

Weber State University
2013 External Regents Review
Department of Economics

As part of its Regents Review process, Eric Amsel (Weber State University), Attila Cseh (Valdosta State University), David Tufte (Southern Utah University), and Seokwoo Song (Weber State University) reviewed the Economics Department. The campus visit took place on March 15, 2013 and this report was submitted on March 26, 2013.

A. Mission Statement

The mission statement of the Economics Department is well articulated and reflects the Department's tradition of excellence and rigor. The department is one of the strongest in the university, as reflected by being home to an unprecedented three Hinckley Award winning faculty members (Grijalva, Nowell, and Mbaku). The tradition of excellence and rigor is embedded in the economics curriculum and expected of both departmental faculty members and students, whether they are economics majors, minors, or enrolled in economics service courses for the college or the university. The Department's mission is clear about the outcomes expected of students, which emphasize the development of decision-making skills, creativity, and independent scholarship.

The missions of the Department and College are largely synergistic with a focus on teaching excellence, scholarly significance, and community involvement. We particularly note that the College's goal of being a regional institution that prepares students for a global economy is well aligned with, and directly implemented by, the department's new 2 + 2 program. This program brings well-prepared Chinese students from Shanghai Normal University and Korean students from Woongji Tax and Accounting College to complete the last 2 years of their undergraduate degree in the WSU Economics Department. We strongly commend the Department in taking on this extraordinary project in internationalizing the education of not only WSU economics students, but also students in the College and University as a whole.

It is not surprising that the 2 + 2 program has growing pains associated with its implementation. Addressing these growing pains will dominate this report as they seem to the committee members to potentially require a wide range of administrative, curricular, pedagogical, and even cultural accommodations so that the program can flourish. It is also important to note that the Departmental accommodation of the program is occurring in the context of other transitions in the college and university which has complicated the accommodation process. The College recently set in motion a strategic plan which allocates resources to important areas of growth, but leaves somewhat vague the precise role of, and resources for, the Economics Department. Furthermore, a successful university retirement initiative has expanded the role of remaining Department members in College service course coverage (the bulk of the SCH generation of the Department). This has stretched the Department thin in covering other courses, notably upper division economics courses, at a time when the 2 + 2 program has increased the number of economics majors taking those courses.

So, the committee must hold back a full-throated endorsement of the Department's mission and its synergy with the College's at this time. The doubling of the Department's majors and quadrupling of the graduates from 2006-2007 to 2011-2012 has created a challenge to cover

upper division economics courses with the same level of “close student-faculty interactions (and) small class sizes” that the College expresses in its mission and economics majors have come to expect. Classes that typically had 15 students have ballooned to 50; and the capstone Research Methods (ECON 4980) course, with the expectations of individual research projects from each student, has too many students enrolled even for the two (and potentially three) faculty members assigned to teach it.

The Dean, Chair, and the Department members are fully aware of the problems and have held discussions about adding additional faculty members. The Department has already received a new tenure-track line to replace retirements and improve coverage of service classes to the College. However, the tenure-track line replaces a contract person, leaving the department reduced by 2 classes a year. ***We recommend that some of the funds generated by the program be used to hire a part- or full-time instructor to teach College and University service courses which provides release for regular faculty to teach more upper division courses required by the 2 + 2 students.*** The Dean’s differential tuition proposal will fully replenish and even add a tenured faculty line to the Department. The differential tuition proposal is being reviewed by University Trustees and State Regents and hopefully will be passed in the not too distant future. The Department successfully developed the 2 + 2 program not only in response to the University’s request to expand its majors and the College’s desire for internationalization of the student body. ***We recommend the recognition of the Department’s 2 + 2 program as an important contribution to the College’s strategic plan for internationalization, as this would justify the flow of additional College resources and recognition to help ensure the flourishing of the program.*** We are confident that these solutions are important steps to re-establish the synergy between the Department and College missions.

B. Curriculum

The committee commends the Department for a major curriculum which provides opportunities for well-prepared students to become exceptionally well-trained economists. The self-study is also full of evidence of the success of alumni from the Department. But, there is no better example of the power, impact, and effectiveness of the curriculum than the success of two of its graduates, Brandon Koford and Greg Parkhurst who have returned as Assistant Professors in the department.

