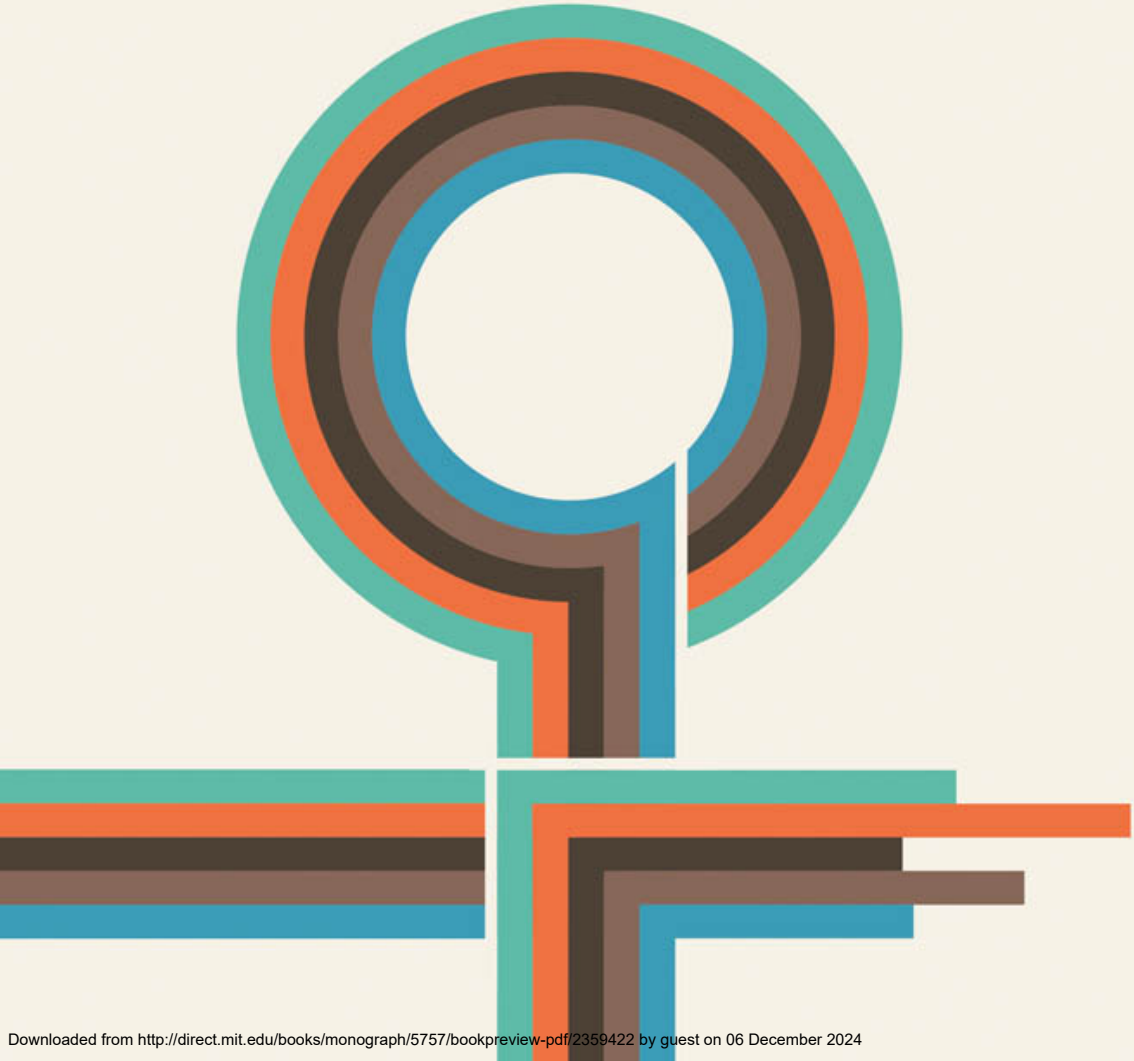
Disparate Measures

The Intersectional Economics of Women in STEM Work

Mary A. Armstrong
Susan L. Averett



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For
Angelika von Wahl
and
Albert L. Folks, Rebecca N. Folks, and Natalie R. Folks

