

Agricultural Business



These assessment results are a summary of the assessment activities and findings reported for this undergraduate degree program. For further information, please contact the department.

Assessment Activities

Discipline-Specific Knowledge

Assessment activities are an ongoing, integral part of the Agricultural Business major. A senior level course, Ag Econ 451, has been designated as the capstone course for this major. An important part of the course involves the use of economic reasoning and analytical skills to critically assess the impacts of changes in policies affecting agriculture. Students in Ag Econ 451 are required to develop papers on specific research topics. Professors, when evaluating these papers, provide meaningful assessment of the students' knowledge and skills in using economic theory and analytical methods.

For several years, the department has conducted a competitive scholarship examination program. In preparation for the exam, students are encouraged to participate in a seminar course that provides them the opportunity to use their discipline-specific knowledge in analyzing real world problems and issues. The students have opportunities to present their findings and analysis both orally and in writing. The seminar course and the scholarship exam provide an assessment of students' ability to apply economic reasoning to real world problems and issues.

Senior exit interviews are conducted to help in the assessment of student knowledge and the overall quality of the departmental instructional program. The interviews provide an opportunity for one-on-one interaction with students. The feedback from these interviews assists in identifying weaknesses and strengths within the department. Furthermore, students evaluate each class, and those evaluations are a component of faculty reviews.

Assessment feedback is obtained from employers through informal visitations and interactions. This provides an assessment about the overall education experience of undergraduates in the Agricultural Business major.

We have looked at a nationally normed exam, and asked a test set of students (approximately 20) to take the exam. We found that the exam was too specific for our department. Oddly, our students did very well on the exam; the questions just did not seem appropriate.

Communication Skills

Many lower division courses have incorporated the use of micro themes as a way to assess the written communication skills of students. Most upper division courses have made extensive use of term papers and case studies to assess both written and oral communication skills of students.

The expanded use of seminars has afforded the opportunity for students to assess their ability to interact in smaller group discussions and formal presentations.

Students write up case studies and present these in class. Students are assessed on both presentation skills and content. Three students make the presentation, which is critiqued by a group of three different students, and the first group then responds. The faculty member teaching the course also participates in the evaluation. Students must have strong communication skills upon graduation.

Problem-Solving Skills

Undergraduate students have had opportunities to participate in faculty-directed research programs. Several students have been involved with the Northern Plains and Rockies Center for the Study of Western Hemisphere Trade through the Undergraduate Scholars Program. The students wrote papers reporting their research results and made oral presentations about the results.

Risk management is an important part of agricultural business. Students have had opportunities to work with an ongoing research project in the department on crop insurance. Students have been active members of the research team and have been involved in data collection and analysis. They have also been participants in meetings discussing the social, political, and economic issues relating to the role and implications of government subsidized crop insurance offerings.

The expanded use of seminars has afforded the opportunity for students to assess their ability to interact in smaller group discussions and formal presentations. The Department has begun to make more extensive use of Special Topics and Undergraduate Thesis. The focus is on management and finance.

Assessment Results

Discipline-Specific Knowledge

Majors are generally well prepared in economic theory and analytical methods. Assessment feedback indicates that the ability to effectively communicate that knowledge in practical settings needs improvement. Most graduates stay in management and executive positions.

Communication Skills

Many students entering MSU have insufficient writing skills. Two writing classes are required and most departmental classes have writing requirements. However, feedback from employers indicates that communication is the weakest area of our graduates.

Problem-Solving Skills

The general assessment from employers is that majors have relatively good analytical skills. Assessment feedback in upper division courses indicates that there is a broad range of student abilities to effectively analyze problems and correctly interpret results. It appears that a major source of the divergence between students is related to the number of transfer students and their level of preparation in the lower division classes.

Program Improvements

University-Level Suggestions

The University may wish to offer more writing opportunities through more formal writing classes or the integration of writing into other course work.

Currently, the math background of the students entering upper level courses is insufficient. We have overcome that deficiency by teaching a limited amount of math. However, more coordination with the math department may be appropriate.

Department-Level Suggestions

Course evaluation is an ongoing process. Next year Ag Econ 445 will be redesigned to provide case studies more representative of those faced by graduates. Feedback from students and employers encouraged the course redesign. Next year the international component of our course offerings will be evaluated.

With a new faculty member on board, we are hoping to take advantage of contacts with ag business company executives to be involved in the analysis of case studies prepared by students. These case studies will be partially associated with financial planning, and partially associated with strategic planning.

One-Year Departmental Commitment

The use of seminars will be expanded. This will offer students the opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow students in smaller group settings.

A new faculty member has been hired to support the Agricultural Business area. He has extensive experience in using case studies in the classroom, and has successfully used agri-business professionals in classroom instruction in particular to help identify the importance of strategic planning processes. His expertise will be helpful in modifying

courses and degree requirements so that students meet the needs of today's agri-business and be enlightened citizens.

Five-Year Departmental Commitment

The department will continue to emphasize the importance of education in the basic disciplinary areas. The role of critical thinking will be enhanced. The use of small group discussions in a seminar setting will continue to expand. The department will strive to reduce the dispersion between transfer students and non transfer students. Given the transferability requirements in Montana, this issue is broader than just a departmental problem.