

Guidance for a Constructive Culture of Exchange in MIT Economics Seminars

Research seminars are one of the highlights of our department's academic life. They provide opportunities for participants to learn about and probe the boundaries of new research, for presenters to gain the benefit of constructive feedback, and for students to develop skills as participants in research discussions. All of these are best achieved when the seminar environment is respectful and inclusive, and when all participants keep these goals in mind.

Building on recent discussions at the AEA meetings and elsewhere on the culture of seminars in our profession, and informed by a number of conversations with our faculty and students, this memo shares some guidance for "best practices" to help ensure that department seminars promote an open and vibrant exchange of ideas within a positive environment for both presenters and participants.

- 1) Allow presenters time at the beginning to frame their talk without interruption.** A "10 minute rule" has been successfully implemented in several field seminars, allowing only brief clarifying questions during this initial period. And as that leaves 70 more minutes, please don't feel you must get all your questions in at minute 11!
- 2) Share the floor.** Please remember seminar time is a scarce resource. If you haven't had a chance to read the paper, please try to determine whether the paper addresses your question before you ask it. If you have already asked several questions, you might consider allowing a bit of time and space to see if others wish to contribute. And please listen carefully to the questions others ask--don't become the person who obliviously repeats the question asked 10 minutes earlier!
- 3) Raise your hand to indicate that you wish to ask a question or contribute to the discussion.** This gives the presenter agency to mediate the discussion by calling on audience members, and avoids interrupting the presenter mid-thought, a courtesy that may be especially appreciated in job talks. If the presenter doesn't see someone's hand, the organizer can help by pointing that out. A question or comment often leads naturally to some back and forth exchange with the speaker. But if you continue to be dissatisfied with a response, please don't hold the talk hostage. Instead, allow the presenter to move on, and follow up offline. Please make *every* effort not to interrupt or talk over the presenter or another participant.
- 4) Avoid sidebar conversations with other participants.** Keep whispers to no more than a short (clarifying) question or response. Anything more should be deferred or asked publicly; please raise your hand and share your question or concern for the benefit of all. Even quiet sidebar conversations between participants rarely are as unobtrusive as intended, and distract the speaker and others in the audience.

- 5) **Strive for fair and equal treatment.** Many studies suggest that women are likely to be interrupted more often than are men in settings like this. The same may be true for softer-spoken participants regardless of gender. Resist contributing to that disparity!

- 6) **Organizers:** Please be prepared to intervene in real time if necessary to call attention to someone whose raised hand has been overlooked, to return the floor to the presenter, or to remind participants of our norms of courtesy and respect.