

April 4, 2018

Dr. Brandon Koford
Chair, Department of Economics
Weber State University

Dear Dr. Koford,

On behalf of the review committee, Dr. Rimvydas Baltaduonis (Associate Professor of Economics, Gettysburg College), Dr. Chris Hoagstrom (Professor of Zoology, Weber State University) and myself, I would like to thank you again for allowing us to visit your beautiful campus and visit with a great department. We found the Economics Department faculty to be engaging, experienced, helpful and very cordial during our visit. Below is our narrative review of the Economics Program at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah.

This report should fulfill our obligation as external reviewers for the Economics program. If you need any further information, have questions, or require follow up, please don't hesitate to contact me.

I would also like to thank Rebecca Kamanski for her assistance in setting up our travel accommodations!

Sincerely,

Catherine Carey
Chair and Professor, Economics
Western Kentucky University

External Review of Weber State Economics Department

The Economics program at Weber State is a program undergoing dynamic change in a very positive way. It has a new mission and vision and a number of new faculty who are positive, forward looking and engaged in every aspect of the educational experience for Weber State students. There have been a number of curriculum changes and new program development actions and ideas. The assessment team met with junior and senior faculty, administration, support staff and students. All groups had positive things to say about the program and department.

Mission Statement

Strengths: The Department has a clear mission statement that complements both the college and university mission statements, particularly with regards to the ***“synthesis of theory across disciplines, the application of theory to practice and the enhancement of professional skills”*** and providing students with ***“excellent educational experiences for students through extensive personal contact among faculty, staff and students in and out of the classroom”***. The Department’s vision supports their mission with a set of actions to meet the mission objectives. The Department’s practices clearly focus on its mission to engage faculty and students in high impact learning through a curriculum that uses applied research in which faculty and students work together. The Department’s 2+2 program and International Business Economics program enhance their vision to create leaders with knowledge of the global economy.

Weaknesses: The list of *actions* in the report appear to be objectives as opposed to actions. What clear actions will be taken to meet these objectives?

Recommendations:

The team recommends that the department articulate and formalize a longer-term strategic plan to support its mission. The Department has begun this process and had met on this in the most recent semester. The strategic plan should have a set of long-term goals supported by objectives and actions to meet those objectives. The self-study document lists a set of objectives to support the vision. A clear set of actions to meet those objectives would go a long way to completing the strategic plan.

Curriculum

The Department offers two business degrees and a social science degree with four emphases. The Department has reviewed and made a number of curriculum changes in recent years including adding a new International Business major, revising the Legal Studies concentration, Econ minor, and Teaching Econ minor, and expanding offerings of a number of electives.

Strengths: The Department is in touch with the needs of the students creating a number of alternatives to meet their career goals.

The department has been innovative in creating and using an experimental economics lab in both teaching and research.

Threats: There are potentially too many alternative routes to a degree given the volatility of current student enrollment in the 2+2 program.

Recommendations:

The team commends the Department for expanding its curriculum and offerings of programs and courses. The team cautions the Department that offering too many programs will require regular offering of a large number of courses, stretching faculty and resources, reducing student credit hours (without growth in the student population), and may make matriculation from some weaker programs more difficult for students. The College will need to support small class sizes in the event of student-major enrollment volatility.

Student-Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Strengths: The Department has a clear set of learning outcomes for students. In addition, the Department has mapped courses to these learning outcomes.

The Department meets three levels of assessment, including the University and Colleges' separate accreditations, as well as, department level and general education level assessment.

The Department uses feedback from the assessment to make changes to its programs and course offerings.

Weaknesses: What is not clear from the report is whether or not all learning outcomes can be met in all programs. In any case, all learning outcomes are assessed in a common course across most programs. The report also suggests that there may be too much assessment at too many levels.

In contrast, there appeared to be challenges in tracking progress and efficiency toward graduation and next-step-success of graduates.

