

American Economic Association  
Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct

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Interim Report

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**Charge**

In October 2017, the Executive Committee of the American Economic Association (AEA) appointed the Ad Hoc Committee to Consider a Code of Professional Conduct to advise on whether the AEA should adopt a code, and to prepare a report and recommendation. The Committee interpreted its charge to include proposing a code and making suggestions about how the AEA’s principles might be advanced.

**Discussion**

The AEA seeks to promote the advancement of knowledge about economics. The AEA pursues this mission by facilitating the discussion and publication of economics research as well as by supporting established and prospective economists in their efforts to generate new knowledge.

The Committee believes that the AEA’s mission is best achieved, and ought to be achieved, in an environment that encourages free expression and exchange of ideas evaluated solely on scientific merit. In particular, the AEA should aspire to a professional environment that promotes equal opportunity and equal treatment for all economists, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, health condition, marital status, parental status, genetic information, professional status, or personal connections. Moreover, the Committee believes that the AEA mission can only be fulfilled if economists adhere to the highest level of honesty and integrity in all aspects of their work.

Recent events raise concerns about systematic deviations from these ideals. In the economics profession as in society at large, it has become apparent that unacceptable behavior has been allowed to continue through tacit toleration.<sup>1</sup> Examining online conversations among some economists, one study revealed a culture that is hostile towards

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<sup>1</sup> Time “Person of the Year: The Silence Breakers.” December 18, 2017.

women.<sup>2</sup> AEA members provided anecdotal evidence that some economists engage in bullying, bigotry, sexism, racism, or other forms of discriminatory behavior towards their colleagues or students. The AEA President-elect made a statement on these issues.<sup>3</sup> The AEA appointed this Committee and issued a statement by the Executive Committee.<sup>4</sup>

The Committee examined practices that are inconsistent with free discussion and also in tension with progress of the discipline. For example, the AEA's objectives are hindered when ideas are attacked because of who proposes them, or when it is impossible or uncomfortable for some people to participate freely. These concerns apply broadly including to professional forums such as conferences and seminars where economists interact face to face, to general forums where economists share findings and views with policy-makers, the public, and the press, to settings where economists provide confidential assessments such as referee reports and letters of recommendation, and to participation in social media.

AEA members have also reported what they perceive as a hostile or confrontational climate in the workplace, including at seminars and conferences. Such a climate may deter some people from entering the economics profession, and may induce others to exit. Limiting participation may impede the advancement of knowledge: success in the economics profession may accrue not to those who produce the most ground-breaking ideas but rather to those who thrive under, or at least are willing to tolerate, unpleasant or aggressive discourse.

The Committee also received anecdotal evidence of economists who abused their professional status, abused processes related to promotion, abused their personal or professional relationships, failed to disclose personal or professional relationships, or failed to disclose relevant personal financial interests. These practices indicate breakdowns of the honesty and integrity that should guide economists' professional conduct.

## **Recommendation**

**The committee recommends that the American Economic Association adopt a Code of Professional Conduct. Draft language for this code is attached for consideration by the AEA Executive Committee.**

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<sup>2</sup> Alice H. Wu, 2017, "Gender Stereotyping in Academia: Evidence from Economics Job Market Rumors Forum", [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3051462](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3051462).

<sup>3</sup> <https://piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/economics-job-market-rumors-site-needs-clean-its-act>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aeaweb.org/news/statement-of-the-aea-executive-committee-oct-20-2017>

The Committee recommends that the Code of Professional Conduct be a statement of principles rather than a detailed guide of how to adhere to these principles. The Committee's proposal parallels the AEA's mission of promotion of research and free discussion as set forth in the by-laws.

The committee reviewed a number of codes of conduct implemented by other associations in economics and social science including those of the American Finance Association, the European Economic Association, and associations for other social sciences. These codes reflect thoughtful consideration of many of the issues that confront economists in their professional conduct. The Committee ultimately favored a more parsimonious statement of principles for several reasons:

- The parsimonious statement of mission in the AEA by-laws has served the association well for more than a century, and serves well as rubrics for the key principles of professional conduct that the committee recommends.
- The AEA, especially through its publications, has well-developed policies relating to conduct in the context of AEA activities. The committee suggests that the policies of the AEA journals provide the most appropriate venue for addressing detailed issues of professional conduct related to the publication process. AEA journals should adopt and promote best practices and set an example to other journals in economics. As part of its oversight of the journals, the AEA Executive Committee should be attentive to how the AEA journals' policies cohere with the overall professional code.

