

Spelman College Submission to the American Economic Association Award for Outstanding Achievement in Diversity and Inclusion

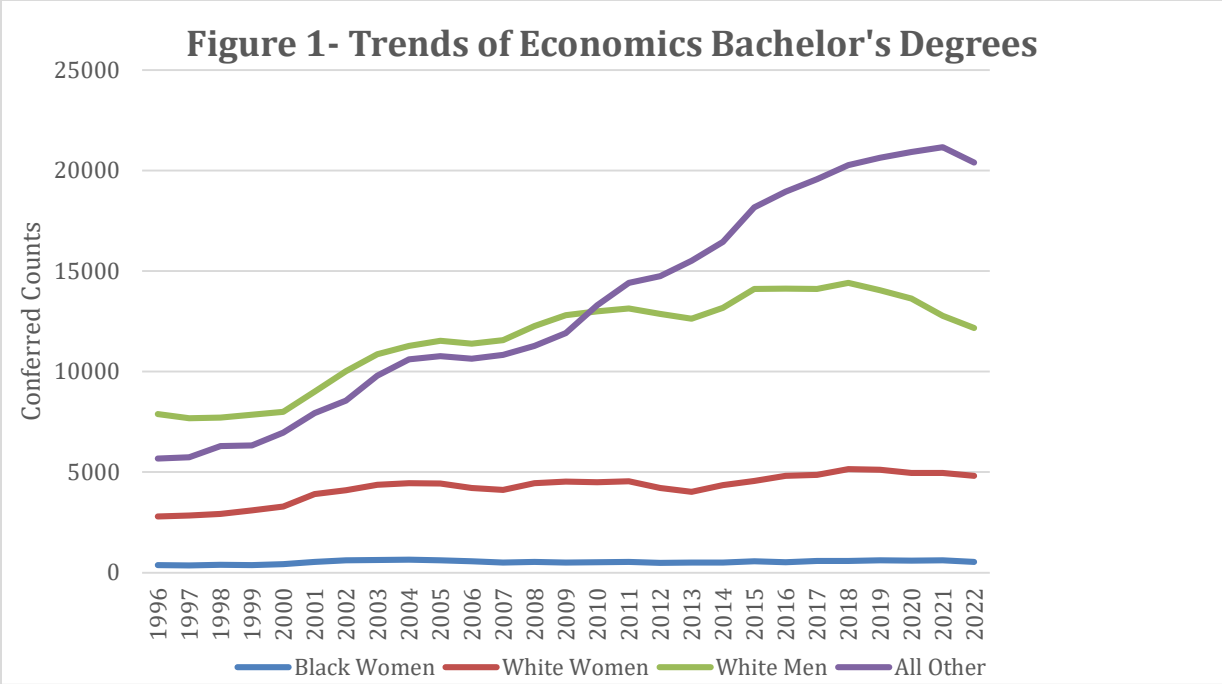
INTRODUCTION / MOTIVATION

For many years, the Economics Department at Spelman College has been at the forefront of addressing diversity gaps in the economics profession. With rates of minorities entering economics consistently low, especially among Black women, Spelman College has seized this challenge as an opportunity to create pathways for underrepresented students into the economics field and into academia.

Since 2018, following the National Economics Association's President's call to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) to fill the gap, Spelman has solidified its commitment to be the premier institution advancing Black women and minorities in economics. And at the year of 2018, out of 1,225 doctoral degrees in economics, only four went to Black women (0.5%), and only 1.5% of undergraduate economics degrees were conferred to Black women nationwide. These trends still persist (see Figure 1). Today, Spelman stands as the top producer of Black women with undergraduate degrees in economics. This proposal details the department's productive steps, structures, and outcomes that have advanced diversity and inclusion in alignment with the American Economic Association's (AEA) mission.

The Economics Department at Spelman College has worked to increase representation and foster inclusivity through three main strategies:

1. Developing initiatives to spark student interest in economics, supporting retention, and guiding students toward graduate study (Best Practices).
2. Actively engaging in broader economic initiatives that promote diversity, such as outreach, mentorship, and research programs that enhance minority engagement in economics (Productive structures and empowerment of individuals).
3. Creating mechanisms to support and advance minority faculty scholarship within academia (Productive structures and empowerment of individuals).