Recommendations:

With such a large number of programs, it may be difficult to assess all departmental learning outcomes for all programs. In addition, with assessment taking place in the Research Methods class (across all programs, with the exception of the AS), how will the growing number of students likely to take the Economics Internship option be assessed? Businesses are increasingly interested in hiring students with Internships. As this trend continues, fewer Business Economics and International Business Economics students will be assessed under the current departmental curriculum map. The Department might also want to consider providing some courses in which students can master the learning outcome (none are listed in the Map). In addition, the department may wish to add some level of learning (introduced, emphasized or mastered) of Learning Outcome 5 in ECON 1100, 4520, and 4810.

Regarding the feeling about too much assessment, perhaps learning outcomes between the university, college and department can be streamlined in some way so that assessment at one level is also occurring at other levels.

The Department should develop assessment tools to track the impact of the experimental lab on teaching and research. These tools should track impact on majors, learning outcomes, articles published, etc. Results can be used to ensure further funding sources for the lab.

Help from the College and University levels may be needed to better track progress and efficiency toward graduation and next-step-success of graduates.

Academic Advising

Strengths: The Goddard College uses a professional advising model with three professional academic advisors. The College also supports a separate career advisor. The career advisor works very well with the academic advisors in helping new majors and graduating majors understand the values of their degrees and what jobs are available. Faculty in the Economics Department serve as mentors for students, helping them decide which program within the Department best fits with students' personal goals and objectives. We believe this is a very effective model for advising.

Weaknesses: It was not clear that the academic advisor we spoke with during our campus visit truly understood what its economics majors do in the business world.

Recommendations:

The College has three very new academic advisors. It is the Department's responsibility to make certain that advisors thoroughly understand what careers and job opportunities are available to students of economics and what educational route will help students reach their goals. The team believes that it is not enough that only the career advisor understands these opportunities. Since an academic advisor is often the first point of contact for a student, it is imperative for them to be knowledgeable in order to not discourage students from the major. If their first response is, "I don't know. Please go talk to the career advisor," then this is not an optimal model.

Faculty

Strengths: The Department has 13 full-time and nine part-time faculty members. The Department is well diversified, all with PhDs, and all are fully engaged in teaching, research and service. While the Department is heavy in non-tenured faculty, this is the result of changes in retirement plans and outside opportunities for former faculty. The present faculty clearly like each other and work together to form a cohesive group. All full-time faculty meet AACSB qualifications. Five of nine adjuncts meet AACSB qualifications.

Recommendations:

The team was quite satisfied with the energy and engagement of the faculty and their commitment to excellence. The only potential concern is the increase in course offerings and programs given the number of majors and students. More offerings are likely to drop upper level course enrollments unless the number of students and majors continue to increase. While enrollments have shown a general

overall increasing trend, the Department's reliance on the potentially volatile 2+2 program may be problematic, particularly if the university moves to such a model.

Program Support

Strengths: Faculty appear to have adequate resources to support their research and teaching efforts. Travel funding is good, and the faculty felt that their technological resources were sufficient. The classrooms were well equipped. The statistics room was very impressive. The experimental economics lab supports innovative and current research. Funding sources include the Dean's office, funds from the 2+2 program, and grants from the university's ARCC program.

Weaknesses: One area of concern is the Department's role in the College's strategic plan. Because the Department is not one of the areas of emphasis in the College's strategic plan, there is a feeling that funding resources that could help their development are being redirected elsewhere.

Recommendations:

The team understands the importance of being included in the College's strategic plan. Although the Department appears to be valued by the College, paradoxically, exclusion from the list of "priority" departments in the strategic plan sends a conflicting message. The Department has an engaged faculty that would likely respond admirably to inclusion in this document. Revisiting the strategic plan of the College and allowing all departments to showcase their strengths and contributions would likely go a long way toward creating a stronger team spirit among departments.

The Department is also concerned with the five-year replacement plan for faculty computers. While this is not an uncommon length for replacement, given the research productivity and number of non-tenured faculty who will likely be heavy technology users, discussion regarding sources of funding for replacement computers might be helpful.

The Department also had concerns about Internet access and quality. The team is aware that this is a university issue, but one that might be addressed none-the-less.

Relationship with External Communities

Strengths: Several faculty are involved with external communities, both academic and public. These interactions are worthwhile and reflect positively on the Department, College and University.

