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Date: April 30, 1998  
To: Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Associate Dean, College of Letters and Science  
From: Jim Walker, Chair, Department of Economics *JR Walker*  
Subject: Department of Economics Assessment Activities 1997-98

**Department:** Economics

**Abstract**

During 1997-98 the department of economics assessed both its undergraduate major and its graduate program. Our focus, however, was on the undergraduate major.

Assessment of our undergraduate major centered on surveys of our majors and, with the help of the Wisconsin Alumni Association, our alumni. Results from our web-based undergraduate survey indicate that our majors are generally satisfied with the education they receive in economics. A common complaint was that additional course offerings be made available at the advanced undergraduate level. The survey of our alumni revealed that more than two-thirds of our alumni pursued advanced study, mostly in law and business. The alumni advocated internships as a way for students to connect their classroom training with the "real" world.

Results of the survey have been reviewed by the Undergraduate Committee. In April, acting on a recommendation of the Undergraduate Committee, the Executive Committee reduced the minimum number of credits to one for Economics 698 to allow students greater opportunity to arrange internships. Undergraduate course offerings have been expanded for 1998-99.

Assessment of the Graduate Program uses three primary sources: the quality of the entering class, time to degree of its continuing students, and placement of students at the completion of their degree. Next year's class looks solid. Our efforts to improve the time to degree are effective as few students remain into their sixth year of graduate study. All but a couple of students have jobs, but none of the students were placed in a top-10 economics program. Nevertheless, our Graduate Program appears to be on-track. We will continue to monitor the Graduate Program closely to attempt to improve our placement efforts.

**Assessment Tools Used** (Using the attached chart, please specify which assessment activities have taken or will take place in your department or program. Indicate also the year when these activities took place or will take place. If you used other tools, please describe them.)

**Direct Indicators**

	Undergraduate Major	Graduate Program
National Exams	_____	_____
Local Exams	_____x_____	_____x_____
Capstone Course(s)	_____	_____
Embedded Testing	_____	_____
Student Portfolios	_____	_____
Review theses & dissertations	_____	_____x_____
Performance Evaluations	_____	_____x_____
Pre and Post Testing	_____	_____

**Indirect Indicators**

	Undergraduate Major	Graduate Program
Student Surveys	_____x_____	_____
Exit Interviews	_____	_____
Alumni Surveys	_____x_____	_____
Employer Surveys	_____	_____x_____
External Reviews	_____	_____

## Assessment of Programs in the Department of Economics

The departmental Undergraduate and Graduate Committees have primary responsibility for implementation and on-going operation of the assessment programs of their curricula. The departmental Executive Committee votes on recommendations of these Committees and has final responsibility for the programs and their assessment.

The objectives of our undergraduate program in economics are:

- To provide a broad curriculum covering major aspects of economics.
- To provide outstanding undergraduate instruction in both the theoretical and applied (or empirical) aspects of economic behavior of individuals, enterprises, and governments.
- To provide information on and interpretation of existing knowledge of economic behavior to the broader community.
- To foster development of critical reasoning skills, quantitative skills and writing skills in the context of economics.
- To engage in applied research designed to enhance our understanding of economic behavior.
- To expose students to the diversity of areas within contemporary economics and allow students to gain some specialized knowledge in one or more of the fields including industrial organization, public finance, international trade, labor economics, macroeconomics, and economic theory.

### Planned Method of Assessment

1. The best indicator of the quality of undergraduate program is the demand for courses by students. The best single quantitative indicator is the number of degrees produced (and its correlate, the number of majors). We will monitor these statistics closely.
2. After each semester, the Chair of the Department and the Chair of the Undergraduate Committee will review the course evaluations for each course and instructor. The Chair will meet with faculty members who have poor student teaching evaluations to review (and correct as necessary) possible reasons for the poor evaluation.
3. The Department Chair and the Chair of the Undergraduate Committee with the assistance of the Economics Students Association (ESA) will conduct a focus group discussion each spring with some of our majors to obtain feedback on whether majors are receiving adequate advising support on the curriculum at UW and for preparation and admission to graduate and professional programs.
4. We will request that majors who take the GRE-Advanced test in economics to forward their scores to the department.

During 1997-98 we followed this Assessment Plan closely but not exactly. Action items one and two have been in place for many years and are routinely done. Our majors continue to increase; we now

have approximately 270 majors (up from 180 two years ago). We decided to postpone item 4 because few graduate programs in economics require the Advanced Test. We also substituted a web-based survey for the focus group discussion. The survey gave us a low-cost way to contact our undergraduate majors. (We are willing to share the survey and our web knowledge with other departments in the College.) We notified our majors by email of the survey and received 76 responses. (A tabulation of the responses are on the Department's web site at [www.ssc.wisc.edu/econ](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/econ).) The Undergraduate Committee reviewed the tabulated responses and the department chair reviewed responses to the open-ended question at the end of the survey. Students were keen on the analytical skills received in their economics education. They also rated the advising services of the undergraduate office quite favorably. Many requested that a more extensive set of undergraduate courses be offered. The department has been aware of the thinness of its undergraduate curriculum. Our recruiting success this year will permit an expanded undergraduate curriculum. The faculty advising program started in the fall, 1997 is evidently too new as few students commented on it. The Undergraduate Committee discussed possible ways of advertising faculty advising program, but developed no specific plans of action.

With the assistance of the Wisconsin Alumni Association, we developed a survey of the department's alumni in a few selected cities (e.g., Washington DC, Denver, Chicago, Atlanta and Seattle). One goal of the survey was to find potential members for informal employment networks in the major cities for our new graduates. We took the opportunity to ask our alumni a few questions about the skills acquired while at Madison and suggestions for the skills our current graduates should develop. The survey yielded about a 20 percent response rate as more than 200 surveys were returned. Interestingly, approximately two-thirds of the respondents reported attending some kind of advanced study, usually either in business or law. (This may reflect the geographical targeting of the survey.) The alumni advocated internships as a way for students to connect their classroom training with the real world.

In response to the Alumni Survey, the Undergraduate Committee reduced the minimum number of credits on Economics 698 to one. This will give students greater flexibility in arranging internships, while preserving the academic integrity of our curriculum.

The assessment program for the Graduate Program continues with no modification from past years. The primary goal of the Ph.D. program is to produce creative, skilled researchers and teachers equipped to expand the frontiers of economic knowledge and to communicate this knowledge successfully to succeeding cohorts of graduate and undergraduate students and to the general public. To monitor our progress towards reaching this goal, we review the results of the first year qualify exams and evaluate the quality of field papers written at the end of the second year of graduate training. Students beyond their second year must file annual reports on their progress which are signed by their thesis advisor and reviewed by the Graduate Committee. We also monitor our placement results. Eighteen of the twenty Ph.D. students have jobs, but none are placed in top-10 econ departments. The increasing proportion of international students makes it difficult to improve on these placement results. The Graduate Committee will consider ways of improving placement in 1998-99.

Enrollments in our Graduate Program have shifted from domestic to international students. This puts pressure on our financial aid system and requires that we pay increasing attention to the language skills of our students. Our assessment program is sufficiently flexible to accommodate these changing needs.

We will continue these assessment activities in the coming year.