

November 8, 2016

PROFESSOR ELI BERMAN, Chair
Department of Economics

SUBJECT: Undergraduate Program Review for the Department of Economics

Dear Professor Berman,

The Undergraduate Council discussed the Department of Economics' 2016 Undergraduate Program Review. The Council supports the findings and recommendations of the review subcommittee and appreciates the thoughtful and proactive response from the Department.

The Council will conduct its follow-up review of the Department in Fall Quarter 2017. At that time, our goal is to learn about the Department's progress in implementing the recommendations of the program review subcommittee and the Undergraduate Council. The Council extends its thanks to the Department for their engagement in this process and we look forward to the continued discussion.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Cook, Chair
Undergraduate Council

cc: F. Ackerman
C. Padden
J. Rauch
R. Rodriguez
K. Roy
B. Sawrey
M. Sidney

Undergraduate Program Review: Department of Economics May 12 and 13, 2016

Summary

- The UC San Diego Economics Department is ranked as one of the top economics departments, nationally and internationally, and has one of the largest undergraduate economics programs in the country, with about 50% female graduation rates, among the highest for economics majors at comparable institutions.
- The Department has successfully developed and maintained a well-functioning undergraduate program, an assessment we heard at all levels, administration, faculty, and students.
- An important goal of the undergraduate program is to prepare its students for graduate school in economics or business. This goal is reflected in the program's focus on strong foundations in economic theory and econometric methods, two of its faculty's strong research areas. The Department makes this focus crystal clear to incoming students, and students seem aware of it. Such a focus also provides training to students that is highly valued by government and private sector employers.
- The Department responded to students' demand for more practical training by adding three minors in accounting, business and entrepreneurship, staffed by the Rady School. This appears to have been, on balance, a good complement to the management science and economics majors primarily. However, below we raise some issues regarding coordination and quality.
- The Department responded to previous undergraduate program reviews with serious changes to the administration of the program. It continues to adapt to ever increasing undergraduate enrollments in highly creative ways.
- As a result of these changes, time to degree is on a par with other programs on campus.

Areas of Improvement

1. Resources

During the last decade the Department has experienced a 160% increase in majors, from 936 majors in 1997 to 2,625 majors in 2015. On the other hand, there was only a 20% increase in budgeted faculty FTE during the same period, from 31 FTEs in 1997 to 37 FTEs in 2015. As a consequence, this imbalance in student-to-faculty ratios has reduced faculty-student interactions even for upper division and elective courses. This may (partially) account for the poor graduation satisfaction survey results; and is unfortunate since students report great satisfaction when there is opportunity to interact with the faculty. Rather than focusing on university allocation metrics, there are a number of telltale signs that the major is severely impacted:

- Upper division/elective class sizes are very large relative to comparable public universities. In addition to being natural avenues for faculty/student interactions, these classes expose students to more specialized areas of economics, well beyond the core curriculum. These courses are where students truly become specialists in their field of study.

We acknowledge the value of the Department's initiative to offer 1-2 unit supra-honors courses tacked on to existing upper division/elective courses. While this helps promote

more advanced learning in a more intimate environment with smaller class sizes, it does not adequately address the full scope of the problem.

- About 50% of classes are taught by non-senate faculty. The Department carefully allocates teaching duties to allow students to always take courses taught by senate faculty, albeit with proper planning.
- T.A. support has been eroding, the result of a misalignment between the size of the graduate program relative to the growth in undergraduate enrollments. The Department has adapted by using undergraduate T.A.s for lower division courses. In addition, it has created the position of reader, a fraction of a typical T.A. position for grading purposes only. This position provides some relief for graduate T.A.s by using some first year students and students in the job market whose schedules can be quite unpredictable (as they visit universities for employment). Nevertheless, we found some imbalance in the allocation of undergraduate and graduate T.A. duties in the lower division courses that we discuss in more detail below.
- During the last five years, there has been a rapid and substantial increase in the number of international students, who currently constitute more than half of the Department's transfer and freshman majors. This has created additional pressure on the Department in dealing with special needs of this population of students in areas such as visa issues, internship, and academic advising. The Department has provided one course release time to one of its faculty to help address the needs of international students.
- Opportunities for academic internship are currently limited because many faculty members do not consider them to be worthwhile academic experiences, and arranging for better quality is time consuming.

