Undergraduate Program Assessment

Department of Economics

Student Learning Objectives
We seek to develop the following capacities or abilities in our undergraduate students:

- to explain microeconomic and macroeconomic phenomena.
- to apply economic reasoning to public policy questions.
- to interpret models of production, distribution, and consumption.
- to evaluate the economic arguments for and against alternative government policies, by examining the effects of markets and of public policy on national economies, firms, consumers, workers, families, and the environment.
- to identify normative and positive critiques of economic models.
- to be critical consumers of economic information.
- to use analytic tools such as constrained maximization and marginal analysis, game theory, cost-benefit analysis and discounting, and class analysis to model the behavior of agents in the economy.
- to analyze quantitative data using modern tools such as spreadsheets and statistical applications, to interpret the results, and to communicate the results with well-designed tables and figures.
- to write about the economy in readable prose that will convince educated lay readers, decision-makers, and economists.
- to understand and interpret disparate views on and approaches to economic questions and policies.

Assessment tools

- Consultation. Undergraduate Advisory Council for Economics (U-ACE); surveys of enrolled students and majors; Economics Alum Advisory Board.

- Ongoing surveys. In spring 2012, UPD/CAA J. Kevin Crocker conducted a survey of students in Intermediate Microeconomics (ECON 203) and Intermediate Macroeconomics (ECON 204). The survey inquired about the effort required to enroll in the intermediate theory courses and about experiences with advising in the Department. The surveys provide a baseline and will enable more frequent updates to our assessment of the performance of the undergraduate program than does the rolling three-year average of the senior surveys. We are also implementing a platform that will let us easily survey students on their experience and needs.

- Evidence-based policy. The Undergraduate Studies Committee consists of four tenure system faculty and senior lecturers, including the UPD/CAA, and one graduate student. The Committee discusses all changes to the program and uses an evidence-based approach to setting policy, using data from surveys, focus groups, the student advisory body, and the Economics Alum Advisory Board. The Committee also relies on guidance from current pedagogical research in higher education in general and economics in particular. The UPD/CAA and the Chair consult frequently on matters concerning the undergraduate program.

- Professional faculty. The Department relies on an engaged and professional faculty to design curriculum and evaluate student progress. Developing capacity for abstract thought and critical thinking is the foundation of the Student Learning Objectives, and much of the knowledge gained is emergent.

Highlighted recent activities

- Econometrics (ECON 452). Since Fall 2011, the department has offered undergraduate Econometrics (ECON 452) every semester in response to feedback from Economics Alum Advisory Board members about the need for better preparation in quantitative skills. In most semesters the course has been taught by a tenure-system faculty member.

- Undergraduate Advisory Council for Economics (U-ACE). Since Fall 2011, the Chair (Ash) and the Chief Academic Advisor/Undergraduate Program Director (CAA/UPD) Crocker have convened students as the
Undergraduate Advisory Council for Economics (U-ACE) approximately twice per semester. The Council serves as focus group and advisory council and helps the Chair and CAA/UPD to identify areas of student concern.

- Undergraduate Economics Club (UEC). The energized Undergraduate Economics Club (UEC) continues to meet on a monthly basis and to involve our most engaged and enthusiastic students. The UEC has changed from electing a single president to selecting a four-person Board of Governors. The UEC sponsors an annual debate. The spring 2013 topic was free trade as a development strategy. The UEC has also sponsored the new Massachusetts Undergraduate Journal of Economics (MUJE), which will publish its inaugural issue in spring 2013. The all-undergraduate editorial board of MUJE solicits articles from undergraduates in the Five Colleges and at all public institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth.

- LMS-based communication with majors. We are developing a zero-credit course in the learning management system which will enroll all majors every semester. The online site for majors will enable: communication with majors using announcements; systematic information gathering with survey tools; and posting internship and career opportunities of special interest to majors.

- Online scheduling software. In 2011-12 Economics implemented online scheduling software for advising. Undergraduates can select types of advising appointments (major/minor declaration, registration hold, course counseling, career counseling, etc.) and advising personnel. The meeting is automatically scheduled, reminders are emailed to all participants, and tracking and follow-up are possible.

