Graduate Program Review  
Texas Tech University

Program Reviewed: Graduate Program, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics.


Name of Reviewers
Internal:
Please include name, title, and Department
Click here to enter text.

External:
Please include name, title, and Department
Azzeddine Azzam, Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I. Academic Unit Description and Strategic Plan
   Please evaluate the following:

   Vision, Mission and Goals
   - Excellent
   - Very Good
   - Appropriate
   - Needs Improvement

   Strategic Plan
   - Excellent
   - Very Good
   - Appropriate
   - Needs Improvement

   Please elaborate if you have identified any items in this section as Excellent.

   Click here to enter text.
Please elaborate if you identified any items in this section as Needs Improvement. Provide recommendations in the area of Strategic Planning.

The mission statement is too broad and sets unrealistic goals. When AAEC states that it is "committed to provide the highest standards of excellence," one is not sure what those standards are and relative to what or who. Commitment by AAEC to work "on all aspects regarding the economics of regional, state, ...." is an unrealistic goal not just for AAEC at TTU but for any other agricultural economics department in the country. One gets the impression that the mission and vision statements are purposefully left unspecified in order to accommodate the interests of every one on the faculty. While that may create an atmosphere of inclusiveness, it does not offer a clear direction for the department and may, in fact, not do justice to the great accomplishments by its faculty.

The vision statement, by stating that AAEC will work on economic aspects of "all current and emerging issues" is equally too broad and too ambitious. A vision statement should be able to stand the test of time and offer measurables. As such it does neither. Down the road there will most likely be current and emerging issues that AAEC will not have the resources to address them at the highest standards promised in the mission statement.

A concrete suggestion on how to make the mission and vision statements more specific is to align them with the research thrusts mentioned in objective 3.1 of the strategic plan. Obviously, those thrusts are there because they have attracted funding in the past and are what the department is and has been good at. However, in light of new hires, whose expertise and interests may not necessarily fall within those research thrusts, the recommendation is that the department identifies broader specialties (for example, Natural Resources Economics, International Trade, etc..) and list some of the research thrusts as sub-specialties. The approach does several things: 1) it accommodates the interests and talents of senior as well as junior faculty, 2) tells the world what AAEC is good at in broader terms, 3) and makes the department more appealing to international student applicants who are less likely to be interested in narrower topics of regional interest.

Other comments (optional)
Click here to enter text.

II. Program Curriculum
Please evaluate the following:

Alignment of program with stated program and institutional goals and purposes

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

08/07/13
**Curriculum development coordination and delivery**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

**Program learning outcomes assessment**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

**Program curriculum compared to peer programs**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

*Please elaborate if you have identified any items in this section as Excellent.*

The graduate program is closely aligned with AAEC's applied research orientation.

*Please elaborate if you identified any items in this section as Needs Improvement. Provide recommendations in the area of Program Curriculum.*

The PhD program is not as strong as it could be largely because of lack of coordination and synergy between AAEC and the economics department (ECON). The general practice by agricultural economics departments across the country is to have PhD students take the core courses (microeconomic theory, macroeconomic theory, and econometrics) and prelims in ECON and, after passing the economics prelims, migrate to the agricultural economics (AGECON) to take courses that use the concepts in the economics core to address agricultural and food issues.

08/07/13
AAEC, on the other hand, is trying to be self-sufficient by providing the core in the department. While that may be sufficient if the goal is to place students into non-faculty positions or faculty positions at universities that are ranked below AAEC, it is not sufficient to take research at AAEC to the next level, a level that would permit AAEC to compete for more competitive and prestigious grants, like NIFA and NSF for example.

According to ECON, lack of coordination with AAEC is due to two reasons: The university budgetary system, and the differences between the relative importance of teaching versus research assistance in the two departments. With regards to the university budgetary system, the current incentive structure is such that it is not in the interest of the ECON to have economics students take courses at AAEC. With regards to teaching versus research assistance, the practice in ECON is that new PhD students are on teaching assitanships and do not start PhD research until they finish the core and pass their prelims. The practice in AGECON is that PhD students are on research assistanships and are expected to assist with research during their first year and with no expectation of teaching. Lastly, but no less important, faculty at AAEC see theory courses in ECON as not serving the applied orientation of their research programs, and faculty in ECON see AAEC courses as too narrow because they focus exclusively on agricultural and food problems. However, ECON believes AAEC courses are useful for ECON students who want to have a specialty in AGECON.

The recommendation is to reboot the discussions with ECON and find ways to resolve the coordination issue engendered by the budgetary system and to minimize the cultural distance between the two departments. There are at least two concrete ways to doing that: 1) hire faculty with joint appointments in both Departments and/or have AAEC faculty teach microeconomics and econometrics in the economics core, 2) identify specialties that include courses from AECC and ECON. The two that were mentioned by ECON are Industrial Organization and Natural Resources Economics.

Other comments (optional)
Click here to enter text.

III. Faculty Productivity
Please evaluate the following:

Qualifications

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Publications
Teaching Load
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

External Grants
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Teaching Evaluations
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Professional Service
- Excellent
- Very Good
For a unit of its size, and for not being part of a Land Grant University, AAEC is an excellent department with highly qualified and reputable faculty. This is evidenced by the number of publications, national and regional research awards for students and faculty, and service of faculty on important national and regional committees. AAEC’s new hires are all from reputable schools and have great potential to contribute to continued growth and excellence of the department.

