Graduate Program Review
Texas Tech University

Program Reviewed: Graduate programs in the Department of Economics

Onsite Review Dates: March 4-5, 2014

Name of Reviewers

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

External:
Please include name, title, and Department
David N. Laband, Professor and Chair, School of Economics, Georgia Institute of Technology

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.
Vision and strategic plan are very generic. No particular focus on economics; could be any academic unit anywhere in the U.S. When asked, no one could articulate a vision for the program(s). There were no programmatic goals other than increasing the number of students in the graduate programs. There was no indication that increasing the numbers of graduate students is a strategy (rather than a goal) that helps meet the vision. The closest thing I heard to a strategy for the department was solving whatever problem(s) happened to be pressing at the moment. This especially emphasized what came across as a management by crisis approach (plug this hole in the dike at this point in time) rather than a strategic management approach. New faculty hires, for example, have been to fill teaching needs created by a departure, rather than as part of a strategic plan to develop programmatic excellence.

I was struck by the lack of involvement by junior faculty in the faculty recruiting process. There seems to be little faculty-wide discussion of hiring needs. Rather a small group of candidates is identified by someone, brought in for campus interviews, and at that point the junior faculty are asked for input. In my opinion, junior faculty should be heavily involved in recruitment, as it is the junior faculty who potentially have the most at stake with respect to the long-run future of the program and, thus, are most affected, potentially, by new faculty hires. But, of course, this implies that the junior faculty should be integrally involved in formulating a vision and strategic plan for the program, which then guides faculty recruitment.

Other comments (optional)
On more than one occasion it was mentioned that the Master’s degree program costs very little to offer. No doubt, this is true in many places. But the fact that a program is cheap to deliver is not, per se, a reason to have it. The product being produced must be of value. Going back to the absence of vision, no one could articulate what purpose either of the graduate degree programs served.

II. Program Curriculum
Please evaluate the following:

Alignment of program with stated program and institutional goals and purposes
__ Excellent  __ Very Good  __ Appropriate  _x_ Needs Improvement  __ N/A

Curriculum development coordination and delivery
__ Excellent  __ Very Good  __ Appropriate  _x_ Needs Improvement  __ N/A

Program learning outcomes assessment
__ Excellent  __ Very Good  __ Appropriate  _x_ Needs Improvement  __ N/A
Program curriculum compared to peer programs

__ Excellent  __ Very Good  __ Appropriate  _x 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 Program Curriculum.

There are no curricular goals/objectives that I could discern. There are only 2 required courses for the Master’s degree. Two. The remainder of the degree requirements are satisfied by taking elective courses. The comprehensive examination for the Master’s degree consists, in part, of questions from the elective courses a student has taken. That is, each exam is different from the others, at least in part. This reflects the absence of a core set of knowledge and/or competencies that are required of everyone. A single course in very basic microeconomics plus a single course in very basic macroeconomics is a very weak common requirement for an advanced degree in economics.

All courses are numbered at the 5000 level. Master’s degree students with relatively little training take the doctoral field courses. This means, of course, that the doctoral field courses can’t really be taught as true doctoral courses. In turn, this implies that the doctoral field courses almost certainly are not academically rigorous for those students. There are no distinct Ph.D. courses in the curriculum. I regard this as highly unsatisfactory.

The Ph.D. curriculum model requires each student to take 3 field sequences in addition to the required core courses. At 3 courses per term, this constitutes 3 years’ worth of coursework alone. It is fairly common for Ph.D. programs in economics that students take 4 courses per term. It also is VERY common for doctoral programs in economics to require 2 field sequences, not 3. In part, then, the structure of this curriculum is responsible for the students’ relatively long time to completion of degree.

Notwithstanding my previous comments about length of time to degree, all parties (Master’s students, Ph.D. students, faculty, graduate program director) felt strongly that there should be at least one additional required course in econometrics. I agree. Depending on program objectives (there currently aren’t any) one or more courses in econometrics should be required in the Master’s degree program as well. This gaping hole in the curriculum drew the unsatisfactory response that everything would be fine if the department just had more resources — in particular the resources the department DESERVED. This was hard to swallow, as it became clear that significant expertise in econometrics (and perhaps other aspects of economics) is available in the Department of Agricultural Economics and/or elsewhere within TTU. However, the Department of Economics does not permit their graduate students to take coursework outside of the Department of Economics and have it count towards fulfillment of the 60-hour requirement. This appears to be part of a specific strategy to maximize the number of weighted
student credit hours produced by the Department of Economics, even at the potential detriment to their graduate students.

The schedule of field course offerings at the graduate level appears to be ad hoc, rather than structured. Students cannot rely on a well-understood and consistently-adhered-to schedule of course offerings. Especially at the Ph.D. level, there is a lack of rigor and structure in the curriculum. Again, this appears to reflect, at least in certain measure, the absence of a programmatic vision that goes beyond maximizing the number of weighted student credit hours produced.

