I. Program Overview

Two degrees are offered in the graduate program in economics: the PhD and a Master of Arts. The M.A. program has two options. The thesis option requires 24 hours of coursework and a thesis. The non-thesis option requires 36 hours of courses and a final comprehensive exam.

The courses offered by the department serve both degree programs, but are geared for doctoral students. This limits enrollment at the masters level. Courses that are suitable for doctoral students in economics are often too difficult or require prerequisites not satisfied by those pursuing a terminal M.A. degree. Having Masters students take courses alongside PhD students creates some problems with sequencing, especially in field courses. Field courses may have to be taught at a slightly lower level to accommodate Masters students who may not have completed the PhD core. Still, this arrangement is typical in graduate economics programs.

Vision

The department believes that graduate training should include both general and specialized study. General studies are included in a set of “core” courses and provide context for those without a background in economics. Specialization comes through a series of field courses, which are later evaluated by written examinations, and a dissertation. The vision is being supported by the curriculum and policies of the department.

Master of Arts

There is a significant difference between the thesis and non-thesis option in the M.A. program. Those writing a thesis take 12 fewer hours of courses. The difference should be 6. The exaggerated difference in requirements makes the thesis option much more attractive to students. From the faculty's standpoint, the marginal cost of directing a thesis is high. It offers few benefits to faculty because the research spillovers are very small. On the other hand, the cost of teaching an additional student in a graduate section is very low. I think the workload in the department would be improved by making the requirements of the two masters options more equal. Eventually, this will increase research productivity. Of course, degree requirements should be left to the faculty to decide.

PhD

After completing a set of core courses, doctoral students take three separate preliminary exams in subfields of economics. To sit for a field prelim, the student is expected to have had at least two courses in that field.

The small faculty and diverse offerings suggest that some specialties are covered better than others. The faculty are spread thin and appear to be covering field classes that are outside of their primary research areas. Covering a large number of fields with a small faculty is a problem. Ideally a department would have at least two specialists who are publishing in a specific field to support preliminary exams and dissertations in that area. In the department's
current configuration, only three fields are adequately supported. High turnover in the junior ranks makes this hard to assess. Greater stability among the faculty will make field offerings more predictable.

The requirement of 3 field preliminary examinations is excessive, especially when supported by a small and increasingly young faculty. Many programs are reducing this to 1 (or none). Given the small faculty and high degree of turnover in the department it is difficult to schedule 2 courses in each field needed to sit for the exams. By the time the field prelim is offered, the instructor who taught the course may have moved on. Reducing the number of field prelims is sensible and becoming common in economics.

In any event, the graduate director is providing adequate supervision and keeping students on track. Most doctoral students complete degree requirements within five years of obtaining a Bachelor's degree. This is very good.

II. Graduate Students

The quality of the graduate students is fair to reasonably good. Verbal GRE scores (average 470) are relatively low. The quantitative scores are better, but averages less than 700; this places students in the 70th percentile. These scores are a little low, but probably typical of those in similar programs.

Most end up at TTU because of its location. They are certainly not attracted by the puny stipend offered by the department. These are well below those offered by competing schools, and even across your own campus. Graduate programs in economics do not compete with other programs in social sciences (College of Arts and Sciences) for students. They compete with agricultural economics and fields in business administration. I was told that the stipends in the Rawls school were substantially higher. Offers here in my department are close to $20,000 (which includes waivers for tuition and most fees).

Many doctoral students end up teaching undergraduate principles sections while in the program. We did not see teaching evaluations for the graduate students, so we are not able to determine how effective this is. Most of the graduate students are not native English speakers or writers. Poor English language skills make classroom assignments difficult and require much more involvement of faculty at the dissertation or thesis writing stage.

The number of graduate students per faculty is very high. This results in a large number of dissertations and theses to direct per faculty. This activity is time consuming and, in economics, offers very few research spillovers (especially a thesis). Equalizing the requirements of the thesis and non-thesis option would help.

