September 10, 2008

RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMICS GRADUATE PROGRAM REVIEW

The Economics program within the Department of Economics and Geography acknowledges with appreciation the efforts of the review committee and its attention to matters of significance to the program's near and long term success. We thank Drs. Scott Hein (ch.), Robert Ritchey, and Comfort Pratt of Texas Tech University and Dr. Lee Adkins of Oklahoma State University.

In some areas the committee strayed from its target to assess the graduate program and entered into matters of department governance, its union with Geography, and hiring practices. As a result, some distortions, misinformation, and internal contradictions detract from overall conclusions. For one example the committee faults our program's vision as poor, yet the report concludes that our mission and vision statements "appear to be well conceived".

Specific responses to the review committee suggestions are:

1. While doubting the claim that faculty morale is low, even uniquely low, the department concedes that faculty salaries are well below national averages, an issue of great concern, and that our turnover rates are on the high side. Operating within a college of arts and sciences rather than a business college explains some of the discrepancy. We continue, however, to recruit new faculty from highly ranked programs by stressing our relative advantages, i.e., immediate involvement in graduate education and the absence of faculty fractiousness. Salary inversion will remain a topic of discussion with the central administration. In part, turnover is a function of good hiring, but we will continue our practice of salary counter-offers where mutual benefits are clear. Retention of good, new faculty is our commitment.

2. The review committee notes the graduate program has achieved significant growth over the past several years. We anticipate this trend continuing. In the fall semester 2008 we will enroll 10 new doctoral students and 3 in the M.A. program. The department has achieved this growth without compromising admissions requirements or the quality of instruction. In meeting with the graduate students, the committee reported the positive comments and observations made by our students regarding requirements and their learning experiences. We intend to redouble
our efforts at improving TA compensation and reducing the number and enrollment of TA classes.

3. The committee raised questions about our terminal master's degree, noting that it is uncommon in Economics. Our program, however, prepares students for doctoral study or employment in business or government. Our M.A. students have successfully gone on to other doctoral programs and have also taken positions with public utilities and state and federal agencies as well as private industry and financial institutions. All of our peer institutions and 11 of the Big XII universities offer an M.A. or M.S. degree in Economics. We find the incremental cost of the M.A. program minimal, while the benefits of the program to the department and university far outweigh its costs.

4. At the suggestion of the committee (Dr. Adkins), we will improve the balance between hours taken by thesis and non-thesis students in the M.A. program. We will consider adding two courses to the requirements of students who opt for the non-thesis degree.

5. The committee proposed we review our practice of requiring three fields of study. We will do this, even though strong arguments persist for three fields. Students have progressed through the present program without unusual delays while also acquiring additional versatility as job candidates. Rather than reducing the requirement, the department may utilize its recruiting to bring in faculty who can develop new fields that will appeal to graduate students. The program review committee was helpful in bringing this issue into focus.

Other issues raised in the report, several of which appear extraneous, may be addressed in coming years. Good and sufficient reasons exist for the Dean's choice of departmental leadership, with change possible as the department attracts new faculty. Broad agreement exists that Economics would benefit from the presence of senior faculty, but that change would necessitate substantial administrative support. The department will also commit itself to better internal communication, but at times it is not a matter of adequate communication, it is more a reaction against the message. The Geography Program's affiliation with Economics, a minor grievance when put in perspective, may change as discussions continue for relocating it to another department in the college. The prospects of the department establishing a "salary committee" in the near future are dim.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph E. King, Chair