

# **Undergraduate Economics Learning Assessment: Selected Advanced Electives**

Spring 2013

## **Background**

In the spring term of the 2012-2013 academic year, the number of undergraduate students majoring in the study of economics continued its steep upward climb. At the end of the term, we had 1,055 declared majors or, to provide a meaningful context, fully 10% more majors than one year previously, almost to the date and the decimal. Among those 1,000+ majors, nearly 300 were international students, with nearly all of them having English as a second language. Periods of rapid growth, we as economists are well aware, are as challenging as periods of decline; rapid growth in one sector (i.e., our international students) creates new stresses on others. Our learning outcomes, even in this cyber-age, remain inextricably linked to our ability to communicate over the divides of language and culture. In this context, with nearly 28% international students filling the seats in our departmental classrooms, we feel a new urgency to the usual assessment of learning outcomes within our department.

## **Assessment**

In an effort to improve this assessment as well as to render more efficient the compilation of data allowing it, this Spring the Department of Economics undertook the design and implementation of a new approach to assess learning at the undergraduate level. This effort aimed at understanding and improving student learning across the economics curriculum.

The process involved identifying learning goals, designing tools, and launching the systematic gathering of information. This major undertaking was possible due to the commitment and hard work of the Undergraduate Program staff and the members of the Undergraduate Committee. It was encouraged by the commitment of the Letters and Science Deans Office and specifically from Academic Planning. We thank all those involved.

In brief, we redesigned the format and distribution of our longstanding course evaluation tool. Three questions to assess student learning were added to the end of semester student evaluations in all economics courses. These evaluations were made available to all students online at the end of the term, and instructions and prompts to complete them were delivered to each student

electronically and reinforced in classrooms as well. In going to electronic evaluation, we had three large hopes: To reach more enrolled students, to make data more readily available to analysis, and to increase administrative efficiency, all of which we believe have an impact on student learning. Students had to respond to three statements aimed directly at assessing the strength and value of learning outcomes in our courses. In each question, we used a 1 to 5 scale:

1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree.

The three statements students were asked to rank were:

- Question 16: I learned a lot in this course
- Question 17: This course helped me develop valuable intellectual and critical thinking skills
- Question 18: This course improved my ability to evaluate economic arguments and/or policy proposals.

Question 16 is a broad and basic question. It remains important despite an obvious lack of specificity, in the same way the forest remains relevant in any discussion of its trees. Question 17 focuses on Outcome #2 of the Essential Learning Outcomes for UW students. Question 18 can be useful in assessing future labor market outcomes and general usefulness of the discipline, in a manner more specific to departmental and instructor goal setting.