PROGRAMS AND POLICIES ALIGNED WITH AEA BEST PRACTICES

Spelman’s Economics Department embodies the AEA’s ‘Best Practices for Economists Building a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Productive Profession.’ These practices include the following initiatives:

Student Engagement and Retention Programs:

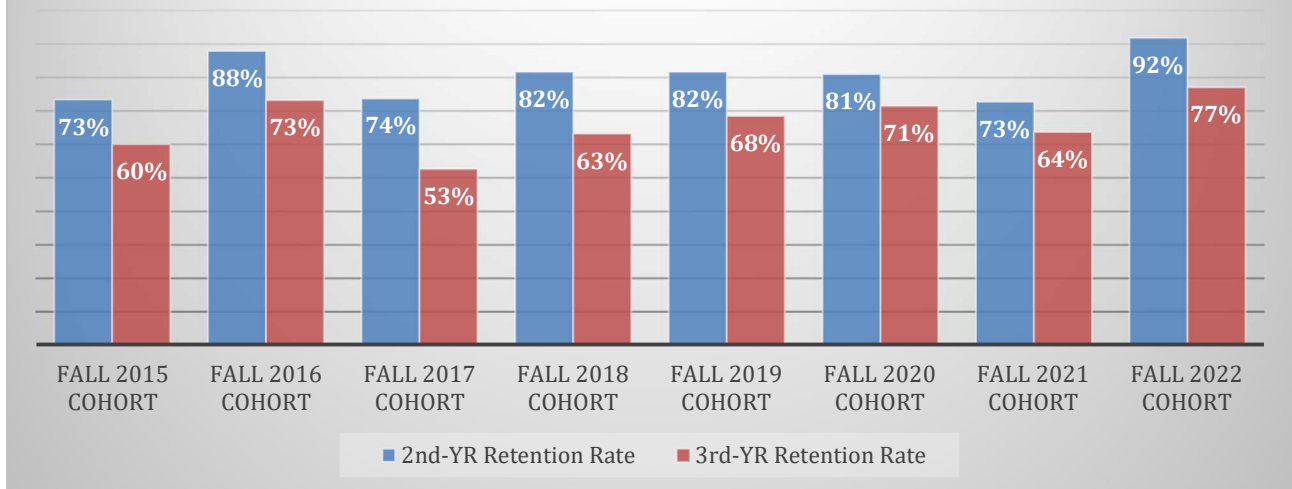
- [Lisa D. Cook Scholars Program:](#) Supported by a grant from Alfred P. Sloan Foundation with a start date of fall 2019, the program specifically addresses barriers for Black women entering economics by providing mentorship, research experience, and academic resources. Scholars participate in journal clubs, speaker series, and research experiences in collaboration with top institutions like Stanford, preparing them for graduate studies. An example of the success program is in one student’s decision to pursue a graduate program in Economics vs the corporate route. She is currently completing her PREDOC at a top 10 program and applying for doctoral studies.

Women In STEM Summer Bridge Accelerator (Wi-STEM): The Lisa D. Cook Scholars (LDC) program partners with a pre-existing campuswide summer research program called Wi-STEM. The program equips pre-freshmen with quantitative skills essential for succeeding in STEM and economics. Retention rates for economics majors from Wi-STEM are 100% compared to 68% for non-participants, showing a direct impact on student success.

- **Undergraduate Research Program:** Economics majors at Spelman complete a mandatory thesis in their senior year, which, combined with a research methods course, provides essential experience in economic research. Students gain hands-on experience applying classroom knowledge to real-world economic questions, a foundation that prepares them for both graduate studies and professional roles. Students' thesis research often focuses on concerns pertaining to both minorities and women.
- **Inauguration of BS degree in Economics:** In fall 2021, the department instituted a BS in Economics degree to strengthen economics majors for entry into pre-doctoral programs in economics prior to entry into doctoral programs in economics.
- **Co-Curricular Engagement:** The department supports student involvement in the Economics Club, Future Business Leaders Club, and a dedicated Economics Journal Club. These groups expose students to various aspects of the field of economics, allowing them to explore interdisciplinary interests such as mathematics, management, and entrepreneurship.
- **Federal Reserve Exploratory Data Analysis Course:** Each year, four to five students participate in an intensive exploratory data analysis course taught by a research analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta using R-Studio. Students are also partnered with a career economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, and a personal teaching assistant to conduct research. This program provides students with hands-on course instruction, personalized mentorship, and scholarship opportunities, all supported by a dedicated teaching assistant to enhance their learning experience. Over the past 2 years, the participation rate in this class has increased to 9 students.
- **VLab:** Established in 2012, [VLab](#) is a virtual research lab that primarily engages Spelman College students in immersive research experiences. To date, VLab has provided approximately 40 students with valuable research opportunities, equipping them for advanced academic pursuits. VLab research assistants have gone on to graduate studies at prestigious institutions, including Columbia University, Duke University, Emory University, Georgia Tech, Georgia State University, MIT, SMU, UCLA, and Yale University. Participants contribute through various roles, such as co-authoring peer-reviewed articles (e.g., in *Small Business Economics* and the *Review of Black Political Economy*), conducting literature reviews, developing surveys in Qualtrics, performing data analysis in Stata and R, and presenting at notable conferences like Spelman College Research Day and the PhD Excellence Initiative hosted by Stanford University and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Through these strategic implementations, the major's retention rate has reached new heights, with current statistics showing a record 92% retention among second-year students and 77% retention among third-year students (see Figure 2).