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—Mary Armstrong

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Introduction: True Lies—The Narratives of STEM Diversity

> More or less severe manpower shortages are noted in most scientific and specialized fields. . . . However, women graduates provide a potential source of scientific talent that can be utilized more fully. . . . The greater use of women will be urged.
> —"The First Annual Report of the National Science Foundation, 1950–51" (National Science Foundation 1951), 18–19

In the twenty-first century in the United States, the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce is dominated by white men. Gender disparities in STEM have been demonstrated and acknowledged to the point of truism, and they have been analyzed and criticized from just about every possible disciplinary and institutional vantage point. Federally funded programs have taken aim at them. Higher education efforts are sharply focused on changing them. Nonprofit organizations push back against them. Businesses loudly bemoan them. Millions of dollars from many different sources have been invested in understanding and undoing them. And just about every actor and organization trying to transform the US STEM workplace can attest to the difficulty of changing them.

Disparate Measures is very much a part of these efforts. But while we agree that US STEM fields are dominated by white men, our goal is not to further corroborate the now obvious lack of diversity in STEM fields. Rather, our interests lie in innovatively examining the economic promises of STEM and the viability of those promises, particularly for women from historically (and currently) disadvantaged populations. Decades of intensive inclusivity work have made a more diverse US STEM workforce a national goal and transformed STEM careers into particularly desirable and sought-after occupations. Seen as part economic driver and part social remedy, STEM

jobs are commonly understood to benefit everyone, especially women and particularly women from underrepresented groups. The public discourses of STEM promise a great deal. But what do diverse women actually find when they work in STEM occupations? What do STEM jobs really deliver—and for whom? Those questions are at the heart of this book.

Our detailed look at these questions shows that the promises of STEM are partly true but also partly false. Often touted as a panacea for stalled social mobility, STEM work is less a cure than a selective analgesic, less a solution than a formula for partial relief. This book demonstrates that when compared to women not working in STEM, women working in STEM are indeed economically elevated by their occupations—yet when compared to white men in the same STEM occupations, women's second-class status is usually reaffirmed. The STEM work realities of many women are characterized by lower overall wages, sizable wage gaps, and lower-paying, lower-status STEM jobs. Yes, doing STEM work pays well for women, including women from historically disadvantaged groups, but not nearly as well as it pays for white men.

These patterns mean STEM work is not just a solution. It is also a problem. *Disparate Measures* grapples with this problem by exploring the constricted economic benefits experienced by diverse women working in STEM. In addition, rather than simply pointing to the occupational and earnings data associated with standard diverse groups, we place our work within two theoretical frameworks that are necessary for understanding and intervening in these patterns. The first is *intersectionality*. Intersectionality holds that social identity categories are always partly constituted and shaped by intersections with other identity categories and by dynamics that are determined in the context of local power relations. The second framework is *critical data studies*, an approach that acknowledges that self-evident identity categories are in fact generated via historical processes and that data about these categories are products of social actions, not reflections of objective truth. Acknowledging that identity categories are inherently intersectional in their meanings and neither self-evident nor naturally countable complicates the use of quantitative data. But embracing that complication opens up new pathways for action and ultimately provides insights that better reflect women's STEM realities and experiences.

As we interrogate the entrenched belief that a diverse STEM workforce will bring about economic abundance for the women who participate in it,

we also engage with the vexing questions associated with trying to measure the fortunes of diverse groups. Who do we (the usually invisible analyzers of data) automatically name when we speak of underrepresented women in STEM? When we say we want to open up STEM work for everyone, who has been left out? And how do we analyze occupational and earnings data on historically evolving, intersecting identities in order to consider the data associated with diverse groups in a more capacious way? These challenges around inclusivity, social identities, and quantitative data have long lain submerged beneath the many other challenges of STEM inclusivity work. *Disparate Measures* brings them to the surface.

In this introduction, we contextualize the familiar goal of diversifying the US STEM workforce by unpacking the ways in which fostering broader STEM field participation is driven by intertwined national-level narratives about combating social stratification and strengthening the US economy. We illuminate how these cultural narratives work together to naturalize the cultural script that STEM careers are a form of individual opportunity that will effectively promote the US economy while automatically advancing women from historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women of color. We further situate our work within STEM inclusivity research, clarifying why we focus on diverse women working in the wider US STEM labor force (and not on the more familiar areas of STEM education and academic STEM jobs).