- Expanded advising. While we had previously advised students only when they were declaring the major or if their GPA fell below 2.5, since spring 2012 we now also advise all spring-semester juniors.

- Peer advising. The department initiated peer advising in February 2012 with the enlistment of one undergraduate economics major as peer advisor for ten hours peer week. We now offer more than 20 hours per week of peer advising provided by undergraduates. We envision expanding the peer advising to include peer mentoring, a one-on-one relationship between undergraduate mentors and new majors.

- Career advising. U-ACE participants and alums expressed an ongoing concern among our majors for more career advising (and indicated that they need more focused advice than can be provided by Career Services). We have provided career advising with the support of the Economics Alum Advisory Board and a course Job Skills for Economics Majors (ECON 491I). Beginning in Fall 2012, Economics alum, financial economist, and UMass Lecturer Doug Cliggott has offered career advising to undergraduates interested in careers in the financial sector.

- Advising Row. We have rearranged space in the department to create “Advising Row,” the first three offices that welcome students when they exit the elevator on the Tenth Floor of Thompson Hall. The first office houses the Undergraduate Program Assistant, the second office houses the Peer Advisors and has a connecting door to the office of the Undergraduate Program Assistant, and the third office belongs to the UPD/CAA. The aim is to provide a coherent and welcoming space for students when they come to their department.

- Field Experience and Study Abroad. In fall 2011 Senior Lecturer Rus Janis took over the Field Experience (internships and co-ops) position in the Department and has expanded the position to include advising for Study Abroad. We are in the process of identifying Study Abroad programs that are a good match for Economics majors, for example, where the coursework abroad is likely to receive full credit in major at UMass.

- Concentrations. To guide students through our undergraduate program, the Department has developed concentrations or clusters for undergraduates. With the exception of the new and popular Undergraduate Certificate in Cooperative Economics, these will not be formally recognized, but will help students to make better course selections.

- Blended courses. In Fall 2012 the Department offered a large (c. 700-student) blended microeconomics lecture taught by Full Professor Gerald Friedman. The Department engaged CFTDD to conduct surveys and focus groups to assess the quality of instruction, and student satisfaction with the blended course was high.

- Undergraduate Research Assistants (UGRA’s). We initiated Undergraduate Research Assistantships in Fall 2012 and offered them in both semesters. Undergraduate applicants are assigned to faculty members as research assistants for one semester. The competitively awarded RA-ships provides three
credits in an Independent Study, offers a modest cash prize, and includes training in necessary statistical and other quantitative applications. We have enrolled eight students to date.

- Undergraduate Certificate in Applied Economic Research on Co-operative Enterprises. The Department is now in its third year of offering its undergraduate certificate in cooperative enterprise. The certificate combines coursework with field experience to prepare students for entrepreneurial careers in the fast-growing cooperative sector of the economy.

- Class size. Beginning in Fall 2012, the department reduced the standard enrollment of faculty small-classroom courses from 32 to 25 students. Faculty and undergraduate have expressed appreciation for the new configuration. Faculty have been able to assign more writing, conduct more engaging discussions, and develop better relationships with students that improve the students experience and long-term connections with the Department and UMass. The Undergraduate Advisory Council for Economics has confirmed faculty reports.

- Section size. Students have indicated section size as a major impediment to a top-quality educational experience in the Department. At 32 students per section, typical undergraduate sections in Economics are more than 50 percent larger than those in peer departments Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology. The quality of the undergraduate experience is one of the keys to success for UMass in the new competitive environment in higher education, and improving the quality of the experience is a high priority for the Provost. Discussion, writing with feedback, and student engagement are our top priorities for improving the classroom experience, and the capacity to make our TA’s more effective with smaller sections is a key component. The ability to offer smaller sections is constrained by the availability of resources; undergraduate demand for the major remains high, and highly qualified graduate students are available to teach.

Future Programs initiatives and activities

- Reduce size of TA discussion section to 25 students.
- Invite newly declared majors to an induction ceremony.
- Foster community among upper-level students with UEC, undergraduate RA-ships, and opportunities to serve as peer mentors.
- Develop a program in quantitative methods and data analysis.