However, as noted above, curriculum is one of the growing pains in implementing the 2 + 2 program. We commend the Department in moving quickly to address some of these pains by adding a one credit course (ECON 4800) to prepare the 2 + 2 students with the necessary background skills to complete the required Research Methods (ECON 4980) capstone course. However, the prerequisite seems to be a limited solution to the problems inherent in teaching the course for foreign students. The class serves as a key course to train critical departmental outcomes and requires completion of individual oral presentations and research projects within one semester. Although this worked out well with 8 - 12 students in the past, it seems much more challenging to manage with 40+ students who may require more supervision due to limitations in their communication skills. The solution to add another or two faculty members to the list of instructors seems like a short-term fix as the faculty resources are needed in other areas as well.

The committee heard and discussed a number of ideas to solve the problem of resources expended on, and bottlenecks created by, the capstone Research Methods class. The one solution we heard most often from the Department was to add faculty lines to ensure sufficient coverage of the curriculum, particularly the capstone and its new prerequisite course. However, we want to offer another potential solution. Perhaps the curriculum, designed as one committee member noted to prepare students for PhD programs, should be reconsidered given what appears to be the professional goals of the 2 + 2 students. ***We recommend a department-wide discussion on curriculum and other issues (see Summary) and consider making available different paths through the curriculum to accommodate the needs of students who desire professional preparation in economics (emphasizing practically applying theory) or academic preparation (emphasizing scholarly understanding of theory).*** One concrete proposal is to allow students to complete a capstone by enrolling in either the traditional Research Methods (ECON 4980) class or by a supervised internship with faculty supervisors supporting the students' understanding of the theoretical economic foundation of their practicum activities, as directed by site supervisors. We recognize that a change in the requirements for the major may have consequences for the attractiveness of the program to the 2 + 2 students and their administrators, a point which should be considered in the discussions.

We also commend the Department on the 2008-2009 changes in the minor which now emphasizes economic behavior and theory and deemphasizes quantitative methods. The committee believes that this is an effective way to expose more students both inside and outside the College to economics, and might contribute to the goal of increasing majors.

C. Learning Outcomes and Assessments

The assessments of student learning outcomes in economics courses are well-defined and appear to be in line with the Economics Department goals and/or the Social Science General Education Goals. There are multiple direct measures being used to assess various outcomes, and they are sufficiently explained. The cycle of assessments suggest that evidence is being collected on a regular basis. We found abundant evidence about the specific ways in which the assessment drives program changes and commend the Department for their fastidiousness in "closing the loop."

In our interviews with students, they too seem very satisfied with the major. However, some expressed disappointment about a reported lack of internships. This is hard to completely understand as there appears to be plethora of employment and internship opportunities detailed in the handout prepared for the committee by the College's career services office (we will have more to say about this in Academic Advising and Program Support section below).

D. Academic Advisement

The Department has a tradition of program advisement by the department chair and advising center, and recruitment (including internships) by the career services office which, by all accounts, has worked very well! However, the numbers of the 2+ 2 students and their administrative complications, career aspirations, and visa issues have forced recognition of the limits of this arrangement. The committee has taken some care in reviewing the issues associated with program advisement, career advisement, and recruitment of majors.

The self-study report documents the initial administrative difficulties in managing program advisement out of the chair's office for the 2 + 2 students. The problem of coordinating critical information about students' home university courses, other WSU departments, the International Student Center, and the Transfer Articulation office periodically resulted in long lines of students outside the Chair's door seeking administrative help. We commend the work of the Chair and Associate Dean in managing what sounds like a very trying administrative "growing pain" for the 2 + 2 program. We also commend the Dean for taking quick and decisive action to add another college advisor/career counselor who has enabled the offloading of some of the administrative responsibilities for the 2 + 2 students from the Chair (see Program Support). The committee concurs with the decision to offload the administrative aspects of program advisement, despite the potential costs expressed in the self-study. ***We recommend that assessments be initiated going forward, perhaps in the form of graduating senior questionnaires, to assess students' judgments of the quality of program advising.***

Career advising, which traditionally was handled through the Goddard School of Business & Economics Career Center, included providing students with job and internship opportunities. The committee heard conflicting reports about the status of internships. As noted above, students reported that they were told there were no economics internships available, as companies wanted students who were more specifically trained. However, the committee received a list of 13 available internships and even more career employment opportunities for economics majors. An additional complication we heard of was that career services are reluctant to place students in internships without pay but that the 2 + 2 students' visa status precluded them earning money outside the university. ***The committee recommends that the department, as part of the wide ranging discussions on curriculum and other topics, include discussions on how to work with career services and secure more (if necessary, unpaid) internship possibilities for students (also see G. Relationships with External Communities)***

