March 19, 2020

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Dr. Lobo,

Thank you for allowing me to visit UTC and review the BA in Economics Program. I enjoyed meeting the faculty and administrators and learning about the department, university and city. Below is my narrative review of the BA in Economics Program at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

This report should fulfill my obligation as an external reviewer for the Economics program. If you need any further information, have questions, or require follow up, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Todd L. Cherry
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Bachelor of Arts, Economics
External Review Narrative

March 19, 2020

PART 1 – Learning Outcomes

How would you rank this program with similar ones in the state, region, and nation?

In terms of learning outcomes, the BA in Economics program at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga corresponds closely to similar programs in the state, region and nation. The curriculum compares well against those at peer institutions and establishes a solid foundation for targeted learning outcomes. The curriculum requires standard core courses and elective upper-level courses. The list of elective courses provides comprehensive coverage of the breadth of economics. The mix of enrollment, faculty lines and student credit hour production correspond to other programs. Enrollment in economics programs located in colleges of business tend to be small for exogenous reasons, but enrollment in the BA in Economics program at UTC is a bit lower than most. After years of instability, the program and faculty are poised for growth. The current enrollment is likely due to the lack of momentum (even decline) from years of uncertainty (e.g., failed chair searches) and weak departmental leadership (e.g., interim and outside chairs). The recent move to the Gary W. Rollins College of Business offers an opportunity for stability and growth. With appropriate resources and engaged faculty, the number of majors/minors in the BA Economics Program should experience meaningful growth in the future. As on many campuses, curricula at the college and university levels rely on courses in the Economics program. As such, economics faculty are relatively productive, generating more student credit hours per full-time faculty member than college and university benchmarks.

Are the intended program and learning outcomes clearly identified?

Since the last review, the Department approved specific learning outcomes for the BA Economics students. The learning objectives are clearly identified and correspond to standard practices in similar programs. They focus on economic concepts, quantitative reasoning, analytical skills, critical-thinking, integrative-thinking, and communication skills. The learning objectives align with the mission of the Rollins College of Business "to provide quality educational programs that produce academically-prepared and business-world ready graduates for a competitive global environment."

What goals should the department establish regarding its curriculum?

Regarding goals for the BA in Economics program, I would suggest exploring the possibility of concentrations. The current program provides a solid starting point from which to create new programs of study for students without requiring significant resources. Concentrations could be constructed around required electives and required minors (BA degrees require a minor). For example, a concentration in Public Policy may require three related upper-level courses (e.g., Regulation and Anti-trust, Environmental, Public Finance, etc.) and a related minor (e.g., Political Science, Criminal Justice). Similarly, a concentration in Computational Economics may require three related upper-level courses (e.g., Econometrics, Game Theory, etc.) and a minor in Computer Science (e.g., Machine Learning, Programming, etc.). A pre-law concentration may be possible.

Concentrations rely on course offerings, so selected areas should flow from the interest and expertise of existing faculty and available minors. If designed well, the cost of creating a concentration is the potential loss in flexibility of scheduling, which points to the need to offer the required upper-level courses. Flexibility can be recovered to some extent by requiring students to take a subset of a list of courses (e.g. 3 of 5 courses).

I would also suggest exploring the possibility of joint programs with other departments. More than other departments in the Rollins College of Business, the Department of Economics can be an important bridge to all corners of the campus. Indeed, a strong Department of Economics can uniquely improve the strategic position of the College of Business on and off campus. One way to do this is to collaborate with departments across campus on joint-programs. As with concentrations, the options depend on existing faculty and departments, but potential collaborating departments include Political Science, International Studies, Math, Computer Science, Philosophy, History, etc.

As discussed in the following section, the faculty appear to excel in the classroom. Based on assessment data, students receive effective instruction in the classroom. As such, I have little to suggest regarding new goals for teaching, faculty qualifications and development. Located in an AACSB College of Business addresses faculty qualification. During my visit, faculty expressed a general, if not universal, satisfaction with the resources available for development.

What criteria does the department use to evaluate sufficient achievement of intended program outcomes? Are the criteria appropriate for such evaluation and/or for the program?