Recommendation: The Department of Economics is very highly ranked at an international level. It is unfortunate that the opportunities for student-faculty interactions are being limited by the size of the major relative to the faculty. We feel strongly the Department requires more resources to hire more senate and non-senate faculty.

2. Poor Electronic Record Management Given the Size of the Major

A great deal of administrative costs, evaluation of alternative pedagogical strategies, and development opportunities through the alumni base are being frustrated by the difficult interface with registrar electronic student record management. In particular:

- On the administrative side, the introduction of a cap to the major, which began this year, has translated into a considerable increase in workload for the advising staff. The staff has to manually evaluate whether students meet the requirements to declare the major and require further counseling on their options. Much of this administrative load would be alleviated if the registrar could automate the process of verifying student requirements. We understand from the administration that part of this issue is to be expected the first year such a policy is implemented. Nevertheless, increasing IT support to allow the Department to automate this process would be clearly desirable.
- The Department engages in a wide range of creative pedagogical initiatives to improve the experience of undergraduates in the program. Evaluating the success of each initiative is critical. In fact, educational policy is one of the main areas of research in economics. The faculty thus feels that they could gain particularly useful knowledge from better

understanding their undergraduates' background and how they respond to alternative pedagogical initiatives.

- Proper development of the alumni network is integral to the future of graduating majors and the long-run future of the Economics Department. For undergraduates, the alumni network is a valuable resource upon entering the job market or graduate studies. For the Department, alumni donations will become increasingly important as they compete against traditionally well-endowed programs from private schools, such as Harvard and Stanford, for example. There are at least three important areas where donations are likely to become increasingly important. First, to attract top researchers that would otherwise not come and hence improve the ranking of the Department, the quality of its graduate and undergraduate experiences, and opening new research programs. Second, donors often fund scholarships for underrepresented groups, an important goal in a public university. Third, frontier research programs can be launched through the generosity of alumni.

Recommendation: the Department's mission would be greatly enhanced if better electronic record-keeping interface at the registrar is developed. Meanwhile, IT resources to improve record management within the Department would be desirable.

3. Retention and Promotion of Lecturers

Much of the success in managing the undergraduate program appears to rest on two individuals, Melissa Famulari and Kate Antonovics, both lecturers with security of employment (LSOE). The faculty, staff and students alike consistently praised their dedication.

- Melissa and Kate appear to be carrying a considerable administrative load with little backup. These responsibilities include maintaining and evaluating the quality of lecturers generally; monitoring credentials for transfer students (how does coursework at a given community college compare to UCSD's requirements?); and designing/introducing/supervising several of the initiatives introduced to promote faculty/student interactions, just to cite just a few of their responsibilities. They also contribute significantly to curricular aspects of the program. As an example, we mention Melissa's leadership in developing videos for intermediate microeconomics. These videos have proven a useful pedagogical tool for UCSD students and across other UC campuses as well.
- The Department has routinely conducted nationwide searches for lecturers. Ph.D. economists generally enjoy a wide and lucrative array of alternative employment opportunities. The instability of lecturer employment is a great source of planning uncertainty. Moreover, below market compensation is likely to add to these difficulties and frustrate efforts to promote and retain excellent LSOEs.
- The Department has a number of Unit-18 lecturers who have achieved continuing contracts. However, despite being more or less permanent instructors, they do not appear to be well integrated into the Department, and the lecturers meet with the chair only once per year to discuss relevant issues.