In chapter 1, we introduce the concept of *intersectional economic analysis* and discuss the challenges of engaging with quantitative economic data as both intersectional and nonobjective. We offer a model that works to engage realistically with the complexities of data based on various salient social identity categories, arguing that data on diverse women in STEM is most valuable when we first (1) understand the factors that have historically (re)formed any given identity category and shaped the resultant data and (2) recognize the specific labor-force issues associated with that group. Carefully attending to the ways data are shaped by both identity-category histories and group-specific workforce factors is crucial for creating a multidimensional and meaningful economic picture of the diverse STEM workforce.

In chapter 2, we describe our data choices and offer a reality check on women in the US STEM labor force. We explore how STEM work stacks up against non-STEM work in the US and examine how women (as a generic group) fit into the larger STEM economy. In what STEM occupational areas

do women tend to work? What are women's STEM earnings overall? This broadly contextualizing overview compares women and men in STEM and also introduces the concept of STEM-related jobs. Throughout *Disparate Measures*, we make important distinctions between conventional STEM work and STEM-related work, with the latter indicating jobs that are not always classified as STEM but that involve science and technology expertise. These jobs, which are strongly associated with the health professions and occupied mostly by women, are an important but often overlooked part of the larger US STEM economy. Chapter 2 provides a robust gender-centered context for our closer examinations of various groups of women working in STEM fields.

These closer examinations are spread across the eight intersectional case studies that make up chapters 3 through 10. Together, these chapters comprise the core of *Disparate Measures*. Each focuses on an intersectional group of women and addresses how the identity category in question has historically shifted and consequently shaped category-related data. They also examine how that group has been situated within the US labor force and (when possible) the US STEM workforce, as well as what forms of bias and workforce challenges have been associated with each group. For every intersection we examine, we provide data on participation patterns and annual earnings for conventional STEM and also STEM-related work. Every case study pushes intersectional work further by identifying additional salient intersections and examining them in the context of both STEM and STEM-related jobs. Each case study concludes with highlights of our findings for that group of women.

Our case studies intentionally emphasize and prioritize race and ethnicity, working to expand on the standard women-of-color aggregate approach whenever possible. We address the category histories, labor-force contexts, and STEM workforce participation and earnings of Black women, Native American and Alaska Native women, Asian and Pacific Islander women, and Hispanic/Latina women. Four more case studies illuminate and explore often neglected identities that are (to different degrees) still emergent within the STEM inclusivity literature—foreign-born women, women with disabilities, lesbian/bisexual/trans women and gender-nonbinary people, and mothers.

Finally, chapter 11 offers a wide-ranging discussion of our significant findings. This chapter outlines seven big-picture recommendations that suggest ways we might begin to reorient ourselves conceptually relative to

promoting equity for a diverse STEM workforce. Emerging from our data-driven, intersectional economic analyses, these recommendations focus on how we can better recognize current STEM equity issues and rethink the patterns of economic disadvantage faced by many women in STEM jobs.

True Lies: The Narratives of US STEM Diversity

For several decades, the subject of broadening STEM field participation has merged with national conversations about the economy until STEM diversity has come to be seen as critical to driving STEM innovation and US economic competitiveness and to advancing the economic fortunes of women and historically underrepresented groups. These entwined connections have become largely axiomatic: a more diverse STEM workforce is understood to be a (perhaps *the*) lever that will foster STEM innovation, boost US global competitiveness, and serve economic justice by positively impacting historically underserved individuals and communities.

But these ostensibly self-evident connections between the US STEM economy and the increased well-being of historically underrepresented groups are in need of rigorous critical analysis. In order to understand the seemingly obvious mutually beneficial connections among STEM fields, the economy, and underrepresented groups, we must look more closely at the particular assumptions underpinning these familiar cultural claims—and ask what it means for underrepresented groups when such assumptions become economic and social truths.

