

Gender Differences in the Choice of Major: The Importance of Female Role Models (Porter and Serra, 2020)

The lack of diversity in the economics profession, including women and people of color, has become a growing concern. Only 20% of economics majors in the U.S. are female, and the share of female graduate students and professors is even smaller. Aware of this issue, several economists are testing which interventions increase women's participation in economics.

One Sentence Summary

Inviting role models to a principles in economics class at SMU¹ increased the female student's engagement with the economics major. They find that this intervention increased the likelihood of female students to major in economics by 8% (from 9% to 17%).

Main Findings

The authors were interested in whether exposing female students to role models would motivate students to major in economics. They invited two female economics students at SMU to identify successful economics major alumni. Both students conducted several interviews and selected two exceptional and charismatic women to be the role models for an experiment. Although the two finalists were female, the students could have perfectly chosen a male role model.

In the experiment, the authors invited the role models to speak with the students at randomly assigned introductory economics classes (treated classes). Both role models visited each treatment class one time and gave a gender-neutral speech explaining how economics helped them on their successful careers. They classified the remaining introductory economics classes as the control classes.

After the role model visit, the percentage of women who majored in economics and the percentage of women who took subsequent economic courses increased. Porter and Serra (2020) estimate that 17% of female students in the treated class chose the economics major at SMU, compared to the 9% of female students in the control classes. Unfortunately, the role model intervention did not influence male students.

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Concluding Remarks

Pugatch and Schroeder (2020) at ASSA 21² showed that sending emails to introductory economics students with information about the economics major did not increase diversity in the economics major. A discussant at the panel suggested that more engagement with the students could prove effective. Indeed, inviting role models to inspire introduction to economic students and engaging with them can be a powerful low-cost nudge to increase women's participation in economics.

References

- Porter, C., Serra, D., 2020. Gender differences in the choice of major: The importance of female role models. Am. Econ. J. Appl. Econ. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20180426>
- Pugatch, T., Schroeder, E., 2020. Promoting Female Interest in Economics: Limits to Nudges. [IZA Working paper No. 13489](#).

² The panel [Increasing Diversity in Economics: From Students to Professors](#) is available on YouTube.