Finally, the committee heard from many quarters that the Economics Department needs to recruit more "domestic" (North American) students to the major. Three reasons were proposed for the recruitment effort, including a) balancing the number of foreign and domestic students in the classroom, b) preserving the number of majors in case the 2 + 2 program is altered or nullified, and c) ensuring the department teaches more than MBA, College, or University service courses which in 2011-2012 was 91.5% of the students enrolled in economics courses. The committee was compelled by these reasons and ***recommends that the department engage in discussions which will address strategies to grow the number of domestic students.*** Ideas to promote the growth of domestic majors discussed by the committee included developing scholarships for economics majors (perhaps using the revenues from the 2 + 2 program – since having more domestic majors would also be beneficial to the international student body), partnering with other programs (ecology, neuroscience, etc.) that will expose more students to economic theories and applications, and lowering the requirements for the minor in order to attract more students to upper division classes. Whatever solutions are offered, they will need to be effectively communicated through the department web site, social media outlets, and to career services staff to ensure that all students and staff fully understand the career opportunities afforded by an economics major, and the skill set imparted by the economics department.

E. Faculty

Full-Time Faculty

The program's tenured and junior faculty members are an impressive group, many of whom have been recognized for teaching excellence and scholarly accomplishments, service and community commitments. The faculty members reflect a good balance of age, gender, and expertise, with a 7 of the 10 departmental faculty members being tenured. The junior-senior balance is recalibrating with the retirement of two senior and the subsequent hiring of two junior faculty members.

There is a good deal of overload teaching with the Chair reporting that on average, faculty members teach one overload class a semester. Overload teaching is a concern as it may reduce time for junior faculty to successfully complete service and research demands of tenure and for all faculty members to form expected high quality student-faculty interactions in class and out of class. Our concern is mitigated by the Dean's assurance that the funds from the differential tuition proposal, if passed, will be used to lower overload needs in the college.

The committee had an opportunity to interview senior faculty separately from junior faculty. There were many commonalities in their comments. There is strong support for the chair, and her ability to communicate the needs and aspirations of the department to the Dean. Nonetheless, senior and junior faculty felt somewhat uninformed about the transitions within the College and worry about exactly how the Economics Department fits into the new strategic priorities of the college. ***We recommend that the chair update the faculty about the college-wide changes as frequently as possible including sending out minutes from the College executive committee, as well as other sources.***

With regard to the fit of the department in the College, there was also a lot of agreement. Junior and senior faculty members believe that Economics offers a core set of conceptual and quantitative skills necessary for business school and social science students. They appreciate that the Department needed to expand the number of majors and view the 2 + 2 program as a way to accomplish that, even though they recognize that there are costs along with the program's benefits. Most faculty members agreed that there remains a need to increase the numbers of domestic majors, which to some was a way to ensure dynamic and interactive exchanges in the classrooms. Finally, both senior and junior faculty (and students) expressed a desire to increase both the choice and frequency of elective class offerings.

The senior and junior faculty members appear to have different views on the cultural traditions of the Department going forward and we raise this as a potential concern. The senior faculty members view that the Department's strong commitment to excellence as clearly communicated to junior faculty going up for tenure, effectively demanded of students in major, minor, and service class requirements, and as the foundation for a rigorous curriculum. Although they respect the Department's cultural traditions, the junior faculty members do not think that tenure standards are well-communicated to them. Some were at a loss to understand their past tenure rankings or predict their future ones, particularly because the standards for their yearly performance review does not clearly or easily map into the tenure standards. We believe that some of the problem lies in the chair's overwhelming administrative responsibilities which limit her time with junior faculty in casual (as opposed to formal) contexts to talk about tenure and promotion standards. We believe that some of these issues will dissipate as the chair's administrative responsibilities for the 2 + 2 students take up less of her time which can then be devoted to junior faculty support, specifically next year when two new tenure-track faculty begin their employment in the Department.

The junior faculty also felt that the 2 + 2 students brought new teaching challenges, the impact of which may not be fully recognized by senior faculty. These challenges impact tenure considerations but also pedagogical ones. They believe that there may be different ways to effectively train not only 2 + 2 but other students and to expand the kinds of students they can attract to their classes by changing some of the class requirements. They can also imagine potentially more efficient alternatives to the curriculum with alternative sequences of courses and requirements. ***These issues seem to be fertile ground for important discussions between the faculty members about how the cultural tradition of excellence and rigor are communicated and implemented in classes and the curriculum, and we recommend that the Department have such deliberations.***

Adjunct Faculty

The self-study described two thirds of the adjunct faculty (4/6) as professionally qualified (PQ) or academically qualified (AQ) for purposes of AACSB accreditation. Given how stretched thin the department is in covering classes, this was a concern for the committee. The chair reported using the maximum number of adjunct-taught classes allowed by their accreditation rules. The situation the Department finds itself in seems acute given that one regular faculty member's unexpected departure, due to illness, family leave, etc. may require violating the accreditation rule with adjuncts who are neither PQ nor AQ. Again this concern may be alleviated if contract faculty can be hired out of the 2 + 2 program funding or by the differential tuition model which can be used to pay for additional tenure lines.