We have identified three widely held, closely interwoven suppositions that structure this national logic of mutual benefit—that is, that a diverse STEM workforce will elevate both STEM excellence and the economy while also advancing the fortunes of the diverse workers involved:

1. *STEM jobs promote new and powerful economic opportunities for women and underrepresented groups*. This claim suggests that broadening the participation of women and historically disadvantaged groups in STEM occupations will increase their economic opportunities and social mobility. It is assumed that such participation will have positive, widespread, and sustainable group-level effects;
2. *Diversity in STEM fields supports STEM excellence and the US economy*. This claim reflects concerns that the US is falling behind in terms of STEM

excellence and a belief that STEM diversity will support innovation in STEM and long-term US global competitiveness. It is tacitly understood that US dominance in global capitalism via STEM is a desirable, shared goal.

3. *There is a looming STEM workforce crisis that the US must forestall or address*. This claim points to a burgeoning economic catastrophe that will be brought about by a lack of qualified US workers for a growing number of STEM jobs. Increasing the participation of women and other groups will ensure that the US does not run out of the scientists and engineers needed to buttress the STEM workforce specifically and the US economy generally.

These narratives circulate through shared national narratives about how to promote both social justice and economic opportunity for specific groups, and they shape our understanding of how to increase educational and workforce diversity and decrease social stratification. STEM diversity now forms a complex bridge between concerns about economic opportunity for women (especially women from underrepresented groups) and concerns about US competitiveness. Yet the actual experiences and relative earnings of women from historically underrepresented groups working in US STEM jobs remain a persistent blind spot in the circulation of these interconnected assumptions and ideas. Sustained attentiveness to intersectional issues is critical for seeing past this blind spot.

STEM = Social Change: New Economic Opportunities for Diverse Women

Taking a closer look at the three core national narratives about STEM diversity can help clarify some of the issues that arise when we uncritically link the power of STEM work both to social mobility and economic opportunity for (underrepresented) women and to a robust, competitive US economy. In terms of the role played by STEM fields in *promoting economic opportunity for women and underrepresented groups*, we can look to the surge in efforts by nonprofit organizations focused on connecting girls and younger women to STEM as one example. Such efforts reflect (among other concerns) a growing sense of urgency around linking young women to the economic opportunities that STEM fields are understood to represent. Well-established and widely respected organizations such as the Girls Scouts of the United States of America have pivoted strongly toward STEM and now focus substantively

on promoting STEM skills and careers. In 2017, the Girl Scouts made a pledge to lead 2.5 million girls into the STEM pipeline (shorthand for educational tracks that often lead to STEM work) by 2025 (Girl Scouts of the United States of America 2017). The organization Girls Who Code focuses on the tech sector, a key opportunity area in terms of both job availability and salaries. In the words of founder and CEO Reshma Saujani, Girls Who Code was started "with the belief that computing skills are a critical path to security and prosperity in today's job market. That access to a computer science education could bring women into a thriving innovation economy and give families a real shot at the middle class" (Saujani 2017). Black Girls CODE, a tech initiative focused on girls and youth of color founded by Kimberly Bryant in 2011, highlights the beneficial connections between tech jobs, economic mobility, and social justice: "Together, we are creating stronger economies and more equitable societies" (Black Girls CODE 2021). When it comes to STEM work, strong economies and just societies are understood to go hand in hand.

Fostering economic justice and opportunities for the women of tomorrow is the driving force behind many organizations that work to prepare girls for higher-paying STEM occupations. These organizations have sophisticated, complex missions focused on multiple, highly laudable goals for girls and other underserved groups. Efforts at connecting girls to STEM pathways are also aimed at increasing self-efficacy and confidence and at providing critical opportunities to fulfill intellectual potential and develop leadership. Organizations such as Black Girls CODE make positive differences in structurally disadvantaged communities in the US, and they deserve both high praise and practical support for their work.

Our point here, however, is that these groups are premised on leveraging STEM careers to create new forms of economic advantage. Access to STEM work is identified as a uniquely powerful way to shift persistent patterns of disadvantage for women and girls, especially those who belong to historically underrepresented and underserved populations. Social mobility and social justice are seen as fundamentally linked, and STEM careers are widely accepted as one of the best bridges between the two.