Higher stipends will make the department more competitive for domestic students with strong regional preferences who are now gravitating toward graduate degrees in business or agricultural economics, or other economics departments in the Southwest. These students are a low risk, low cost way to deliver principles classes. A target of 40% (2 of 5) domestic PhD students would be a worthwhile goal for the department. Many international students now attend institutions that teach all courses in English. These students often do a very good job of teaching principles sections. Recruiting students from these institutions is another way of improving the pool of potential graduate teaching assistants.
Stipends could be increased by reducing the number of admissions. Admitting 5 or 6 good students would be better than 8 or 9 that are so-so. The department has been averaging around 8 or 9 new students per year and that seems high given the size and composition of the faculty.

The department shows a good commitment to the graduate students. It provides offices, computer access, limited access to copying, and funds for conference participation. Some support is provided in the job search. The morale among the graduate students is good, and they seem perfectly unaware of the tensions percolating among the faculty in the department. Communication between graduate students and the department administration appears to be good. The lone disaffected student we talked to would no doubt have benefited from better advice about the wisdom of pursuing a second PhD in economics.

III. Faculty

There are 12 full-time tenured or tenure track faculty that serve in the department, 5 Assistant Professors, 6 Associates, and 1 Full. With the lone full Professor just retiring, the department will soon be split nearly equally between Associate and Assistant Professors. Given the large numbers of undergraduate hours taught and the comprehensive scope of the graduate program the size of the faculty is inadequate. The department must rely heavily on its graduate program, specifically the doctoral students, to fulfill its undergraduate teaching mission.

Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any viable candidates for promotion to Full Professor at this point. The department desperately needs a few highly productive Full Professors to provide senior leadership. Increasing the productivity of Associate Professors, mainly in terms of quality of publications, deserves priority. They are competent and engaged, but overburdened on the teaching side.

Low retention of junior faculty continues to plague the department. During the review period only 2 of 10 hires have been retained. There are a number of reasons for this that I will discuss below. Something must be done soon to fix this or the department will be in serious trouble. This issue was a concern during the last review, but nothing has been done address it.

The department employs several visiting Assistant Professors. Often these are hired from department's recent graduates. Although cheaper to hire, using visitors with degrees from other institutions might be more beneficial to the graduate program, both in terms of teaching and research.

IV. Teaching Productivity

The teaching load is heavy. Each faculty has a large number of graduate courses to cover and a large number of theses and dissertations to direct. For instance, one Associate Professor has directed 6 dissertations and 7 theses in the evaluation period. Though this individual has managed to publish a few papers during that time, the quantity and quality of those publications has no doubt been diminished by the heavy student load. Although in theory graduate programs make us more productive researchers, the reality is that a number of students in mid level programs simply aren't up to the task without significant supervision; the problem is acute when the students don't write well in English. The net effect is a drain on faculty research productivity.
V. Research Productivity

Research productivity, at least among the senior faculty, is not very high and may be falling. It appears that about half of the department is publishing regularly, but the placements are in rather specialized journals that are unfamiliar to me. I did not read the articles so I cannot comment on their quality—they may be excellent. However, I think it is important for the health of the graduate program for faculty to at least periodically publish in outlets that are visible to the broader profession. In economics high quality general journals and upper tier field journals serve this function. Publishing in these outlets brings more prestige to the department, which in turn helps in recruiting students and faculty. The Assistant Professors are accounting for the bulk of this type of publishing and given the low retention rate, this is not promising.

Why is research productivity low at the senior level? Some of the blame can be placed on the heavy teaching load. Also, yearly recruiting wears on everyone. It is demoralizing to see new hires earn higher salaries and enjoy lower service expectations. Furthermore, the resources that support research, travel, and faculty development are completely inadequate.

The most highly productive senior faculty are the most likely to leave if equity adjustments are not regularly made. The department has lost its two most productive Professors (Kruse and Ewing) during the review period. Dr. Steinmeier's, also very productive, is retiring. The department needs to find a way to replace senior faculty of this caliber and to devise a strategy to keep others that manage to develop to this level. Unfortunately, low productivity at the Associate Professor level diminishes the likelihood of this happening.

VI. Retention of Junior Faculty

The retention rate for new hires is very low, about 20% during the review period. There are several reasons for this.

