

Brief exposure to charismatic career women inspires female students to pursue same field

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Credit: Southern Methodist University

A low-budget field experiment to tackle the lack of women in the male-dominated field of economics has been surprisingly effective, says the

study's author, an economist at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

Top female college students were inspired to pursue a major in economics when exposed very briefly to charismatic, successful women in the field, according to SMU economist Danila Serra.

The results suggest that exposing young women to an inspiring female role model is successful as a result of the mix of both information and pure inspiration, Serra said.

"The specific women who came and talked to the students were key to the success of the intervention," she said. "It was a factor of how charismatic and enthusiastic they were about their careers and of how interesting their jobs looked to young women."

Given the simplicity and low-cost of the intervention, similar experiments could be easily conducted in other male-dominated or female-dominated fields of study to enhance gender diversity.

Serra's results showed that among female students exposed to the enthusiastic mentors there was a 12-percentage point increase in the percentage of female students enrolling in the upper-level Intermediate Microeconomics course the following year—a 100% increase, or doubling, for that demographic.

Not surprisingly, given that the intervention was targeted to female students, Serra found that the role model visits had no impact on male students.

But astonishingly it had the greatest impact on high-achieving female students.

"If we restrict the analysis to the top female students, the students with a

GPA of 3.7 or higher, the impact is remarkable—it is a 26 percentage points increase," Serra said. "So this intervention was especially impactful on the top female students who perhaps were not thinking about majoring in economics."

The results were very surprising to Serra, an assistant professor in the SMU Department of Economics in Dedman College who teaches the upper-level class Behavioral and Experimental Economics. Serra's research relies on laboratory and field experiments, a relatively new methodology in the field of economics. She launched and is co-leader of the Laboratory for Research in Experimental Economics at SMU.

"I didn't think such limited exposure would have such a large impact," Serra said. "So this is telling me that one of the reasons we see so few women in certain fields is that these fields have been male-dominated for so long. This implies that it is very difficult for a young woman to come into contact with a woman in the field who has an interesting job in the eyes of young women and is enthusiastic about her major and her work. Young men, on the other hand, have these interactions all the time because there are so many male economics majors out there."

Co-author on the research is Catherine Porter, associate professor of economics at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, and Serra's former Ph.D. classmate at the University of Oxford.

"The gender imbalance in economics has been in the news a lot lately, and much of the discussion has been very negative," said Porter. "This study offers something positive: a cheap way of improving the gender balance. The results can hopefully be used by other schools in order to redress the low numbers of women that major in economics - women have a lot to offer and should consider economics as a subject that is interesting and varied for a career."

Serra reported the findings, "Gender differences in the choice of major: The importance of female [role models](#)," on Jan. 6 in Philadelphia at the 2018 annual meeting of the Allied Social Sciences Association. Hers is one of many findings on gender and [gender differences](#) in economics presented at a session organized by the Committee for the Status of Women in the Economics Profession.

Inspiring the individual is the best tool to recruit and retain

Serra launched the study after SMU was one of 20 U.S. universities randomly chosen by Harvard economics professor Claudia Goldin for the Undergraduate Women in Economics Challenge. The project awarded each university a \$12,500 grant to develop a program freely chosen by the universities to test the effectiveness of a deliberate intervention strategy to recruit and retain female majors.

Nationally, there's only about one woman for every three men majoring in economics. SMU has a large number of economics majors for a school of its size, with 160 a year. The gender imbalance, however, is greater at SMU than the national average, with only one woman to every four men.

Serra developed her intervention based on her own experience as a Ph.D. student at the University of Oxford several years ago.

"I started thinking about role models from my personal experience," Serra said. "As a student, I had met many female professors in the past, but my own experience taught me that inspiration is not about meeting any female professor—it's about meeting that one person that has a huge charisma and who is highly inspiring and speaks to you specifically."

Serra said that's what she experienced as a graduate researcher when she first met Professor Abigail Barr, who later became her Ph.D. advisor.

"I know for a fact that that is why I decided to do a Ph.D. in economics, because I was greatly inspired by this person, her experiences and her research," she said. "So I thought it would be interesting to see whether the same could work for a general student population."

Two inspiring women role models, 15 minutes, four classrooms

Serra asked two of her department's top undergraduate female economics students to take the lead in choosing the role models.

The students, Tracy Nelson and Emily Towler, sorted through rosters of SMU economics alums and shortlisted 18 men and women that they thought were working in interesting fields - which purposely excluded stereotypical jobs in banking and finance - and then carried out scripted interviews with a subset of who agreed to be interviewed via Skype to get additional information about their career path and to assess their charisma.

The students ultimately found two alumnae, July Lutz and Courtney Thompson, to be the most inspiring. Julie Lutz, a 2008 graduate, started her career in management consulting but, shortly after, decided to completely change her career path by going to work for an international NGO in Nicaragua, and then as a director of operations at a toy company based in Honduras. Lutz now works in Operations at a fast-growing candy retail company. Courtney Thompson, class of 1991, has had a stellar career in marketing, becoming the senior director of North American Marketing and Information Technology at a large international communications company, with the unique claim of being not only a

female econ major at a time when that was exceedingly rare, but also African American in a white dominated field.

Serra invited each woman to speak during the Spring 2016 semester for 10 to 15 minutes to four Principals of Economics classes that she had randomly selected from a set of 10. The Principles classes are very popular, with about 700 students total from a variety of desired majors, and are typically gender balanced. The imbalance, said Serra, starts the following year with Intermediate Microeconomics, which is a requirement for upper-level economics courses and so is a good indicator of a desire to major in economics.

Serra offered each role model an honorarium for speaking, but each woman declined and indicated they were happy to be back on campus sharing with students. Serra told the speakers nothing of the purpose of the research project, but encouraged each one to explain to the class why they majored in economics and to be very engaging. She directed them to approach the students with the following question in mind: "If you had to convince a [student](#) to major in economics, what would you say?"

Thompson, Serra said, during her college days played SMU's costumed Peruna mascot, and today retains a "bubbly, big personality, that makes her extremely engaging." In her classroom visits, Thompson described her experience working and being extremely successful in marketing with an economics degree, while being surrounded by business majors. Lutz, being still in her 20s, was very easy for the young [women](#) in the classrooms to identify with, and her experience working in the non-profit and in developing countries may have been especially appealing to them.

Young women judge best who will inspire them

Serra believes that a key to the success of the intervention was the fact

her two female economics students actively participated in the selection of the role models.

"The most important thing about the project was that I realized I needed current female students to choose the role models," Serra said. "I'm not that young anymore, so I'm probably not the best person to recognize what is inspiring to [young women](#). I think young female students are in the best position to tell us what is most inspiring to them."

Serra is the inaugural recipient of the \$50,000 Vernon L. Smith Ascending Scholar Prize for her highly cited corruption research.

She uses lab experiments to study bribery, governance and accountability, questioning long-standing assumptions. Some of her findings are that corruption declines as perpetrators take into account social costs of their illegal activities, and as victims share information about specific bribery exchanges through online reporting. Serra's current research agenda also includes experimental work on gender differences in preferences, behaviors and outcomes.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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