But an awkward question remains to be addressed: when diverse women cross the bridge into STEM careers, what do they find on the other side? We argue that they find the "true lies" of STEM. While these women generally earn more than other working women like them earn, they are also likely to

earn less than white men. STEM careers are indeed a road to better wages—but they are also a road to well-disguised wage inequality, depending on the comparison. And while gender pay gaps are a familiar part of generic discussions about the US workforce overall, there is a notable absence of national conversations about pay gaps in STEM fields. Instead, pay differences in STEM remain masked by the utopian economic promises now culturally attached to STEM work.

STEM Excellence and the US Economy Depend on a Diverse STEM Workforce

In terms of *diversity in STEM fields supporting STEM excellence and the US economy*, one of the most powerful illustrations we can provide is the National Science Foundation's (NSF) steadily increasing investment in STEM diversity. For decades, the NSF has invested millions of dollars in broadening participation in the US STEM workforce and has justified these expenditures by connecting STEM diversity to STEM excellence and hence to a stronger US economy. The NSF ADVANCE program, which focuses on promoting equity and inclusivity for women (particularly women from underrepresented groups) in academic STEM careers, has been a leader in this effort, awarding over $350 million to more than two hundred US institutions of higher education between 2001 and 2020 (National Science Foundation 2021). In recent years, NSF has increased its focus on historically Black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions as well. A NSF program called INCLUDES (Inclusion across the Nation of Communities of Learners of Underrepresented Discoverers in Engineering and Science) illustrates how diversity in STEM and excellence in STEM are fundamentally linked together and welded to a vision of a stronger US economy. INCLUDES is

> a comprehensive national initiative to enhance U.S. leadership in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) discoveries and innovations focused on NSF's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and broadening participation in these fields. . . . Significant advancement in the inclusion of underrepresented groups in STEM will result in a new generation of STEM talent and leadership to secure our nation's future and long-term economic competitiveness. (National Science Foundation 2020)

Nothing less than "our nation's future and long-term economic competitiveness" depends on STEM diversity. The stakes are high, and the links

among increased STEM diversity, STEM excellence, and US global competitiveness are now matters of significant taxpayer investment.

The NSF's interest in STEM diversity has been accompanied by similar interest from the private sector. The logics of social mobility and potential economic opportunity through STEM are often intertwined with the logics of competitive capitalism and good business. Unsurprisingly, it is easy to find partnerships between corporations and STEM-focused social justice and economic opportunity initiatives. Through these partnerships, nonprofit organizations receive the resources they need to run outstanding programs for underserved individuals. Simultaneously, corporate entities offer their participation as both evidence of the company's values (equity) and sharp business practices (profit). "Doing good" (supporting social and economic opportunity via STEM and other diversity initiatives) and "doing well" (increasing corporate competitiveness and profits) orchestrate easily within this model. The language of ethical and social responsibility around STEM diversity dovetails smoothly with private-sector and corporate interests in higher profits in the modern (information and global) economy.

One example of this dynamic is AT&T, a corporation that works closely with Girls Who Code and contributes over $1 million annually to that organization (Girls Who Code 2020). The company also supports STEM initiatives associated with the Girl Scouts and Black Girls CODE (AT&T 2021a). In the context of these substantial commitments, the company's 2020 diversity, equity, and inclusion webpage banner statement offers a mix of the values and business equation that rationalize such partnerships:

> At AT&T, inclusion is how we unleash the power of diversity, and equity leads to equality for all. We strive each day to foster a sense of belonging and empowerment in our workplace, create relevant marketing for our customers, listen before engaging in our communities and work as a team alongside our diverse suppliers. We innovate with the community in mind and focus our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion practices on five pillars: our employees, our communities, our customers, our content and our suppliers. (AT&T 2021b)

AT&T is committed to diversity and inclusion in principle ("equality for all," "sense of belonging for all") but makes clear that commitment is also good business ("create relevant marketing," "work as a team alongside diverse suppliers") and a way to "unleash power." Michael Dell, CEO of Dell Technologies, offers a succinct version of this ethics plus business logic: "I

have always believed diversity is power. It is how we win, and win the right way" (Dell Technologies 2021).