Although we did not meet the adjunct faculty, the committee is reassured by the documentation of careful monitoring of the adjuncts including the comparison of grades and pass rates between regular and adjunct faculty and the sharing of that information with all faculty members. The Chair also monitors and works with adjuncts to ensure coverage of critical class content. Besides this commendable work on the part of the chair, ***the committee additionally recommends yearly meetings with adjuncts individually or collectively to review such topics as course evaluations, changes in curriculum, assessment goals and findings, and departmental expectations.***

F. Program Support

The department office appears to run smoothly and efficiently. There was wide praise for how the office functions, particularly dealing with the 2 + 2 students' administrative needs. As documented in the self study, the burden of both the new and the unanticipated administrative demands to register the 2 + 2 students fell on the department secretary, who handled the job with grace and efficiency! Similarly with the library support – everyone seemed completely satisfied with the library system with no complaints heard. The committee was reassured by the self-report account highlighting the responsiveness of the Dean's Office in replacing faculty computers and acquiring new classroom technologies. Finally, despite some concerns from committee members about whether there was sufficient student computer lab space, the committee heard no complaints or concerns from faculty, students, or administrators about such facilities. We remain concerned about such space, particularly if the number of majors increase and **recommend that the issue be monitored, perhaps through graduating student assessments.**

After some probing of the department secretary, adviser/career counselor, the chair, and the Associate Dean, the committee confirmed that 2 + 2 student advisement is running much more smoothly now than before. The Chair continues to have personal contact with the students, but the office of the adviser/career counselor has taken over the administrative responsibilities for these students, in cooperation and coordination with the Chair and Associate Dean.

As we have noted, we have some concerns about the relationship between the Department and career services, particularly as they relate to finding internships for economics majors and recruiting majors to the department. Reports from students and others suggest that the career services staff may not fully appreciate internship and career possibilities and opportunities for majors from this field. We heard a report that the office may not be promoting careers in economics to potential student majors and is not encouraging about the availability of internships, despite documentation listing a number of careers and internships that are available. It is difficult for the committee to know whether reports are examples of systemic problems or nothing more than rumor or idiosyncratic interpretations of particular interactions. ***Whether systemic or not, we reiterate our recommendation of a series of meeting between the career service staff and the Department's faculty to ensure that both groups are on the same page on a variety of topics.***

G. Relationships with External Communities

The Department's community relationships seem focused on individual faculty members' community involvements, which in the case of Dr. Mbaku is as extensive as it is impressive. However, as noted in the self study, there is no formal External Advisory Committee to the department beyond the Business Advisory Committee. ***The committee recommends the Department to take steps leading to the development of a departmental External Advisory Committee.*** Notably, it is in the Department's interest to forge relations with a number of different community entities (businesses, non-profits, institutions, government agencies) to cultivate internship sites for economics students. Such placements can be as part of the curriculum and serve as a potential capstone experience for some students. These community relations can grow from a loose affiliation of internship sites to the creation of a formal External Advisory Committee as the relationships are strengthened over time. Once formed, such a committee can provide important insight to the Department's strategic objectives and may assist the Department in discussions about curriculum, strategic departmental goals, and other topics.

H. Program Summary

The Economics Department is presently undergoing important transitions at the same time as transitions are occurring in the college and the university. Much of the transition is due to personnel changes and accommodation of the new 2 + 2 program. With two new tenure-track faculty members coming aboard next year and the 2 + 2 quickly becoming successful (with the most acute problems having been addressed) the Department is moving from being stretched and stressed towards more normal functioning. This seems to be an ideal time for the Department to think about more long-term issues that touch on a range of topics. ***Although there are specific recommendations for dealing with particular short-term and long-term issues, the committee recommends that the Department begin a process to write a 5-year strategic plan that will address (among other topics) its mission, curriculum, culture, pedagogy, faculty roles and responsibilities, and relationships with the career center.*** The strategic plan could be a basis for

the department to better coordinate its transition and find commonality about the direction it should take. By managing its own transition, the Department will be in a better position to coordinate with the transitions going on in the College and University.