel like I’m driving in the fog. Things are coming at me and my advisor will tell me, but he’ll assume that I have been told this or know this. And so I have to explicitly ask, and he’ll be like, ‘Good God, you don’t know that? That’s in two months and you have to have this ready.’ I think this is normal, but we have this expectation in the first year that you are totally and entirely devoted to your classes and you don’t need to worry about anything that happens after that. It’s just not realistic.

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Some students shared that they had not realized that if they intended to graduate in five years, they would need their job market paper ready at the end of the fourth year so that it would be in hand for them to go on the job market in their final year. Judy echoed this sense of dislocation in the overall process: “Messages from the department related to key milestones or stepping stones you have to do along your program can feel last minute or out of nowhere. So it might be helpful to key students in on where we are going. They can provide a bit more long-term heads-up.” Other studies have also supported the value of departments more actively providing information to students about navigating graduate school requirements and expectations.¹⁸

Research process

Several participants said that they wished there was more time earlier in their program to learn and practice research skills. Jason (Top 25 program) said, “I would even phrase it as ‘How to Be a Researcher.’ . . . I think I would just love to better understand from faculty not the lifecycle of a paper but how do you do research.” Kavya (Top 10 program) also shared this idea, “When the time comes that you actually have to do research, it feels like ‘I took all these courses, but I don’t know how to use them.’ So maybe just more training in terms of how to do research rather than just reading papers and teaching you math.” In addition, participants identified, in some cases, a need for more infrastructure for research, including funding for project needs such as datasets, training on proposal development, and support for proposal submission.

Series on navigating graduate economics

“I think there’s a fair amount of hidden curriculum in economics,” said Shakti (Top 10 program). “The amount I know now, which I did not know as a younger graduate student, which just happened by chance . . . it’s massive.” Participants were enthusiastic about the value of a series of resources about navigating graduate economics. Jason said:

I wonder if it could be helpful at the AEA level to do some sort of field-wide graduate student onboarding/culture/norm experience where

“I wonder if it could be helpful at the AEA level to do some sort of field-wide graduate student onboarding/culture/norm experience where there are prerecorded webinars or documents that any graduate student could read through and watch.”

¹⁸ Bayer, Hoover, and Washington, 2020.

there are prerecorded webinars or documents that any graduate student could read through and watch. It would go over the stuff of what you should expect out of your graduate student experience, how you should interact with faculty who are your advisors, faculty who aren't your advisors, faculty outside your university, outside your department, whatever. How to develop a question, how to pitch and brainstorm ideas, like 'Here's how to run a graduate-led reading group.'

Other students suggested that it would be helpful to have an ongoing resource that would keep up with changes in the field. One student pointed out that since it is hard to find time, especially as a first-year student when this information would have the most impact, it would be helpful to have a one-page summary of key points from each session. Jason also suggested that this kind of series could be a vehicle for AEA to promote best practices and resources to directors of graduate studies and department chairs.

A few students mentioned that they had extremely positive experiences in graduate school and that they attributed that to their selection criteria when they determined where to pursue doctoral education. A series on navigating graduate education can help students think through what values and priorities they have for their careers and determine not what program is the best, or the best for their subfield, but what program will best fit their individual needs and values. Uncovering the hidden curriculum in economics would advance diversity across multiple axes: gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.¹⁹

Profiles of economists

Linda (Top 10 program) suggested that there would be value in a public series of profiles of economists: "[I would like to see] interviews, profiles of people in a wide range so that people can understand that there are places where their own values are matched maybe a little bit more and there are other options." This suggestion echoes literature suggesting the importance of role models for improving participation among minoritized groups.²⁰ This also extends one of the benefits described with regard to summer camps in economics — simply helping students remember that the field of economics is much bigger than their individual experience of it.

¹⁹ Stanbury and Schultz, 2023.

²⁰ Bayer, Amanda, and Cecilia Elena Rouse. 2016. "Diversity in the Economics Profession: A New Attack on an Old Problem." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30 (4): 221–42. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.30.4.221>.

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Students in economics are talented, curious, and eager to learn skills and apply them to vexing challenges. Recognizing that the field of economics has often been a hostile space for people who deviate from a narrow demographic profile, we can use many tested and new strategies to support students from a variety of backgrounds and with a broad range of experiences in the field. This support is important to allow students to thrive.

A few students offered the interesting insight that investing in students early and reinforcing the sense that students are investments and valued members of the field—not novices advancing past a series of hurdles or dropping out of the field—will yield better outcomes. This might seem paradoxical, they acknowledged, but reducing the pressure on graduate students will improve outcomes. When students are reminded that they might not persist after their first year, or that their advisors will not read their third-year paper, or that their funding will run out after the fifth year, these anxieties distract from their work at hand and chip away at their confidence. Rather than replicating some of the harmful practices that may have been standard in the field in the past—and in some departments, that continue today—these participants urge leaders in economics to treat graduate students as valued trainees and even colleagues.

Bayer and Rouse argue that diversity is an important aim for the field of economics for generating a broader range of viewpoints which will improve the ability of economists together to generate “robust and relevant knowledge.” In addition, diverse groups tend to perform better than homogeneous groups in solving complex problems.²¹ But economics will continue to struggle with diversifying its practitioners until there is broad acceptance of the need for a change in the climate of economics, and until steps to change the climate are normalized in departments across the country.

Many of the findings and recommendations included here echo ideas that the AEA and other leaders in this field have identified. A key challenge to tackle is the issue of incentives aligned with goals. Assessing a department’s climate, identifying areas for improvement, prioritizing and implementing improvements, and monitoring success are time-intensive projects. The broader conditions for researchers create pressures on department leadership and faculty that, in addition to existing disincentives to pursue climate efforts meaningfully, even further disincentivize this work. So, department leaders should carefully consider what these efforts are worth to them and, with faculty,

21 Bayer and Rouse, 2016, p. 233.

identify what incentives can help offset the costs of this work.

The AEA should continue its valuable work identifying best practices and implementation strategies, and the organization should ensure that its communication channels to promote this work reach graduate students. This will mean that even if economics department faculty do not support this work, students will be aware of it and can access resources designed to support them. Here, helpful resources include even straightforward expectations like treating people with decency.²² Building on this work, the AEA and other field leaders can and should try a range of strategies to address the issues identified here and in other literature in the field. Improving the climate in economics can have powerful and lasting effects for faculty, current students, and future generations of economists.

Key Recommendations:

- Build community in multiple directions and at multiple levels.
- Treat students as respected, valued members of departments and the field.
- Broaden thinking about what is valuable and important.
- Align incentives to goals.
- Provide resources to students to navigate department-level requirements and field-level expectations.

22 Bayer et al, 2019.

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