As a practical matter, if the AEA decides it wants to adopt a detailed professional code of conduct along the lines of other associations, it would need to appoint a committee with sufficient time to prepare such a document, including provisions for collecting suggestions and feedback from the profession.

### **Additional proposals**

The Committee believes that the principles in the code of conduct cannot be advanced fully without commitment both from economists as individuals and from the AEA as the leading association of economists in the United States. The Committee offers the following additional suggestions for the AEA to consider to advance these principles.

#### **1. Diversity of the Executive Committee and Officers**

The AEA appears to be attentive to the diversity of the Executive Committee with respect to gender and race. This attention should be ongoing. Additionally, the AEA should consider the diversity of its committees and officers along dimensions including the range

of academic departments, universities and colleges, and types of careers represented in nominations. This recommendation derives from the Committee's sense that some people perceive the AEA to be an elitist organization with its leadership drawn from a small part of the profession.

## **2. Monitoring and reporting on climate**

The Committee found itself relying on anecdote and personal experience in preparing the report. The Committee recommends that the association actively monitor the climate in the profession and regularly report on it. By gathering systematic data, the AEA could facilitate both monitoring and improvement of behaviors related to the principles that the AEA adheres to, and could inspire members of the profession to uphold them. Data can also help justify initiatives or interventions when appropriate. Monitoring activities could include:

- a. Survey members about the climate in the profession, and elicit reactions to potential initiatives such as those listed in this report.
- b. Make data available to researchers to study whether there exist biases in referee reports, editorial decisions, and recommendation letters.
- c. Evaluate the effectiveness of various mentorship programs for minorities and women seeking to enter the profession.
- d. Give greater attention to the findings of the reports of CSWEP and CSMGEP.
- e. Commission an observational study of seminar and conference presentations in economics as well as other disciplines, and quantify the extent to which there is unproductive aggressiveness in economics or its subfields.

## **3. Best practices for addressing bias**

The AEA should take steps to identify best practices to avoid both conscious and unconscious biases. It should consider serving as a clearinghouse of tools for addressing bias and promoting best practices among its members and their institutions. It should also consider adopting tools for addressing bias within AEA functions. Specifically, the AEA could:

- a. Study and encourage the use of gender-bias "detectors" for letters of recommendation.
- b. Adopt training for editors to avoid relying too heavily on institutional background and network connections in screening and referee decisions.
- c. Encourage departments to implement training workshops for faculty on professional conduct and hiring.

- d. Encourage departments to implement training for students on professional conduct, including especially bias but also honest and transparent research practices.
- e. Post examples of good practices for training and instruction surrounding professional conduct.

#### **4. Ending harassment**

Sexual harassment is one of the most extreme violations of the code of professional conduct. A key goal for the AEA should be to establish a professional equilibrium where such behavior is not tolerated, and where victims of it can expect members of the economics profession and their institutions to address the violation appropriately. The committee recommends considering the following:

- a. Create a gated website where job market information can be posted by departments, agencies, and firms. The recent AEA survey of department chairs suggests overwhelming support for this idea, as long as the information posted consists of updates on dates rather than specific names of candidates. Creating this website would allow job market candidates to obtain the information they seek without accessing social media that includes irrelevant or offensive material. The website should include advice and general information about the job market process provided by established members of the economics profession.
- b. Most individuals have procedures within their institutions for addressing harassment. Sometimes these arrangements fail. Hence, the AEA should consider whether it should provide arrangements for members of the profession to seek advice or assistance relating to harassment where institutional remedies are unsuccessful. The committee discussed multiple options, but did not reach a consensus:
  - i. The AEA could create an AEA ombuds to help resolve conflicts that may arise between individual members of the AEA and their own institution. The ombuds would take action, i.e., contact the relevant institution.
  - ii. The AEA could create a network of mentors who could advise those facing harassment. A mentor would provide confidential advice, but not take action or report the claim of harassment. In the event a mentor hears the same issue from multiple individuals, the mentor could share this information with those individuals provided they all approve.

In short, the economics profession should strive for a better equilibrium where tacit acceptance of harassment and other deviations from responsible professional conduct is itself unacceptable.