Such statements are notable for their ordinariness, not their rarity. Businesses typically have public diversity statements that describe inclusion as supporting humane values and improving competitiveness via more effective marketing, better customer relations, and improved products. Pairing the goal of increased profit with the innovation generated by diverse teams is now a common practice, and there is nothing technically incorrect about the juxtaposition. There is no evidence to indicate that the individual benefits of opportunity are canceled out if they are publicly touted as driving profit. And inclusivity is indeed "good business": many studies report that diverse teams drive better financial outcomes (Eswaran 2019; Hunt et al. 2018; Sheppard 2018).

However, while businesses often promote diversity—including and perhaps especially STEM diversity—as a way to boost profits, such a pairing is rarely examined with any care. The seamless connection between fostering opportunities for underrepresented individuals and increasing corporate profits has become an unreflective one, with the latter simply justifying the former. The equation is now so normative it is simply proffered as an obvious win-win: doing the ethical thing (creating an equitable workplace) just happens to be doing the lucrative thing (maximizing the talent pool to amplify both performance and profit). Yet this approach has not always been the ground zero of STEM diversity efforts. As Lorenzo Baber (2015) points out, in the 1980s and 1990s, early narratives around STEM equity strongly echoed the discourses of the civil rights movement and were primarily focused on systemic prejudice and (non)meritocracy. And while those issues remain central to many scholars and practitioners today, arguments based on the principles of equity and access are now often overshadowed by profit-based arguments aimed at "strengthening the U.S. advantage in science and technology in the face of growing global competitiveness" (Baber 2015, 252).

Embedded in the now seemingly self-evident linkage of STEM diversity with stronger profits and products, the value of diversity in STEM has become welded to economic competitiveness in general, any company's bottom line specifically, or both. But this automatic equivalency deserves more thoughtful consideration. In the most obvious sense, some of these pairings might simply give us pause. BP's chief scientist Angela Strank's

outspoken support for STEM diversity (in *Forbes* magazine) in order to ensure the future of Big Oil is less appealing when we consider the impact of fossil fuels on the climate emergency and the level of harm climate change will have—ironically enough—on women worldwide, especially in the Global South (Nagel 2015; Sharma 2018). And we are likely to recoil when the head of global commercial development for pharmaceutical giant Mylan—now infamous for ballooning the price of the broadly needed and historically affordable EpiPen—notes the importance of involving women in STEM so the company can reach its "bold mission: to provide the world's 7 billion people access to high quality medicine" (Gulfo 2017).

But problems with the linkage between STEM diversity and profits go beyond these disturbing examples. When arguments for STEM diversity shift away from an understanding of equity and access as values sufficient unto themselves and toward corporate profits, support for broader participation becomes vulnerable to any organization's sinking economic fortunes. In a worst-case scenario, the failure to innovate or compete successfully once parity across diverse groups has been reached might be understood to show that diversity does not automatically result in business success and therefore is not worth the effort. Far more perniciously, when the argument that diversity equals innovation and profit is made uncritically, the (normalized) structural inequalities that have created and sustained a lack of diversity—historical and systemic forms of disadvantage, explicit and implicit bias, patterns of microaggressive behavior, forms of unrecognized and unearned privilege—remain unacknowledged within a feel-good story that connects social mobility for historically disadvantaged groups with increased business success.

This approach leaves the underpinnings of systemic inequity and discrimination—racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia—intact. And with that infrastructure unexamined and in place, historically privileged groups remain privileged and historically underrepresented groups remain embedded in forces that have been (and will continue to be) unaddressed. Diverse workers may be good for business, but history shows that business has not necessarily been good for them—and our national conversations about STEM opportunities reflect little awareness of that latter fact (Acker 2006). Yes, diversity is power. But for whom? And to whose advantage?

Our point here is not that there are often startling contradictions between stated corporate values and actual effects (a point that would

hardly be new). And equity-driven, nonprofit initiatives are neither naïve nor helpless in the context of corporate support. In 2017, for example, Black Girls CODE declined over $125,000 from Uber, with founder Kimberly Bryant citing Uber's intersectional "issues with gender" as well as "certain inequitable practices with people of color" (Connley 2017). But we do want to suggest that it is time to reconsider promoting a diverse STEM workforce primarily through arguments about national economic competitiveness and increased corporate profit and to imagine reframing the advantages of STEM diversity more humanely and capaciously (McGee and Robinson 2019).

