NEA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, 1993:
WHY BLACK ECONOMISTS?

Cecilia A. Conrad

This article looks, with humor, at the role of black economists in academia and in the economics profession.

A few years ago Barnard was in the midst of its reaccreditation process. I was serving on Committee C so named because it followed committee’s A and B. The discussion turned to the recruitment of minority faculty. The dean of the faculty opened the discussion by reading a short paper that could have been titled “Three Reasons Why Barnard Shouldn’t Try to Recruit Minority Faculty.” He made three basic points: (1) Minority professors aren’t necessary as role models and mentors for minority students. White faculty, he argued, can be just as effective mentors. (2) Minority professors aren’t needed to teach courses related to minority issues. Most of the scholarship has been done by whites. (3) Minority professors are expensive. Because of their small supply, they are paid huge extravagant salaries.

Now as the token minority on the committee and, at that point, the token black on the ladder faculty, I couldn’t help but take this personally. (Was he trying to convey some message about my prospects for tenure?) At the conclusion of his speech, as you might guess, all eyes turned to me. In a masterful display of what writer Jill Nelson recently called the “thin line between Mau Mauing and Uncle Tomming,” I smiled and asked “which schools are paying these extravagant salaries, how much are they paying, and where do I apply?”

My dean’s speech was not a personal attack. It was an intellectual challenge. Despite my discomfort, I must admit he raised some good questions—questions that I will return to later to ask specifically about black economists. But before I do, there is another good reason to ask “Why Black Economists?” We, the National Economic Association, have
spent a great deal of energy thinking of strategies to increase the supply of black economists. Until now, we have faced a situation where departments and other employers are largely supportive of our efforts. Those days may be numbered.

Affirmative action is under attack. The job market for new Ph.D.'s in economics is tight. Recent research has questioned the costs of minority recruitment and its supposed benefits. I recently heard a paper that looked at black elementary and secondary teachers and reported they were of no benefit to black students and harmed whites. Could a paper about college and university professors be far behind?

With this in mind, I return now to ask two of the questions posed by my dean. (1) Are black economists needed as role models and mentors? (2) Are black economists needed to study black issues? Furthermore, what has been the contribution of black economists to the field of economics?

In a very informal survey, the most frequent answer to the question, “why black economists,” was “to serve as role models and mentors for black students.” Certainly, in my own career, I owe as much to mentoring by black economists as I do to anyone who served on my dissertation committee. However, this mentor/role model argument is somewhat circular.

**Question One: Why do we need more black economists?**
**Answer: To serve as role models and mentors for black students.**

**Question Two: Why do we need role models and mentors for black students?**
**Answer: To increase the supply of black economists.**

On an individual level, we’d like to encourage young people to consider all of their options. On a personal level, we’d all like to have more company. The bigger question, however, is whether black economists are a social good.

(I would be remiss as an economist if I failed to observe that there are personal costs of increasing the supply of black economists—namely the sacrifice of the extravagant salaries described by my dean.)

What about the need for black economists to teach courses about black issues? I would be the first to resist any attempt to restrict economists to the study of their own racial groups having begun my own career in industrial organization theory. The notion that only blacks can teach about