Recommendations:

The Department boasts a large number of graduates going on to graduate school. However, a significant percentage will not. It might be helpful to begin aligning the Department with corporate partners. One way to do this is through the development of an Executive Advisory Council. Another way to do this is through the development of a Center for Applied Economic Research. And yet another way is through reaching out to businesses, including banks, insurance agencies, manufacturers, hospitals, law firms, etc., to create applied internships for economics majors. Still another way is through the Department's

new alumni speaker series, which brings alumni back to speak with students. Interaction in all of these ways can have a secondary impact of bringing in more donations dedicated to the Department.

Other Recommendations:

Threats in Recruitment:

To support the large number of faculty and programs, the Department needs to focus on student recruitment. Recruitment for the program occurs at all levels.

- Faculty meet potential majors in lower level courses (we note this is already being emphasized and recommend its continuance)
- Advisors meet with students for major and course selections, as well as, for career advisement
- Promotional materials
- Career/Job fairs
- Alumni speaker series

Recruitment of more domestic students is essential to stabilize enrollments. Recruitment in the 2+2 program might be aided by surveying constituents in the students' home countries. A thorough understanding of what skills and abilities these constituents expect from students returning home might stabilize enrollments from those countries.

Threats in Enrollment:

The \$80 fee has been mentioned as a possible source of the College's decline in enrollment relative to the University, which likely impacted Economics majors as well. The Department should conduct a study on the impact of the fee on the College's and Department's enrollments and revenues. If the fee is the source of decline, the College might consider (a) lowering the fee or (b) making certain that students understand the benefits that accrue to them as a result of the fee. The latter might involve a fairly significant internal marketing campaign.

Elimination of calculus for many programs in the College will directly and indirectly impact the Department and enrollment in economics majors. Perhaps the Department and College can agree to a form of Business Math that is inclusive of the needs of all departments.

Threats in Tenure process:

The team has some concern over the tenure-review process. New faculty undergo a full progress-toward-tenure review during their third year. If there are issues, the process could trigger a fourth- or fifth-year review. However, if there is not an issue, the next full review comes at the tenure application. In addition, the committee reviewing the tenure applicant could be an entirely different committee with a different set of expectations. While there were no concerns expressed in the department at any level—junior, senior, or administrative—this is still a potential issue on the horizon with so many untenured faculty, increasing the chance of a faculty member denied tenure without proper warning. If nothing else, we recommend careful attention to annual reviews throughout the tenure-track process to

ensure honest and supportive feedback that will give each faculty member the best potential for success.

Experimental Economics at Weber State University

A successful experimental economics laboratory requires three things: 1) professionally trained researchers, 2) adequate infrastructure, and 3) funds to pay for experiments. The College of Business and Economics at Weber State University has already made significant investments towards that and has a great potential to make the lab into a source of a high impact scholarship, teaching and community engagement.

People

Currently, five faculty members are involved in five different experimental projects. Most of these projects are collaborations among Weber State faculty, both senior and junior. This is a great sign that supporting experimental economics research would further foster collaborations among Weber faculty, which could easily have positive spillover effects well beyond the Economics Department and the College. At the same time, these faculty members have already established relationships with respectable experimentalists at other academic institutions and are pursuing research projects while presenting their work at various conferences. This elevates the visibility of Weber State in the experimental economics community and allows the Department to maintain important academic links to other universities in Utah and beyond.

The faculty who are currently engaged in economics experiments are using them as a tool to answer research questions in the fields of their interest. Since no one has been formally trained in experimental economics, it would be strongly advisable for the Department Chair and the Dean to support the attendance of these faculty members at the Economic Science Association (ESA) meetings – both international and regional – even when they are not presenting their own scholarship. ESA is the main professional association for economists who conduct controlled experiments and is a fantastic network that helps to stay up to date on proper methodology and research protocols. Specialized training workshops and summer schools (e.g. zTree or oTree programming workshops, experimental economics workshops for macroeconomists, etc.) on experimental methodology would be other worthy opportunities for experimental faculty development. That also holds for faculty who have not yet participated in experimental research, but would love to take advantage of the experimental economics lab opportunities at Weber State.