STEM Diversity and the STEM Shortage

Finally, it also is instructive to examine what might be the longest-lived and most persistent way we commonly link STEM diversity with the US economy, and that is the claim that there is a looming STEM workforce crisis that the US must forestall or stop. Any person who is even minimally attentive to US cultural conversations around science and technology is likely to recognize the narrative of impending disaster that interminably circulates around the US STEM workforce. We have long been panicking about the shortage of trained US STEM professionals and the economic losses that will result from that shortage. Indeed, the twenty-first century began with both the National Science and Technology Council and the National Science Board issuing reports calling for increased vigilance around educational innovation in STEM and STEM-related employment needs (National Science and Technology Council 2000; National Science Board 2003). Many more studies followed, focusing on likely STEM worker scarcity and a shortage of trained STEM talent in the US, with alarming reports from the National Academy of Sciences (2007, 2010) (*Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* and *Rising above the Gathering Storm, Revisited: Rapidly Approaching Category 5*) having particular impact. Under the Obama administration, a report from the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (2012) estimated a future deficit of trained STEM professionals, positing an almost inevitable (national and economic) crisis. A report from the New American Economy Research Fund (2017) (a bipartisan group seeking immigration reform) warned of a "persistent and dramatic shortage of

STEM workers." In 2021, the US Department of Defense (2021, 102) cited the "national STEM shortage" as a looming crisis for military readiness and national security. All told, the twenty-first-century story of US STEM occupations is anxiety-ridden and powerfully fixated on an impending shortage of STEM workers.

But despite its dominance, that narrative is also hotly contested. An active counterargument seeks to complicate what has become the self-evident problem of a lack of US STEM workers. Robert N. Charette points out why it is so difficult to make claims around a STEM job deficit or surplus, noting that the National Science Foundation and the Department of Commerce define STEM jobs differently and thus reach different conclusions about the size of the STEM workforce and associated future needs (Charette 2013). Taking Charette's work further, Yi Xue and Richard C. Larson demonstrate the heterogeneity of the STEM labor market and show how the answer to "surplus or shortage?" can vary across occupational domains (such as academia and industry) as well as across specific types of STEM occupations (Xue and Larson 2015). These studies illustrate why it is difficult to be certain what the truth is—or, put another way, why it is relatively easy to calculate future STEM jobs as both a deficit *and* a surplus.

The STEM (non)crisis is a powerful example of how definitions and choices around a seemingly constant variable (STEM) can drive diametrically opposed findings. The simple question "What counts as a STEM field?" throws open the issue of a national STEM shortage, rocking the foundation on which many STEM diversity arguments (and other arguments, from educational pipeline funding to immigration reform) are built. In addition, the question of STEM job deficit and job surplus is also significant because arguments for broadening participation in STEM have come to depend on the threat of a STEM workforce deficit. The narrative that there is a dire need for skilled workers to support the US economy and fill STEM jobs and that plenty of untapped talent resides in US populations of women and underrepresented groups plays an enormous role in justifying educational and corporate diversity initiatives, providing validation, momentum, and support for efforts focused on promoting social mobility through STEM access. In short, when it comes to STEM diversity, narratives promoting the value of STEM diversity now at least partially rely on the threat of a STEM workforce deficit. Much depends on a dire need that only missing US populations can fill. But we must consider what we gain—and what

we risk—when a core rationale for investing in STEM diversity relies on an entirely debatable economic crisis.

Our argument here is a call to be more carefully cognizant of the connections we make and their consequences when we predicate STEM diversity on the STEM shortage. If calls for STEM diversity depend heavily on a STEM crisis, then they are (like calls for diversity because it supports US innovation and corporate profit) subject to revocation in the very terms on which they rest. In 2014, Michael Teitelbaum's wide-ranging *Falling Behind? Boom, Bust, and the Global Race for Scientific Talent* traced nearly a century of episodic US STEM workforce emergencies, arguing that the ongoing sequence of STEM crises has been and continues to be the cyclical product of interest-group politics, faulty data collection, and misaligned understandings. Teitelbaum's argument posits that there is not (and probably never has been) a US STEM crisis, only new versions of the same national debate (Teitelbaum 2014).