Please elaborate if you identified any items in this section as Needs Improvement.

The productivity of the faculty is exemplary, particularly the number of publication per FTE. As for the quality research outlets, there is always room for improvement.

Outcomes of competitive grant applications certainly hinge on the quality of research publications and that quality generally is associated with top ranked journals (e.g., American Journal of Agricultural Economics (AJAE)). During the period of self-study (2013-2014) there were 3 AJAE articles, all published in the initial years of the new hires but none after that. I recognize that it is very tough to have articles published in AJAE but the realities are such that articles give a slight edge when it comes to competitive application grants.

Other comments (optional)

Click here to enter text.

IV. Students and Graduates

Please evaluate the following:

Time to degree

- Excellent
| Retention  |  |
|------------|  |
| Excellent  |  |
| Very Good  |  |
| Appropriate |  |
| Needs Improvement |  |
| N/A       |  |

| Graduate rates  |  |
|-----------------|  |
| Excellent       |  |
| Very Good       |  |
| Appropriate     |  |
| Needs Improvement |  |
| N/A             |  |

| Enrollment     |  |
|----------------|  |
| Excellent      |  |
| Very Good      |  |
| Appropriate    |  |
| Needs Improvement |  |
| N/A            |  |

| Demographics   |  |
|----------------|  |
| Excellent      |  |
| Very Good      |  |
| Appropriate    |  |
Number of degrees conferred annually
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Support Services
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Job Placement
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

Student/Faculty Ratio
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Appropriate
- Needs Improvement
- N/A
Please elaborate if you have identified any items in this section as Excellent.
Click here to enter text.

Please elaborate if you identified any items in this section as Needs Improvement. Provide recommendations in the area of Students and Graduates.
Enrollment in the PhD is tied closely to funding. With diminished funding comes diminished PhD enrollment, and with diminished PhD enrollment comes diminished human capital for research, further weakening AAEC's ability to compete for the grants needed to replace lost funding. The department needs to think of creative ways of finding other sources of revenue, including, but not limited to, distance education in the Master's of Agribusiness.

Other comments (optional)
The university can help in this regards. The Dean has indicated that in the short term he is open to the idea of switching funds from faculty lines to graduate research support.

V. Facilities and Resources
Please evaluate the following:

Facilities
☐ Excellent
☐ Very Good
☐ Appropriate
☒ Needs Improvement
☐ N/A

Facility Support Resources
☐ Excellent
☐ Very Good
☐ Appropriate
☐ Needs Improvement
☒ N/A

Financial Resources
☐ Excellent
☐ Very Good
☐ Appropriate
Please elaborate if you have identified any items in this section as Excellent.
Click here to enter text.

Please elaborate if you identified any items in this section as Needs Improvement. Provide recommendations in the area of Facilities and Resources.
In the long term, AAEC could use more space. In the short term, AAEC could enhance the efficiency of the space they have at their disposal by replacing current student pods with more modern and spatially efficient ones that would accommodate more students within the available space. The facilities can also use some tidying up.

Other comments (optional)
Click here to enter text.

VI. Overall Ranking

Overall Ranking

Please provide summative conclusions based on the overall review.
In light of the constraints AAEC faces, namely diminished university funding and not having the Hatch funds available to departments in Land Grant colleges, AAEC has during the self-study period done remarkably well and matched and sometimes exceeded the performance of peer departments. However, as funding sources dry up, the PhD program, which is a viable component research at AAEC, is vulnerable to diminished enrollment unless AAEC finds creative
ways of increasing revenue. Since part of that revenue must ultimately come from grants, AAEC must gear itself up to be more competitive for grants. A necessary condition for that is to hit higher ranked journals. The realities are that at the margin grants with authors who publish in higher ranked journals are more likely to get a slight edge in the competition for grants.

Please provide summative recommendations based on the overall review.
AAEC needs to revisit its strategic plan and consider the following: Revise the mission and vision statements so they are more specific and more aligned with resources and capabilities. The mission and vision statements should be able to stand the test of time. As they stand, the statements are too high-minded and set unrealistic goals.

AAEC needs to reconfigure its research thrusts. The recommendation is to decide on broad research specialties such as Natural Resources Economics, Applied Econometrics, Industrial Organization, to mention a few, and list subspecialties with each broad speciality. For example, water economics could be listed under Natural Resources Economics, livestock economics under Industrial Organization, etc...

AAEC needs to reboot its academic relationship with ECON and find common grounds to advance the interests of the respective departments' faculty and students. The recommendation is to consider having the PhD core (microeconomics, macroeconomics, and econometrics) be taught in ECON during the first year of the PhD program.

AAEC should capitalize on courses in ECON to develop specific specialties. The two suggested by ECON are Natural Resources Economics and Industrial Organization.

AAEC should strive to get more of its work, particularly by younger faculty, published in premier AGECON and ECON journals. Publishing in such journals is not inconsistent with an applied research program and will also help with giving an edge to AAEC faculty when applying for competitive grants.

AAEC should consider distance education for its Master’s of Agribusiness as a tool for increasing enrollment and as a source of additional revenue.