A great value added of laboratory research experiments is that many of them can easily be adapted for teaching purposes. Multiple faculty mentioned that they already use simple, hand-run experiments in their classes in order to provide students more hands-on experiences and break the routine of standard lecturing. Indeed economics experiments can be utilized as a high impact educational tool when the theories are directly discussed in light of decisions that students have made during their classroom experiment. Faculty could be encouraged to attend specialized workshops on teaching economics with laboratory experiments, which would allow them to expand such experiential learning in variety of their courses, though classes with up to 20-25 students would likely benefit most. Effective teaching while

using engaging economics experiments can be a great draw to students who may avoid economics due to a perception that it is a purely math based discipline.

Infrastructure

The Department has a mixed-use physical computer lab that has been fitted to accommodate laboratory economics experiments. It has 15 individual subject stations with built-in partitions and one experimenter's station in front of the room. The experimenters use standard participant recruitment software – ORSEE (Online Recruitment System for Economic Experiments) – that allows to follow appropriate protocols for participant filtering and randomization.

The Department also has a mobile lab – a set of tablets that can be taken to the field and used to conduct lab in the field experiments as well as to facilitate controlled field experiments. One such project has already been pursued. Creative use of the mobile lab could also bring great synergy with the community engagement initiatives that the Department is pursuing.

Currently, ORSEE is set up with a pool of potential participants, who are invited to add their information to the participant database. This approach of maintaining a large enough database of prospective participants can be quite time consuming since the student body is constantly changing. As some students graduate and new students arrive to the university, the lab needs to organize constant marketing campaigns to add prospective participants to its ORSEE database. A more prudent way to maintain ORSEE database would be by automatic enrollment of all matriculated university students with an option to opt out. This would create a very desirable pool of participants, which would increase the quality of experimental scholarship at Weber State and attract many desirable collaborations with external scholars. Not to mention that the suggested approach would save a lot of precious time for the involved faculty and staff.

Since the laboratory economics experiments involve human subjects, all studies require a review by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which can also be quite time consuming. The current IRB practices seem to be timely and reasonable, but they also could be improved by granting all standard laboratory economic experiments, i.e. those that fulfil the widely accepted protocols, a blanket IRB approval. Thus, only the studies that involve vulnerable groups of subjects or non-standard experimental protocols would be required to go through full IRB review. Institutionalizing this change would further lower the barriers and time costs for the researchers (faculty and students!) who are interested in pursuing laboratory economics experiments for their research ideas. Along with other recommendations this in turn would make Weber State a very attractive place to work, collaborate and study if one is interested in experimental/behavioral economics questions.

Funds

Economics experiments are a relatively costly research methodology in the field of economics, though the benefits normally far exceed the costs. The funds are needed for the participant earnings, for maintaining the physical lab infrastructure as well as for experimental software development. It is paramount that all participants in the economics experiments are properly incented and that no

deception is used. These are key principals of experimental economics and trying to cut any corners may jeopardize not only the chances of individual researchers to be published in respected economics journals but also could risk the academic reputation of the whole lab.

The faculty who are currently involved with economics experiments indicated that they have access to adequate research funds, mostly available through RSPG and departmental resources. Given the competitive nature of RSPG funding and depending on the number as well as the types of the pursued experimental projects, these currently available funds may not be enough for sustainable lab operations. The Department and the College may want to seek external funding sources, e.g., by making asks to potential donors to establish an endowed fund for economics experiments at Weber State or a fund for student research using economics experiments, etc. The faculty should be also encouraged and recognized (even when attempts are unsuccessful) to apply for external grants. However, the seed money for pilot studies and promising new ideas should be readily available from internal sources.

Recommendations

The continued support of the lab and implementation of above recommendations will help the College with the retention of current faculty and the recruitment of new colleagues when it comes to that. The synergy between faculty, who conduct economics experiments, and high impact student learning as well as community engagement could elevate the efforts of both the Department and the College to a higher level. Developing appropriate assessment tools to track this impact would further facilitate prudent development of the experimental economics lab at Weber State.

We have been extremely impressed with the enthusiasm of economics faculty to engage with the lab and to conduct experimental research. Many departments would be jealous of this contagious enthusiasm for collaboration, engagement and innovation.