

MSU Departmental Assessment Update Spring 2007

Department: Agricultural Economics & Economics

Department Head: Wendy Stock & Myles Watts

Assessment Coordinator: Wendy Stock

Date: June 11, 2007

Degrees/Majors/Options Offered by Department

- Bachelor of Science in Economics
- Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Business
- Masters of Science in Applied Economics

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 then provide meaningful assessments 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 present their findings and analysis both orally and in writing. The seminar course and the scholarship exam provide assessments 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 also 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. Nevertheless, our students did very well on the exam; the questions just did not seem appropriate.

Communication Skills

Many lower division courses incorporate 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 provides the opportunity for students to assess their ability to interact in smaller group discussions and formal presentations.

In our capstone course, 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 enter MSU with 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 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. Ag Econ 445 has been redesigned to provide case studies more representative of those faced by graduates. Feedback from students and employers encouraged this process.

One-Year Departmental Commitment

The use of seminars is being expanded. These offer students the opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow students in smaller group settings.

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.

Economics

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 Economics major. A senior level course, Econ 432, 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. Students in Econ 432 are required to write papers on specific research topics. The evaluation of these papers provides meaningful assessment of their 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 allows 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 instruction program. The feedback from these individually conducted 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 educational experience of undergraduates in the Economics major.

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.

An important part of Econ 432, a senior level course, requires the student to present his or her paper to the class. Similar requirements are present in all other Econ 400 level courses.

Problem-Solving Skills

In addition to Econ 432, undergraduates have had opportunities to participate in faculty-directed research programs. Several students have been involved in such activities. Examples include work with the Northern Plains and Rockies Center for the Study of Western Hemisphere Trade with assessing the impact of maternal labor force participation on infant health, and with assessing the usefulness of sophisticated technology adoption models in describing economic outcomes, all conducted through the Undergraduate Scholars Program. The students wrote papers reporting their research results and made oral presentations about the results.

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 also begun to make more extensive use of small group projects to engage students in small groups.

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.

Many of our majors have at one time or another been employed by the department as assistants in teaching or research. This gives students the opportunity to learn, and gives them experience in doing or explaining economics. In terms of working with other students in intro courses, these students get a lot of experience explaining what economics is about. On the research side, these students learn how to dig out data and do the analysis. Those students employed by the department are quicker starters when they begin jobs.

Communication Skills

Many students entering MSU, either directly after high school or as transfers from other institutions, have insufficient writing skills. English 121 and 221 (College Writing I and II) are both required for Economics majors. Furthermore, most classes have a writing component. Even so, feedback from employers and past students suggests that this is our graduates' weakest area.

Problem-Solving Skills

The general assessment from employers is that majors have strong analytical skills. Assessment feedback in upper division courses indicates that there is a broad range of student ability to effectively analyze problems and correctly interpret results. Students who have taken economic principles and other basic course work at other institutions are not as well prepared for our upper division course work. However, pressure to allow credits to transfer from other Montana institutions makes the problem nearly intractable.

Our graduates are much better prepared going into our own graduate program than students from other universities.

Program Improvements

University-Level Suggestions

The University may wish to offer more writing opportunities through more formal writing classes or integration 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

The department will continue its ongoing review of the curriculum and other educational opportunities. The department has expanded its course offerings to include Introduction to Econometrics, a junior-level course designed to incorporate more hands-on research and oral and written communication skills into the curriculum.

One-Year Departmental Commitment

The use of seminars is being expanded. This will offer students the opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow students in smaller group settings. These smaller group settings will not only improve specific problem-solving skills, but will also improve the students' ability to orally present and defend their analyses.

Faculty will be encouraged to continue to incorporate the use of mechanisms to assess the economic reasoning and analytical thinking skills of students and their ability to effectively communicate.

Five-Year Departmental Commitment

Departmental faculty have reviewed both the curriculum and course orientation on a regular basis. Substantial Departmental resources are expended on the three introductory economics courses. The Department chose the three course sequence over the commonly

offered two course sequence to provide a strong basic training and to compensate for insufficiently prepared incoming students. (MSU has a liberal admittance policy for all Montana high school graduates.) The Department will continue to try to find ways to reduce course size and/or include smaller discussion groups for large introductory classes.