Figure 2- Retention Rates for Economics Majors



PRODUCTIVE STRUCTURES AND EMPOWERMENT OF INDIVIDUALS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED AND MARGINALIZED BACKGROUNDS AND IDENTITIES

The mission of the Spelman College Economics Department aligns closely with that of the institution. As a historically Black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, Spelman College provides an environment uniquely designed to support and empower Black women. This supportive structure reduces stereotype threats, fostering a strong academic foundation across disciplines. Spelman’s impact is evident: it consistently ranks among the top institutions for producing Black graduates who go on to earn doctoral degrees in science and engineering (Fiegenger and Proudfoot, 2013). Additionally, Spelman has held the #1 ranking among HBCUs in the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges rankings for 18 consecutive years. Spelman graduates excel beyond STEM, becoming leaders across diverse fields. In economics, for instance, alumnae have served as Presidential Economic Advisors, Chief Economists for the Department of Labor, Economists at the International Monetary Fund, and even as a Governor on the Federal Reserve Board.

Faculty Involvement in Diversity Initiatives

Spelman’s Economics faculty demonstrate a commitment to fostering diversity in the field through active contributions to literature and discourse on diversity in economics. Notable presentations, panels and publications include:

- **" [What Can Historically Black Colleges and Universities Teach about Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Black Students? - American Economic Association](#)"** This Journal of Economic Perspectives article highlights how HBCUs effectively engage minority students in economics and other fields, advocating for structural and pedagogical changes that could be implemented in broader educational settings.
- **"[Undergraduate Economics at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#)"** in the *Minority Report* newsletter, which features successful HBCU strategies for attracting and retaining students in economics.
- **"[The Pipeline Problem for Undergraduate Women of Color and Interventions Proposed to Address it](#)"** in *CSWEP News*' issue entitled "Addressing the Economics Pipeline Problem at the Undergraduate Level" which discusses the importance of institutional support and the role of organizations like the Sadie Collective in promoting diversity within economics.
- **"[Valuing Identity in the Classroom: What Economics Can Learn from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education - American Economic Association](#)"**: Another Journal of Economic Perspectives article informs the curriculum, integrating methods proven to increase engagement among diverse students. Specifically, faculty have introduced best practices from STEM education into economics courses, helping students build a professional identity as economists.
- **"[All Flowers, No Weeds in Intermediate Microeconomics: Inclusive Teaching in the Hardest Core Class](#)"**: Faculty show that Intermediate Microeconomics can be used as a class to weed out students, though some of this could be due to less inclusive teaching styles. Faculty demonstrate that in addition to consistently adopting a growth mindset, academic economics should consider key strategies for teaching the course in an inclusive manner.
- **"Black Women in the Economics Profession"**: A faculty member led the charge of steering a conversation at the Allied Social Science Association national meetings on diversity and inclusion particularly as it pertained to Black women. The panel provided insight into the New York Times publication titled "It Was a Mistake for Me to Choose This Field - Black women are underrepresented in economics, which is bad for everyone."
- **"The Economy She Deserves: Building an Agenda for a Women-Centered Recovery"**: Faculty collaborated with Wellesley College and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership to host an international summit focused on addressing the current drivers of gender-based economic inequality. The summit aimed to articulate a robust agenda for creating an economy that prioritizes women's needs and aspirations. One

key component was a panel discussion examining the pandemic's impact on women's well-being and health, particularly in relation to their performance in the labor market.

Spelman's Economics faculty demonstrate a commitment to fostering diversity in the field through leadership roles and serving in key roles within national economic organizations dedicated to diversity, including:

- **National Economic Association (formerly the Caucus of Black Economists):** Faculty members have played active roles in the National Economic Association (NEA), a professional organization dedicated to advancing the careers of minorities within the field of economics. In addition to its founding mission, the NEA focuses on producing and sharing knowledge about economic issues critical to the growth and prosperity of African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, and other communities of color. Dr. Romie Tribble has served as NEA Secretary continuously from 2008 to 2024 and was honored with the Alfred L. Edwards Award for Outstanding Service to the NEA in January 2024. Dr. Miesha Williams has been a dedicated member of the NEA Board, serving from 2018 to 2024, while Dr. Angelino Viceisza has held positions as President-Elect, President, and Past President of the NEA from 2022 to 2025, also serving on the board from 2019 to 2022.
- **Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP):** Dr. Holmes is a board member (2021 – 2024), advocating for policies and programs that advance the careers of women economists.
- **AEA's Committee on the Status of LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Economics Profession (CSQIEP):** Dr. Viceisza mentors LGBTQ+ economists and leads initiatives to increase representation within the field.
- **Sadie Collective and PREDOC:** Faculty leadership extends to the Sadie Collective, which promotes African American women in economics, and PREDOC, where Dr. Holmes works to reduce barriers to doctoral careers for underrepresented minorities.
- **The Ph.D. Project Finance and Economics Doctoral Student Association:** This program links Finance and Economics minority doctoral students at institutions with Business Schools and mentors them through the doctoral programs as well as their early career stages. In addition a pipeline is fostered where minority undergraduate students can participate and learn more about doctoral programs. Dr. Williams works as a faculty participant and support in this organization.
- **AEA Mentoring Program:** Departmental faculty are also committed to mentoring minority students earning a Ph.D. in economics at various institutions during their matriculation to increase representation within the field.

Faculty involvement in these organizations reflects the department's commitment to leading diversity efforts beyond campus.

Promoting Diversity in Economic Scholarship

Spelman faculty members have led initiatives to empower minorities' scholarship. Initiatives include:

- **Freedom and Justice Conference (with NEA, ASHE and AERIP):** Spelman College was the host institution for the 2024 NEA-ASHE-AERIP Freedom and Justice Conference and chaired the plenary session. The conference was dedicated to the professional development of junior faculty or graduate students in economics and related fields. The conference addressed freedom and justice issues related to Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous populations.
- **[BAM!](#)** This is an NSF funded project which is implemented in the form of an intervention to support faculty as MSIs. The long-term goal of this project is to contribute to greater inclusion of faculty at MSIs in STEM. The program has reached 15 minority or women faculty members and out of seven submitted NSF proposals, three have been awarded a total of \$1,180,495.
- **The [Retirement and Disability Research Center | NBER](#) (RDRC):** Funded by the Social Security Administration, one of RDRC's goals (in collaboration with Spelman College) has been to boost research capacity on retirement and disability policy among faculty at HBCU's and MSI's as well as faculty from underrepresented groups. To date, more than 15 proposals have been funded from underrepresented groups.

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Spelman's Economics Department demonstrates sustained excellence in diversity and inclusion through measurable outcomes:

- **Student Success:** Since 1988, over 1,500 Spelman students have graduated with an economics major. Spelman consistently ranks among the top HBCUs for producing Black women with bachelor's degrees in economics.
- **Faculty Representation:** Six of seven faculty members in the department are minorities, with five being women. One faculty member is currently within a doctoral program.

- **Increased Pipeline to Graduate Programs:** Spelman graduates have successfully entered graduate programs or predoctoral programs at prestigious institutions like MIT, Columbia University, Yale, and Berkeley, positioning them as future leaders in economics.

PLANS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

While the Economics Department at Spelman College has experienced notable success, it is committed to enhancing its programs and policies and increasing collaboration. Recent innovations and future initiatives include:

- **Research Methods Course:** The department has recently introduced a research methods course for sophomore students aimed at preparing them for statistical analysis and fostering an "economic way of thinking" as they develop research questions. This course is designed to improve students' success in the culminating thesis class.
- **"Economics and Race in the United States" Course in partnership with Indiana University:** This elective course introduces not only the content of race but also the recognized interaction and intersection of race with gender and other pertinent socio-economic variables impacting the lived experiences of African-American women as future Spelman graduates and as viable graduate school candidates in Economics. This course will further demonstrate how economics can be applied to topics of students' interest.
- **Research on the Choices of Black Women in Pursuing an Economics Degree:** A faculty member is conducting research to understand the factors influencing Black women's decisions to enter and complete the economics major. This study aims to identify the intervention components that have the most significant impact and will inform the department's programs and practices.
- **Spelman College Center of Excellence for Minority Women in STEM:** This center houses support from the Department of Defense, the Department of Education, Google Inc., and National Science Foundation. As participants in the steering committee for this center, the economics department will be able to extend the availability of research opportunities for faculty and students. One of the main goals of the initiative is to promote a STEM and economics identity among students.

CONCLUSION

Spelman College's Economics Department is a model of diversity, inclusivity, and excellence within the economics profession. By actively engaging students, supporting faculty advancement, and leading national initiatives, the department has fostered an environment

where underrepresented groups thrive in economics. The department's continued success in increasing Black women's participation in economics, empowering minority faculty, and collaborating with national organizations reflects Spelman's unwavering commitment to diversity and inclusion.

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