Recommendation: provide more resources to expand the LSOE pool. It would be advisable to have a deeper bench of permanent lecturers to share more of these responsibilities. Moreover, the administration should consider bringing their remuneration more in balance to

outside market opportunities. We recommend that Unit 18 lecturers become somewhat more integrated into the Department (e.g., by meeting as a group with LSOEs on a regular basis).

4. The Rady School Minors

The Department views the three minors offered by the Rady School (accounting, business and entrepreneurship) as generally a good complement to the majors offered in economics. This is particularly the case with the minor in accounting. This minor was designed jointly by Rady and Economics faculty. Minors in business and entrepreneurship were not set up in coordination with Economics. Faculty thus perceived some of the content of these two minors as not having as good an intellectual fit as accounting. Furthermore, Rady is currently staffing these minors entirely with lecturers, raising some concerns that the overall experience and value for economics majors is less than ideal. Improved coordination between Rady and Economics seems therefore important and desirable. Although plans for a joint major seem far in the future, similar unilateral actions by Rady will likely result in friction and suboptimal outcomes.

Recommendation: improve coordination with Rady to improve the interface between their minors and the Economics major.

5. TA Management

While we did not find anything major, we learned of several issues that could be easily improved.

- Instructors of lower division courses with similar class sizes enjoyed disparate TA resources, mostly when it comes to undergraduate T.A. allocation. Some courses had a clear surplus while others were clearly deficient. The Department should seek more balance in these allocations.
- Students found disruptive the practice of having different TAs teach different parts of the material in section. As an example, a course with 5 TAs was found to have each T.A. teach all sections for two weeks. Rather, students voiced preference for continuity, that is, the same TA should present the material in section throughout the quarter. This would facilitate better interaction between the TA and the students and guarantee some stability in pedagogical style.
- Section times are often scheduled very late in the day (we heard of sections scheduled from 8-9pm and 9-10pm). This practice has the effect of reducing student attendance and making the second section hour especially costly to maintain as often students do not show up. Consider scheduling sections at more convenient times. We recognize this is a fine balance since class availability and TA resources are at a premium.
- TA allocation formulas in other campuses allow for some degree of flexibility for courses with computer lab components. For example, U.C. Davis allows for a TA in its undergraduate econometrics course 140, with enrollments capped at 50 students. This cap allows the TA to conduct two sections back-to-back in the computer lab. On a related note, on-campus computer labs provide insufficient support for courses with a lab component, such as econometrics. Students reported congestion of the virtual lab and too few seats available for instruction at the lab.
- There appeared to be some lack of coordination between readers and TAs . More clarity about TA duties and expectations in general would be helpful. This issue seems easily

solvable through beginning of the quarter meetings of TAs, and readers with the instructor of the course.

Recommendation: standardize TA management and clarify expectations. Improve computer lab/instructional resources.

6. Econ Tutor

Several faculty members remarked that there is a private business just off campus specializing in obtaining past exams and materials from economics courses to tutor students for a profit. Having a private tutoring service per se is an acceptable business model. Unsurprisingly, the Economics Department has taken steps to internalize this service by introducing a peer tutoring service that the students can access for free. Early indications (since this program was introduced recently) are very positive. However, we note that the faculty found the practice of using materials that are ostensibly the intellectual property of the faculty and the university to extract profit particularly galling. A negative externality of this service is that some faculty no longer use problem sets to evaluate students. The reason is that they feel Econ Tutor will provide the answers to problem sets thus creating a wedge between students that can afford this private service and those that cannot. We think the university's legal department should probably investigate a more forceful course of action to dissuade EconTutor from using intellectual property for free.

Recommendation: continue the peer tutoring experiment and consider potential legal action against Econ Tutor.

The Undergraduate Review Committee:

Professor Guershon Harel, Mathematics, UCSD, Chair

Professor John Wixted, Psychology, UCSD

Professor Òscar Jordà, Economics UC Davis, external