

Department of Economics
Student Outcome Assessment Plan (SOAP)

California State University, Fresno
Fall 2003

Description of the Program

Mission, goals and learning outcomes

The Department developed its “Student Outcome Assessment Plan” in Spring 1999 under the direction of Dr. James Cypher, who was chair at the time. This plan was the Department’s first effort to specify expected student outcomes and to delineate a method for formally assessing learning outcomes for the program as a whole. The assessment plan was done in lieu of the normal 5-year review which would have been scheduled for the 1998-1999 academic year.

The Department’s mission statement follows:

Advancing economic understanding is the mission of the Department of Economics. The study of economic ideas and theories, the attainment of economic literacy and economic reasoning are fundamental elements of a liberal arts education. Acquiring proficiency in economics is a necessary component of active citizenship. Thus, the Department’s objective is to ensure that students acquire the ability to reason analytically regarding economic issues, theories and institutions.

The Department described seven goals for the program. The first six of these goals focus on student learning. The final goal describes how the Department should interact with the community and the region. The Department’s goals are:

1. Economic competence: Mastery of the descriptive, conceptual, and analytic processes necessary to understand the nature of economic systems, their functioning and their dynamic properties.
2. Analytic competence: Instruct student in the methods of quantitative analysis and statistical techniques, empirical methods and hypothesis testing.
3. Critical thinking: Enable students to acquire new knowledge and understanding which will allow them to think broadly, rationally and critically regarding a full range of social issues.
4. Communication skills: Ability to present complex economic arguments and concepts; capability of explaining and articulating economic analyses; proficiency in accurate oral and written communication.
5. Application of economics: To acquire the methods of modern scientific economics in order to address societal issues. Learning to apply economic analyses in the context of professional employment.
6. Social awareness and responsibility: To acquire understanding of a diverse and complex society, and an increasingly integrated global environment. To play a leadership role based upon informed, balanced and reflective decision-making in a full range of social contexts, including the workplace and civil society.
7. Community economic education: To advance the level of economic understanding in the community at large.

In its student outcomes assessment plan, the Department described the learning outcomes that are associated with each of the goals listed above. The learning outcomes are listed below with the relevant goal:

1. Economic competence:
 - a. General education: All students are required to demonstrate knowledge acquisition in the fundamentals of microeconomic theory and analysis, macroeconomic analysis and the fundamentals of international trade and finance.
 - b. Upper division: All students are required to demonstrate in depth analysis of complex, advanced knowledge in the field of economics, and in applied areas of analysis.
2. Analytic competence: Mastery of analytical methods of various models and dominant paradigms through comparative analysis, the application of statistical techniques, comparative static analysis and dynamic methods, models and theories.
3. Critical thinking: Intellectual maturity as exhibited through a variety of written and oral presentations, including logical argumentation. Critical thinking through analytical testing of core received ideas and “conventional wisdoms” as advanced in the present historical moment and over the past two hundred and fifty years. Breadth through a variety of course electives, or at the introductory level, through the presentation of conflicting and clashing views in the context of economic policy issues.
4. Communication skills: Familiarity with and proficiency in communicating economic analysis in group and large audience settings. Ability to explain economic ideas and concepts to both trained and general listeners. Excellent general writing skills in the context of short reports, essays, research papers, reviews and summaries. Ability to communicate with the aid of graphs, tables, formulas, models and other quantitative measures, or formal mathematical concepts.
5. Application of economics: Applications of knowledge, including core theoretical concepts, to a broad range of social issues. Application of economic analysis, or simulations of actual applications, through exam and assignment format, possibly including surveys and sampling or “situational” type questions and problems which simulate employment applications.
6. Social awareness and responsibility: To acquire a comprehensive analysis and understanding of social stratification, the determination of policy decision and processes and the dynamic and institutional properties of economies other than the U.S. through courses emphasizing international content and context.
7. Community economic education: To diffuse economic knowledge through public presentations, applied research, grant-supported activities, publications and through print and electronic media.

Assessment activities

As part of its student outcomes assessment plan, the Department undertook a number of assessment activities. A brief description of the assessment activities follows:

- *Student focus group*: In Spring 2000, Dr. Cypher facilitated a focus group of 10 economics majors. The main findings of the focus group were that the Department offers a solid, highly-regarded program, morale among students is high, lower division courses

are perceived as being too difficult, mandatory advising should be considered, and the Economics Club should be strengthened. In response to this assessment, the Department placed a higher priority on advising, encouraged students to see their faculty advisor each semester, and assigned Dr. Hays, one of our newer faculty, to sponsor the Economics Club.