Some students are required to teach prior to passing their core comprehensive examinations. In my opinion, this is unconscionable. For these individuals, prepping one or more courses to teach for the first time imposes an enormous burden at a time when their top priority simply must be to pass his/her comps. Again, the ugly impression this leaves is that the department’s relentless pursuit of student credit hour production occasionally compromises the integrity of the learning experience of certain students in the doctoral program. This is highly objectionable. The goals, objectives, strategies and management of the graduate programs should be pedagogically-driven, not driven by the desire to use SCH production to leverage resources out of the upper administration.

With respect to delivery, it is highly problematic for doctoral students to have dissertation advisors who are untenured. It also is highly problematic for doctoral students to have dissertation advisors who are not research active, for a lot of important reasons that simply cannot be a secret to anyone. This observation provides a relevant segue to section III.

**Other comments (optional)**

A number of issues were raised by the doctoral students (issues identified briefly with additional comments from me following):

Low level of rigor in Math I and Micro I. The respective texts for these courses, Chiang and Nicholson/Snider, indeed really are regarded as more suited for undergraduate courses than doctoral courses. For Micro I, at least, this concern may result from the fact that both Master’s and Ph.D. students take this course.

History of Economic Thought should be an elective, not a required course. Over the past 30-40 years, History of Economic Thought has disappeared from the Ph.D. curriculum at most universities. Because of the absence of a vision for TTU’s graduate programs in economics, I find myself wondering what would happen if the current instructor of HoET suddenly vanished. Would this course continue to be required? Or would it be replaced by one or more advanced econometrics courses that everyone says are needed?

Students are required to take 6 credit hours during the summer. But as I understand it, the department offers no doctoral courses. If this is correct, then the students are paying tuition and getting nothing in return, which would be highly objectionable.
Department should allow graduate students to take courses from AgEcon, Math, Statistics and Finance departments. As I have indicated elsewhere, this absolutely is a valid issue.

There are 8 core courses. These can be finished within two semesters; therefore the students could take the comprehensive exam in the summer after the first year (when they are paying tuition....). As it currently stands, the students take the CE after 4 regular semesters. Again, as I have indicated elsewhere, this also is an aspect of the program that could be improved.

III. Faculty Productivity

Please evaluate the following

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____Appropriate  ____x_Needs Improvement  ____N/A

Publications

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____Appropriate  ____xxx_Needs Improvement  ____N/A

Teaching Load

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____x_Appropriate  ____Needs Improvement  ____N/A

External Grants

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____x_Appropriate  ____Needs Improvement  ____N/A

Teaching Evaluations

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____Appropriate  ____Needs Improvement  ____x_N/A

Professional Service

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____Appropriate  ____x_Needs Improvement  ____N/A

Community Service

____ Excellent  ____ Very Good  ____Appropriate  ____Needs Improvement  ____x_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 Faculty Productivity.

Very little scholarship exhibited by the senior faculty. What little there is has been published, for the most part, in non-prominent journals. A number of these publications are short notes that are not making substantive contributions to economic science. Faculty reporting of publications in the self-study was sloppy at best. I was very disappointed in this aspect of the self-study.

There is little professional service in terms of very basic research-related activities such as serving as an ad hoc reviewer for peer-reviewed journals. No doubt, this reflects the overall lack of research activity by the faculty, especially the tenure-line faculty. If you are at all active, in terms of submitting papers, you get called on to referee papers.

The GPTIs must be teaching a lot of undergraduate students, both in terms of numbers and as a percent of all students taught. While this may make the teaching load for the tenure-line faculty manageable, it is not necessarily good for the program itself. But we have no way of knowing this, as there is no vision for the undergraduate program either.

Some of the recently-hired faculty show promise in terms of research. But they need to be aware of the research expectations, both within the department and, especially, at higher levels of review. They need mentoring which, of course, is not available from a set of tenured faculty that is not research-active.

Other comments (optional)
Click here to enter text.

Department of Economics website is extraordinarily bad. I accessed the web page on January 10, 2014. Of the 14 faculty listed at that time, 5 did not provide any information about publications. Only 5 individuals had a link to their respective CVs.

IV. Students and Graduates
Please evaluate the following

Time to degree
___ Excellent ___ Very Good ___Appropriate ___Needs Improvement ___N/A

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 __Needs Improvement __N/A

Number of degrees conferred annually
__ Excellent __ Very Good __Appropriate __Needs Improvement __N/A

Support Services
__ Excellent  _x_ Very Good __Appropriate __Needs Improvement __N/A

Job Placement
__ Excellent __ Very Good  _x_Appropriate __Needs Improvement __N/A

Student/ Faculty Ratio
__ Excellent __ Very Good __Appropriate  _x_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.
As indicated previously, structural aspects of the Ph.D. program contribute to a lengthened time-to-completion. The fact that 3 field sequences are required is one. The lack of a reliable schedule of field course offerings is another. Having the students take 3 courses per term rather than 4 courses per term is yet another. High turnover among the junior faculty coupled with their involvement in serving as
dissertation advisors is another. High teaching loads for GPTIs is another. Anything close to 6 years as a completion time is 1-2 years longer than most comparable programs, especially for a program like TTUs that is not really producing research Ph.D.s.