The assessment methods and metrics are well-developed and appropriate. Majors are assessed in required intermediate courses, which is the last common course taken by all majors. One improvement would be to move assessment to the final year of study. As it stands, assessment does not include some upper-level coursework and may include students that switch away from the program. Results from the assessment provide evidence that the program is successfully meeting its learning goals, though the sample sizes are limiting. The data indicates that nearly all students meet or exceed learning outcomes (about 90%). As stated, the BA in Economics has a solid curriculum, and the assessment results indicate effective instruction from the faculty.

Does the department make use of evaluation information and/or information obtained from student, alumni, and employer surveys and/or data from institutional research to strengthen and improve the program?

Beyond the assessment methods being appropriate, the Department collects very useful information about student experiences. Individual instructors receive student feedback on courses via online course evaluations, and the department receives student feedback on the program via an exit survey. The Department generally received high marks in the student satisfaction survey. Relative to the college and university, students rated the Department higher in areas related to their learning (problem-solving and informed citizen) and experience (interaction with faculty) and lower in diversity (interaction with diverse students). Diversity is a discipline-wide issue for Economics. Many departments are engaged in addressing this issue, and it's worth noting that the Department of Economics at UTC is engaged in this issue as well.

Part 2 – Curriculum

Is the current curriculum appropriate to the level and purpose of the program? Is it adequate to enable students to develop the skills and attain the outcomes needed for graduates of the program? Does it reflect the current standards, practices, and issues in the discipline?

The BA in Economics program is consistent with the programs at similar universities. The required core classes match other curricula and elective offerings include a sufficient range of fields. Instructors appear to create appropriate syllabi and deliver sufficiently rigorous courses. The content and rigor are appropriate for the program (BA in Economics). As mentioned previously, the introduction of concentrations could offer students tracks that align with their interests and career goals. The BA in Economics program is adequate and reflects current standards, practices and issues in the discipline.

Does the department regularly review and revise curriculum content and organization to ensure that it is appropriate and that it prepares students to meet the specified learning outcomes? Will the department need to update the curriculum and/or develop new or alternative offerings in the near future?

The Department recently reviewed course offerings to improve efficiency and scheduling. It is currently exploring opportunities to expand and differentiate offerings to better serve student needs. Recent efforts led to improvements, and there are opportunities for further improvements. As mentioned previously, there are opportunities to create concentrations within the program, and there are opportunities to collaborate across campus on joint-programs. These are not necessary, but they represent opportunities for development and growth. I'm optimistic because the departmental leadership appears committed to continued improvements at this critical juncture in the program.

Is the curriculum content appropriate for UTC? Are the core and advanced courses approximately balanced? Does the curriculum ensure the development of appropriate skills in the following areas: general education, critical thinking skills, research strategies and skills, written and oral communications, and computer and technology-related skills (in general and specific to the discipline)?

The curriculum content and rigor are appropriate for UTC. Economics is quite standardized at the undergraduate level, and the BA in Economics at UTC corresponds closely to those standards. Required core classes are standard, and the offerings for required elective hours are sufficiently diverse. However, I note the low enrollment and a small faculty limit the number electives offered each semester. The challenge is to simultaneously increase the numbers of majors and faculty members to enhance upper-level offerings and co-curricular activities. The BA in Economics program provides comprehensive coverage in all dimensions—general education, critical thinking skills, research strategies/skills, written and oral communication, and technology-related skills. By design, the BA program offers a well-balanced and well-rounded curriculum. Along with student satisfaction survey results, discussions with students indicated that the courses prepared them well for subsequent courses and eventual employment related to the discipline.

Are appropriate pedagogical and/or technological innovations included that enhance student learning? Are the department's instructional practices consistent with the standards of the discipline?

Yes. Instructors employ standard practices and technology, but they also extend their efforts to innovative methods. I was impressed with their culture of innovative teaching that valued engaging and dynamic learning. For instance, one instructor explained how she incorporated movies and documentaries in novel ways to illustrate concepts and stimulate discussions. This culture is a result of an engaged and caring faculty. One of the most impressive observations during my visit were the extremely positive views that students shared about their instructors. They consistently expressed sincere appreciation for the personal interaction and support from instructors. Students were aware that instructors cared about their learning and success, and they appreciated it. The student-faculty relationships are clearly meaningful. It was unclear what extent central advising would support BA students, and while this is a good idea, the faculty may keep in mind how this would affect these relationships.

Does the department clearly outline program requirements and offer courses regularly to ensure timely completion of the program?