The Chair freely admits the “revolving door” for Assistant Professors is less than optimal, but I am even more pessimistic than he about the long-term effects on faculty productivity and the graduate program. I am not convinced that the market will continue to supply willing candidates of adequate quality to the program; nor am I certain that enough senior members of the faculty will be left to direct a substantial number of graduate students and to hire new faculty.

Retention is certainly influenced by market forces—salaries in economics have risen modestly, but steadily over the past 6 years. I saw no evidence of any formal program at the College or University level to make market equity adjustments. The only mechanism for market adjustments is through counter-offers made to those with another job offer in hand. Once a faculty member has entered the job market, attended national recruiting meetings, made a campus visit and obtained a solid offer, the desire to leave is substantial. Motivation to leave in most circumstances should not reach this level. A more preemptive approach to relieve salary inequities may be cheaper and more successful in the long-term. Although the counter-offer strategy is necessary in some cases, its does not promote loyalty or commitment to the institution required by a graduate program that features an unusually heavy teaching requirement and provides very low levels of faculty research support.
The College and the department make substantial commitments of time and resources to make new hires successful. Each new hire is given a reasonable teaching load (2 courses a semester), usually with a single preparation. New hires also receive start-up funds, reduced service commitments, and are shielded from full participation in the graduate program to the extent made possible by teaching requirements and desires of the faculty. This has positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it allows junior faculty to establish a research program. Given the very long delays in the journal review process in economics, it is essential to get off to a good start. In a department with a large number of Assistant Professors, this reduced load places a greater burden on more senior members of the department. Salary inversion and a higher service load do not make for a happy senior faculty.

Being too protective of the junior faculty may alienate them. It postpones buy-in and leads to the perception that they are simply employees of the department. It is important for new hires to be involved in decisions concerning curriculum, hiring, and other departmental business. I do not get the impression that the junior faculty feel they have enough of a vested interest in the direction or success of the department. Without a claim to the department's future, commitment among those in the junior ranks will be weak. More involvement of junior faculty may help them establish a stronger attachment to the university and the department.

Our discussions with the junior faculty were revealing in this regard. They did not believe their input into hiring of new faculty was weighted highly enough or at the proper time. Although they reviewed resumes and helped to assemble the candidate list, none of them were sent to the initial interviews held at the job market. Oddly enough, the department chose to send a geographer. Once candidates were brought to campus, the junior faculty raised objections to the basic qualifications of one of the candidates. The junior faculty best suited to judge the technical qualifications of the applicant felt that their objections were discounted.

A straight up vote, which included the geographers, was taken. Department members were asked to rank the candidates (1 or 2) and allowed to abstain. There was no option for finding either candidate “unacceptable.” The final vote was quite close and apparently split by rank. The contentious outcome left the junior faculty feeling alienated and without standing. One asked, “Is this what we will face when we come up for promotion?”

In response to this, a senior member of the faculty suggested that the junior members were experiencing a case of sour grapes; their guy was not picked and they simply need to get with the program. Whichever is the case, the outcome is unsatisfactory if a broader consensus cannot be reached.

Also, there was some reluctance by the junior faculty to discuss issues regarding the work environment with senior faculty. When asked, “Who do you talk to about faculty issues?” only two of the five Assistant Professors would name even one person; no one felt comfortable discussing such things with the Chair.

VII. Morale

Faculty morale is low. There are a number of reasons for this. The revolving door for junior faculty creates anxiety. They don't believe they are being involved enough in departmental matters. The senior faculty are suspicious of the Chair and the Dean. Everyone lives life in an
informational vacuum—there is almost no communication between faculty, Chair, and the College administration. No one understands or derives benefits from the union of economics and geography. No one likes having a history professor preside over the department.

The faculty view the Chair as an instrument of the Dean's will rather than as a colleague. The Chair not being an economist adds to the mistrust, whether justified or not. The Chair was hand-picked many years ago by the Dean to fix internal problems in the department that have long since been solved. The rationale for his continued service as Chair is questioned by all.