For our purposes here, the central interest is not the back-and-forth of the crisis/no crisis debate but the importance of recognizing that once we are locked into the specific terms of a crisis debate, the stakes become exceptionally high for those who rely on the STEM shortage to justify interest and investments in increasing access to STEM fields. If the STEM crisis debate is a matter of how we produce data and define STEM, what happens to efforts to promote the participation of women and underrepresented groups when those data and definitions change? Like the premise that diversity is good for business, the STEM shortage argument places STEM diversity initiatives on surprisingly shaky and easily eroded ground.

Behind the STEM Curtain

The US STEM workforce stands at the center of a complex crossroads of national conversations and debates about the importance of diversity, innovation, and excellence in science and technology and about US economic and corporate competitiveness. To talk about diversity in STEM is to talk about many large and important things at once—possible economic opportunities for historically underserved groups, innovation and the discovery of new knowledge, increased corporate profits, US workforce capacity, a stronger (or weaker) US economy, and the shape of modern global capitalism.

Weaving together the various tangled strands of current thinking about STEM diversity is the idea of the future. The many narratives of STEM diversity are all oriented toward the idea of progress, and they are therefore necessarily forward-looking. Resources are focused on the potential economic elevation of women and historically (currently) disadvantaged groups, the future competitiveness of the US economy, and the forestalling of the always just-around-the-corner shortage of STEM workers. Ideas about STEM diversity in the twenty-first-century US also have a powerful relationship to temporality because of the belief that something called *diversity* will make things (markets, cultures, societies) better tomorrow. This is partly because the idea of progress (however defined) is inherently optimistic and always about making the future different from—and better than—both yesterday and today.

But this eternally forward-focused approach signals other factors, as well. First, it reminds us that the actual diversification of US STEM occupations has slowed and, in some cases, badly stalled (Fry, Kennedy, and Funk 2021). As the epigraph to this introduction suggests, years of effort have turned into more than half a century of frustration. The diversification of the STEM workforce has progressed in some areas but flattened for women and people of color in many high-paying and in-demand areas of STEM work (Kennedy, Fry, and Funk 2021). These failures partially explain why narratives of STEM diversity are stuck in the future tense.

Second, this fixation on the future distracts from the critical issues faced by diverse women who are in the STEM workforce *right now*. One useful way to conceptualize this blind spot in STEM diversity work is to consider the classic (and flawed) STEM education metaphor of the leaky pipeline. This familiar image invites us to imagine women and disadvantaged groups moving along educational pathways toward a successful STEM-oriented future—if we can only find ways to keep them in the groove over time. Over the past few years, the image of the pipeline has been critiqued for its failure to interrogate the pipe itself and, for example, the many ways that STEM teaching and learning are problematic and embedded in white supremacist, colonialist, and misogynistic concepts and practices (Cannady, Greenwald, and Harris 2014; Lord et al. 2019). STEM education has been revealed to be a decidedly nonneutral process.

In many ways, our critique of STEM diversity narratives parallels these critiques of the educational pipeline image. The current discourses that

hold up STEM careers as a panacea for everything from social stratification to a shaky US STEM economy simultaneously mask significant questions about the nature of the STEM workforce itself: Who does which kinds of STEM work? How much do they earn in comparison to dominant groups? What specific forms of systemic disadvantage await different kinds of people working in the STEM labor force?

We are in agreement with the claim that "more research is needed on scientific careers outside of academia" and recognize that, like the mythical STEM education pipeline, the STEM workforce is not a neutral entity (Fox, Whittington, and Linkova 2017, 707). The occupational patterns and earnings of diverse women working in STEM tell us something important about STEM inclusivity because they illuminate what happens *after* people arrive in the STEM workplace. There are many loud national discussions about broadening participation in STEM, but little is said about the economic experiences of those who surmount the obstacles and finally come to work full-time in these jobs. What happens after the STEM dream comes true? As we close this chapter and move to a deeper discussion of identity categories and the challenges of intersectional data, we begin to foreground the economic realities of the diverse women working in STEM through whom these many narratives circulate.

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