The student/faculty ratio is high. Not such a big deal if there are sufficient research-active senior to share the dissertation advising load. A very big deal when there are no research-active full professors and there is little research activity among the tenured faculty.

**Other comments (optional)**

For most of the questions my answer was NA. This is because I had no context for providing a useful answer. The status of items such as retention, demographics, enrollment, number of degrees conferred, etc. depends entirely on what the goals/objectives of the program are. In the absence of such goals and objectives, I can only speculate about these items. For example, if you want to focus on producing the very best research scientists possible, demographics become irrelevant. You recruit intellectually gifted students; these individuals are not defined by skin color, gender, etc. Relatedly, retention depends critically on the standards you set for the program and the caliber of student you are able to recruit. Retention per se is not a goal. Graduating good students is a goal. Retention statistics become a residual. You do not retain bad students. Everything meaningful circles back to the goals and objectives of the program, which in this case are absent.

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
- Needs Improvement
- N/A

**Staff Resources**

- 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 Facilities and Resources.
Click here to enter text.

Other comments (optional)
I answered NA to most of these questions. There really was no discussion of faculty resources and staff resources. With respect to financial resources, there was a bit of discussion of the time-pattern of the operations budget. But I know from experience that the true financial situation of a program is not reflected completely in a single diagram or set of numbers. Consequently, I do not feel qualified to issue an opinion on the department's position with respect to financial resources with the amount of information available to me.

VI. Overall Ranking

Overall Ranking
__ Excellent __ Very Good __Appropriate __ Needs Improvement

Please provide summative conclusions based on the overall review.
One of the illuminating aspects of this review came near the end, when the department chair was asked what he thought the perception of the economics program with the TTU community was. Even in my short time on-campus, it became clear that economics is regarded as an underperforming academic unit. The Chair's response reflected a complete disconnect with this reality. My strong impression is that the unit is remarkably insular, with little or no engagement with other academic units. This means that a variety of potentially (extremely) productive synergies is not being realized there. My sense is that other units would be highly interested in creating such synergies, but not with the current faculty and current performance in the program.

It really was quite astonishing to see so many doctoral students in a program characterized by so little faculty scholarship. A Ph.D. is a RESEARCH degree. Competent development of Ph.D. students (both inside and outside of the classroom) requires faculty who are highly-engaged and successful researchers.
The structure of the academic program gave me little confidence in the product being produced, either at the Master’s level or the Ph.D. level. Doctoral students enroll because of the money (that was a common refrain). But a strong academic program must be defined by a good output, not by an input.

Please provide summative recommendations based on the overall review.

To my knowledge, most of the highly-ranked comprehensive Research I institutions in the U.S. have strong economics programs. Economics pervades almost every facet of human existence. So, in general, a strong economics program enhances research opportunities across a broad spectrum of other disciplines. I believe that TTU would be well-served by developing a strong economics presence at the University. That said, it is not entirely clear to me how best to do this.

One thing that is clear to me is that if the current department of economics is to get significantly better, there must be an infusion of RESEARCH leadership at the full professor level. A single full professor hire will not do. It is doubtful that 2 full professors would do. I would argue for 3 - - 2 research leaders and a third who is an accomplished researcher who also serves as Chair.

A second thing that is clear to me is that there must be a shared vision for the program. This vision must be grounded in science and pedagogy, not generation of student credit hours.

I’m not sure about how to handle the visioning and the senior-level hiring. While the existing faculty should be part of that process, I don’t believe they should be a large part of that process - - perhaps 1-2 tenured faculty and several of the junior faculty who have more at stake. Perhaps all should be advisory only, without votes. Perhaps the visioning and senior-level recruitment could be led by senior faculty in other units who understand the importance of a strong, intellectually vibrant, research-driven economics program and potentially have a stake in developing such a program.

But building a strong economics presence need not imply a complete re-building of the department of economics. During my visit, it became evident that there are pockets of economics excellence located in several units at TTU. I would think one could explore how this institutional talent might be used advantageously. For example, the review team heard that there are several advanced courses in econometrics offered through the department of Agricultural economics. Yet the graduate students in economics currently are not permitted to take these courses for credit towards the economics degrees. Instead, the current leadership advocates hiring an econometrician into the economics department as a condition of offering the (very much) needed instruction to the economics graduate students. This thinking and management strategy is not efficient for either the students or Texas Tech.

The school offers a broad spectrum of graduate elective courses and field sequences. With only 1-2 faculty members with relevant expertise in each area, there is little collected expertise. Thus, the offering of fields, as well as student progress on dissertations, is sensitive to faculty departures. This is not how most doctoral programs are run. Most are built around a small number of areas of expertise that define the program. Multiple faculty members are hired in each field to strengthen the teaching
base AND strengthen the research base. Although the social sciences generally, and economics in particular, historically have had a lower extramural funding profile than the natural/physical and engineering sciences, there are emerging opportunities that might be good fits for TTU. Two in particular that the review team discussed were in the areas of energy economics and health economics. There may be others. Building programmatic expertise in select areas like these would permit faculty to work collaboratively across disciplines there to strengthen extramural research proposals. But, of course, this requires vision.......