Questions were raised about the Chair's annual evaluation. How this is conducted and what effect it has is poorly understood. No one sees the correlation between faculty productivity and rewards within the department. Greater transparency in faculty evaluation and raise programs would help. The Chair would benefit from having a faculty committee (elected by the members of the department by secret ballot) review merit rankings. Faculty are in a much more knowledgeable position to evaluate quantity and quality within economics profession and they should be consulted.

The faculty committee that once served in this capacity has been disbanded. In a situation that cries out for more faculty involvement, there is no faculty input on any departmental issues outside of the curriculum. At a minimum, I would expect the department to have a properly functioning personnel committee to review the Chair's recommendation for merit increases, recruiting and hiring of faculty, establishing promotion and tenure guidelines, etc.

The role that geographers play in hiring of economics faculty is substantial. Interview teams sent to the job market meetings have routinely included a geographer, but no junior faculty; this puzzles me. Junior faculty are the future of the department and their input is important at this point in the hiring process. This helps the junior members achieve departmental buy-in. The participation of geographers is also confusing to the applicant and suggests that hiring and eventual evaluation for promotion and tenure will involve personality as much as substantive output.

The union of geography and economics is detrimental to the department in several ways. It raises questions from job applicants, it confuses the graduate students, and it irks the junior faculty, who wonder what effect this group will have on their future at TTU. Greater separation between the units would serve both departments better. At a minimum, the role of geographers in the hiring and promotion and tenure decisions of economists should be eliminated (and vice versa).

VIII. Other Resources

In my opinion, travel stipends are woefully low. Travel and conference participation is necessary for faculty development. The department allocates only $800 per faculty member per year. Typical travel to a regional or national conference costs about twice that. Junior faculty should be expected to present papers at these meetings, attending 1 or 2 conferences a year. Senior faculty should also be expected to attend meetings within their respective specialties.

The Chair reports that no one's travel request is turned down, but the faculty indicates that this happens because people are reluctant to ask. They know there is not enough to support all requests. Rather than be told "no," or endure the disdain of others who will be inevitably
denied, they choose not to ask. An intermediate goal should be to fund at least $4000 year per person for travel, data, software, etc.

There is virtually no summer research support. This is not competitive with peer institutions and creates further incentives for junior faculty to leave the university.

I saw no evidence of a viable seminar series. If one exists, it should be promoted better. It is important for graduate students and faculty to have an opportunity to see what others outside the walls of TTU are doing. Bringing in scholars from the outside is one way to do this. Lubbock is blessed with good air transportation as well as close proximity to other fine universities and research institutions. I would hope that a healthy seminar series is an important part of the graduate program.

Additionally, no provision is made to pay journal submission fees. This is supported elsewhere and failure to reimburse these is clearly not supporting the research mission.

Building facilities are adequate, but just so. Office space is tight, though graduate students have offices in the building. Faculty computing appears adequate. Greater access to printing and copying would be useful, especially during evenings and weekends.

IX. Conclusion

This is not a bad department. There are a number of things it is doing well. Classes are taught by competent faculty. Students make timely progress and are competent upon graduation. The Chair, though distrusted to some degree, is perceived as being fair in assigning work load. The Chair by most visible measures is doing a good job of managing the day-to-day operation of the department, but as an 'outsider' is in an impossible situation. I don't believe he is aware of the underlying tensions and low morale in the department. Obviously, communication is a problem. Despite its troubles, the department has been able to hire several promising Assistant Professors. I worry a little about future trends in this regard as some junior faculty expressed the most recent hire was made for "stability" rather than based on merit. We shall see.

There are other serious issues facing the graduate program. The faculty is too small and publication rate is not very high and the visibility could be better. Retention among the most promising hires is too low. The pressure to promote less worthy junior faculty is likely to build. Morale is low. Resources for research and faculty development are completely inadequate. The future of the senior leadership is bleak. From where will the Full Professors come? What effect will the absence of top senior leadership have? Having an economist as Chair (preferably, one chosen by the department itself) would restore some trust; this should have positive effects on morale, productivity, and retention. The participation of the geography faculty in the hiring and the promotion and tenure decisions for the economists must end.

It's remarkable that the department has been able to do so much with so little. The tipping point may soon arrive, though. Some reorganization, better communication, and an infusion of highly productive senior faculty will help.

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