- *Econometrics project*: One aspect of the assessment of our economics major is utilizing a capstone/senior experience that all majors must take near the end of time as students, specifically the final project for Introduction to Econometrics, one of the Department's three upper division core courses. This project has been assigned annually since 1999 and copies of all projects have been kept allowing for comparisons across years. The projects are evaluated using a scoring rubric that emphasizes three main objectives of our major: Discipline-specific knowledge, communication skills and problem-solving skills. Each of these three objectives is divided into subcategories including: General economic theory, Econometric application, spelling/grammar, flow of argument, understanding of the function and limitation of econometric models, and drawing appropriate conclusions. In addition, the originality of the paper and ability to complete the project are also analyzed. By utilizing cross-year comparisons, it has been possible to ensure that the quality of our students finishing their degrees by completing the econometric course is consistent even when different professors teach the econometrics course. Several changes have been made to Introduction to Econometrics as a result of this assessment activity. First, the research project is now required of all students in the course, no matter which faculty member teaches the course. Second, students are now required to present their research projects orally.
- *Assessment of Economics Themes in Film course*: The Department has undertaken an assessment of one of our most popular upper division general education courses, Economic Themes in Film (ECON 176) Dr. Leet and Dr. Houser developed a test of the economic way of thinking (EWOT) and administered pre-tests and post-tests to students in ECON 176 and in the Department's more traditional one-semester economics course, Modern American Economy (ECON 165). They found that students in the film course showed greater improvement in their ability to use EWOT. Dr. Leet and Dr. Houser published one paper on this course in the *Journal of Economic Education* (Fall 2003) and presented preliminary results of their analysis of the course's efficacy for teaching the economic way of thinking at the Allied Social Science Association annual meeting in 1999.
- *Economics competency exam*: The Department developed an economics competency exam to assess the learning outcomes for the Department's lower division principles courses and to give the School of Business a way to assess their students' knowledge of economics. Dr. Leet and Dr. Houser met with the School of Business' curriculum committee to discuss their concerns about their students' competence in economic principles. Based on his experience in economic education and several national testing projects, Dr. Leet developed tests for microeconomics, macroeconomics, and international economics. The tests were given in several introductory marketing courses in Spring and Fall 2003. The Department and the School of Business are currently reviewing the data. The results of this assessment will be used to improve the principles courses.
- *Student survey*: The Department conducted a survey of economics majors in Fall 2003. The survey was designed to elicit information about the quality of instruction, advising, scheduling, and other issues. A copy of the student survey instrument is included in Appendix 4. The survey indicates that students are generally pleased with the quality of courses and instruction. Student opinions about the quality of advising had improved dramatically since the student focus group in Spring 2000. There were two issues

identified in the student survey that have been identified as requiring action by the Department. First, almost half of the economics majors surveyed indicated that there should be a required sequence of courses. Second, 40 percent of students stated that courses were not scheduled to meet their needs. The Department will continue to analyze these survey data and determine how to respond to the student concerns about the structure of the major and course scheduling.

- *Alumni survey:* The Department sent a survey to its alumni to solicit their opinions on the quality of the education that they received from the Department and their perceptions of the current structure of the economics major. The survey results are beginning to come in as this self-study is being completed. We will report the results of the survey to the review team in the spring.

The Department continues to assess student learning outcomes. Several assessment activities are on-going (e.g., the econometric research project and the economics competency test for business students). Other activities, such as the student survey and the alumni survey, will be repeated periodically. The Department plans to undertake the following assessment activities in the next 5 to 7 years:

1. Focus group of graduating econ majors;
2. Biannual survey of majors;
3. Alumni survey;
4. Joint assessment with School of Business of student learning in principles courses using tests in business classes;
5. Comparison of learning outcomes in unitrack and our in-house principles courses using a test of economic understanding;
6. Comparison of learning outcomes in principles classes taught by full-time and part-time faculty using a test of economic understanding;
7. Focus group assessment of departmental internship program from employer and student perspectives;
8. Assessment of upper division GE classes using a test assessing economic thinking;
9. Formation of an alumni group and/or a community advisory group to assess curriculum and advise on research that would help focus students and faculty on community needs and problems.