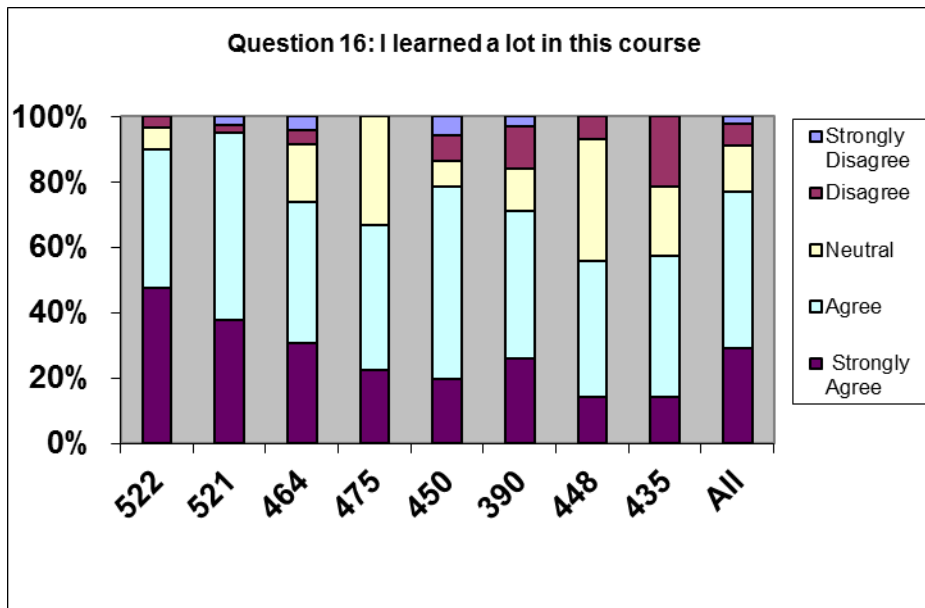
## **Results**

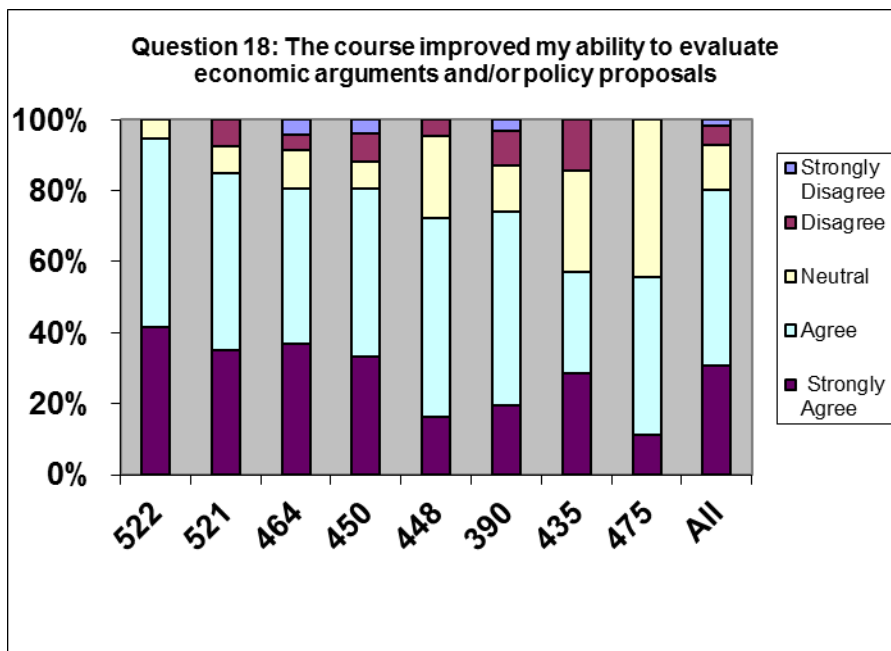
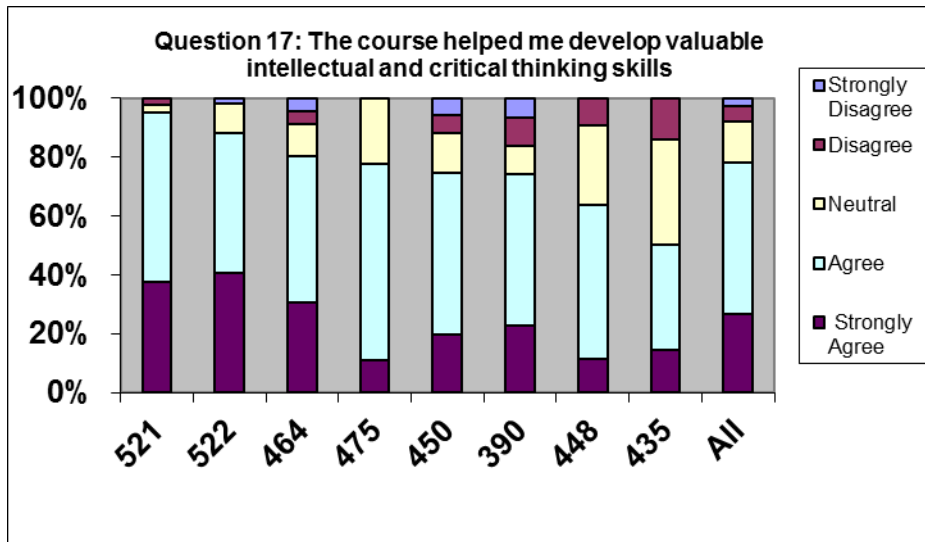
It is important to consider that this electronic format was being used for the first time. We knew the switch from paper to electronic evaluations would result in changes in response rates and respondents' characteristics. We remain very conscious of the likelihood that students' answers may be affected by the medium; writing on paper with ink in one's own handwriting is a more personal commitment than clicking on a number on a keyboard. The Department is still in the process of evaluating and understanding these changes and their effect on the interpretation of the data obtained on student learning. We regard these responses as a new and valid baseline whose value will indubitably increase with further semesters' use.

Given the large amount of data collected and the many nuances in interpretation, we are only able to present the data for a set of advanced electives courses from our curricular array. These courses are generally taken

by economics majors in their third or fourth year (juniors and seniors) and have as prerequisites one or two of the intermediate theory courses. Students need to complete two or more advanced electives (depending on the chosen Option of the major) to graduate with an economics major. The courses vary in size (from 38 students to 120), and the response rates oscillate between 30% and 48% of the enrolled students. These courses provide a good benchmark of undergraduate success in our major among students already committed to the discipline.

The charts below offer a consistent and gratifying picture. About 77-80% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statements of the three learning assessments. We are very encouraged by these results. We hope to look at them more carefully over the remainder of the summer and build a sound platform we can use in coming terms as a basis for comparison. In all three bar graphs, the horizontal axis breaks down the data by course numbers, the vertical designates the strength of the respondents' agreement with the statement.





### One Additional Perspective on Assessment

A challenge for all departments, including Economics, is to know the employment outcomes of our graduates. This is one critical market test of the quality of skills students acquire in college. It is a particularly natural metric for a discipline like economics that focuses on the workings and outcomes of markets. It is surprisingly difficult, however, to acquire this information. For the past few years, the Department has been conducting student surveys after both Spring and Winter graduations. Low response rates (far below 50 percent) have persisted despite our best efforts to encourage student participation. This year the Department is experimenting by providing a positive incentive for

students, offering a randomly allocated prize to a lucky survey completer (a plane ticket back to Madison or two nights in Union South) in an effort to boost completion rates. Our short survey focuses primarily on post-graduation plans and the effectiveness of departmental efforts to enhance employment outcomes. However, one question we included will eventually be useful as part of our continuing efforts to assess and improve student learning outcomes, an “overall satisfaction with the Department” rating. Data from this question may not be useful this year as there were problems with the construction of the rating scale we used, but we will continue to refine this for future surveys. An open-ended survey question seeking feedback on how we can improve may provide more immediate ideas we can discuss as a department. Already, feedback has supported our efforts to enhance the breadth of our course offerings, improve our teaching quality, and enlarge and strength our academic and career advising services.

Demand remains a primary measurement, in any case. The growth of our department is shadowed by many economics departments across the nation, shadowed, but not outshined. Going back to our analysis of “market,” the facts are clear. In the 2006-07 academic year we had just over 300 majors. Today, we’re over 1,000. Our challenges are as clear as our motivation.