

External Review Report

Economics Department, Sonoma State University

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On November 14, 2013, I visited the Sonoma State University Economics Department to conduct a regular 6-year external evaluation of the program. Before the visit I read the department's 2006 self-study, their revised "green-sheet", and information from the University web site. While there, I met with the faculty members both individually and as a group, a group of students, the Dean and the Provost.

1. Program Summary

In my opinion, the department is doing an excellent job overall. It has a strong reputation in the School of Business and Economics and University. The Dean and Provost noted its rigorous program, research agenda, and the department's leadership on campus. It is providing a solid quality, traditional undergraduate education to its students; it is congenial. The department is blending quantitative skills to provide an applied approach to theory in most of its upper-division courses, which is essential for student preparedness in the workplace. The faculty has maintained its focus on teaching and research. It is providing training that fits the student body.

As an external evaluator I will concentrate on issues where I have suggestions, or on areas where problems may develop in the future.

2. Student-Faculty Interaction

In my conversations with students, they were very pleased with the preparedness of their professors within the department, their approachability, and an atmosphere which encourages student in-class participation. Students also commented that they obtain practical skills in their upper-division classes using either computer applications such as *Excel* or *STATA*, improving their value in the job market following graduation. Students were also impressed with the School of Business and Economics' career office that connects students with internships and jobs.

The faculty attracts students from the introductory economics courses. One effective method that the department employs is to send an email to students that earn a B+ or better on the first exam inviting them to become economics majors. Students commented that they liked

the “personal touch” and felt they were being invited to join economics rather than opting-in to the major.

The department has an Economics Club fostering a community within the department. A few faculty invite students to play football with them Friday afternoons. However, students mentioned they would like more social gatherings with faculty at least once per semester. For example, a welcome back party, holiday party or a graduation party.

While students are assigned an advisor in the department, there is no form of mandatory advising which means that often students do not get academic advising. Indeed, Provost Rogerson mentioned the move towards mandatory advising across campus to increase graduation and retention rates. The department could be pro-active and institute such a program by simply placing a registration or administrative hold on a student, which could be released by an advisor. At a minimum, advising should take place once per year and ideally once every semester.

3. Age and Gender Structure of the Department

The department is small, young, energetic, and dynamic. Because of its size, it is difficult to maintain an ideal age structure. Currently, department members are at similar stages in their career. As the department ages, it is important to maintain and expand the research focus that keeps mature professors current, and to maintain student contact, which is vital to the success of the department.

In addition to the age structure there is a gender imbalance: the department has only one female faculty member out of six. Students noted that the female-male student ratio in the economics department is well below the ratio for the University. Gender balance among faculty could help attract/retain women to/in the program since female faculty act as role models and mentors for female students. How to maintain gender/age balance is an issue that the department and the School should keep in mind.

4. Breadth of Course Offerings

In my opinion, the department’s largest challenge is the lack of breadth in course offerings. Understandably, the department devotes many of its resources to teaching core courses and does not have enough faculty members to offer breadth in upper division elective courses. The department also provides significant faculty resources in Sonoma State’s MBA program. While the inclusion of economics in the MBA program should be applauded, it also contributes to the deficit in upper-division electives since it draws faculty away from teaching courses intended for economics majors.

My conversations with students also indicated that they were dissatisfied with the number and predictability of upper-division course offerings. Many students felt that they had to immediately take a course that was offered because there was no guarantee that the course would be offered again. This limits their choices and impacts their schedule. For example, the advanced macroeconomic theory and the advanced microeconomics classes have not been offered for some time now. Besides advertising the regularity of courses so students can plan their academic schedule, the department can inform students about the availability of classes if there is mandatory advising. Further, an additional tenure track position to replace Dr. Susan Hayes would help alleviate this problem.

During my interviews with faculty, all but one mentioned that they would like to fill the open tenure-track line with an economist in the field of public, labor, or health economics. Contingent faculty (lecturers) are a cost-effective way to increase the breadth of course offerings so long as they are *experts* in the subject matter and can teach effectively. Besides the lower cost of contingent faculty, they would add breadth and help network the department for student internships and jobs in the area. Additionally, they would add breadth to the department with, and possibly lead to more research opportunities for the department and students.

5. Depth of Courses Currently Offered

Students are currently required to take two seminars after completing their core courses in lieu of a capstone seminar. These seminars involve a research project often with an empirical component and student presentations. Oral communication was one area the department wanted to improve following their self-study in 2006. This is now incorporated in the seminar courses. The research projects help students with writing skills in their discipline. Faculty often mentioned the inadequacy of students' math skills, in particular algebra skills. Ironically, students mentioned they would like a calculus prerequisite for their intermediate-level courses since they felt that the math often dominated the economic theory instruction. Of course, those students have the benefit of hindsight and the students interviewed were the academically stronger students so there is some selection bias.

The department recently began an undergraduate research competition that was quite successful. The finalist presents at the Western Economics Association International (WEAI). Not only does an undergraduate research competition increase student skills in the discipline: academic and oral, but it also increases and encourages student-faculty interaction. I commend the department on this endeavor and recommend continued financial support from the School.

One faculty member experimented with a hybrid course (an online component in addition to an in-class component) in introductory macroeconomics. However, this class was not successful since grades dropped by approximately 20-30% compared to the same regularly taught class. In fact, according to the faculty member, one common theme on course evaluations was that

students wanted more face-time, rather than less. Perhaps a flipped class or hybrid course may be better suited in an upper-division course if the department moves in that direction to deliver course material. In a flipped class, the in-class component could be used for in-depth discussion (seminar style) or problem solving.

6. Faculty Research and Institutional Support

Department members are active in research in their fields. In fact, many members have branched into other areas, for example, research in the wine industry and local regional economics. They are flexible, energetic, and often incorporate their research into the classroom. For example, one faculty member uses datasets from his research for students to analyze in class. All department members lauded Dean Silver for supporting research and for helping to provide professional development funds to support research. However, increasing those funds would better support research efforts since, while funds have increased, they are still quite limited. Many department members mentioned they would like a TA to help grade homework to allow more time for research and support teaching. Some faculty reported that research efforts are often hampered at the University level by the approval process for granting conference funding or by institutional boards such as the IRB. More flexibility at the University level would improve faculty productivity.

Dean Silver mentioned that increasing collaborative research would bolster the department reputation in the University and community. Some members have conducted research with others from the department of psychology and the School's Wine Program. However, there is a community need for researchers in regional community development. One department member is very active in regional development but additional partnerships with private firms in the community would strengthen ties, providing internships for current students, fund-raising, and building an alum network close to the University.

7. Department Collegiality

I was very impressed by the collegiality of the faculty. All recognized the joint nature of the decisions, and showed a willingness to compromise to arrive at reasonable decisions.

8. Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this report, the department is doing an excellent job, and in many ways, it is a Dean's ideal department—happy students and an accepting and collegial faculty. But a department only remains successful by being proactive, and dealing with issues which may become a problem in the future. The suggestions in this report should be seen in that context.