As mentioned elsewhere, the Department clearly outlines the program requirements, which are adequate and reflects the current standards and practices in the discipline. Though recent changes have addressed offerings and scheduling, it is an issue to keep in mind going forward. The small number of faculty members leaves little room for error in scheduling. One student shared that his graduation was delayed because, due to a mistake by advising, he had to wait a year before a required course was offered again. Of course, I cannot verify the student's claim, but it does illustrate how the small numbers leave little room for error by the advising office, students, or departmental scheduling. The BA program and Department would benefit significantly from the addition of a new tenure-track or non-tenure track faculty member. The addition would enhance the student experience by lowering class sizes, increasing course offerings and expanding co-curricular activities. It would also improve the current over-reliance on adjunct faculty.

PART 3 – Student Experience

Does the program and curricula provide students with the opportunities to evaluate the curriculum and the faculty? What procedures are in place to ensure and document that the department provides students with regular opportunities to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of teaching? How well is this information used to improve the program?

Yes. The Department collects very useful information about student experiences. Individual instructors receive student feedback on courses via online course evaluations, and the department receives student feedback on the program via an exit survey. These assessment tools are embedded in the standard operating procedure of courses, and results are regularly reviewed by the faculty.

Do students have adequate opportunities to participate in professional and career opportunities appropriate to the discipline and to opportunities to apply what they have learned outside of the classroom?

The students are afforded excellent opportunities for professional and career development outside the classroom. This has improved significantly with the move to the Rollins College of Business. The Decosimo Success Center in the Rollins College of Business offers academic advisors, career advisors, internship advisors, and professional development advisors. There are many co-curricular programs, such as the Bridge Luncheons, Business Card Workshops, Resume Week, Unum Scholars Program, Moc Interview Week, Entrepreneurship Breakfast, SMILE Fund, among many others. Notably, economics students are able to participate in internships via the college program. Recent internship and employment opportunities include UBS Financial Services, Purchasing Division of Volkswagen, and the Tennessee Valley Authority. The array of opportunities at the college level is impressive.

The opportunities are largely provided at the college level. This is appropriate and standard, but there are openings for improved department-level and major-specific activities (e.g., economics club, Fed Challenge, etc.). Past instability surely dampened momentum for these programs, but the current situation offers opportunities to develop momentum and growth. However, at this time, the small number of faculty is a constraint on faculty time for new initiatives. The chairperson is impressive and appears willing to carry the load with new ideas for major-specific activities. I should mention that students also benefit from many university services, such as the Disability Resource Center, the Counseling Center and the Student Outreach and Support office.

What curricular and/or extracurricular activities does the department offer towards exposure to diversity? Do these activities provide adequate opportunities for students to be exposed to the perspective or underrepresented groups?

Economics, as a discipline, lacks gender diversity relative to most other fields. While the discipline does better with ethnic diversity, this often appears at the graduate level and among faculty. This explains the apparent lack of gender and ethnic diversity in the BA program. While the faculty are quite diverse relative to other departments, the students are less diverse. Of course, this is largely driven by the demographics of the campus. However, from this baseline, the diversity among faculty members is noteworthy. I was impressed by the diversity of perspectives that emerged from my conversations with faculty members. These discussions also emphasized the group's efforts to provide opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse perspectives (e.g., Empower You Future).

Do the students have access to appropriate academic support services? Describe the academic support services and comment on their adequacy and appropriateness.

Students enjoy a wide range of academic support services. As mentioned, the Decosimo Success Center in the Rollins College of Business offers academic advisors, career advisors, internship advisors, and professional development advisors. The type of programs available to students is consistent with similar programs housed in a college of business, but the extent of support services goes beyond those provided by most programs. Advising is an area that may need attention. The advising office of the Rollins College of Business may be working through challenges with the transition, particularly because the introduction of the BA Program (from a relatively unique discipline) surely present challenges to the advising office. During my visit I heard stories of students receiving incorrect information from advising and that students were subtly steered away from economics. The former can be addressed with effort and experience, but the latter may require training and a shift in mindsets. Unlike many business majors, economics does not have a linear career path. Students often equate the value of a degree with clarity of its career path. This is incorrect of course, and advisors should correct this mistake rather than reinforce it. We know that, in an increasingly changing world, economics provides the general critical-thinking, analytical, and problem-solving skills that equip students to successfully navigate disruptions and opportunities. Much of the data point to these skills are in high demand and becoming more important, not less. It is important to build momentum in the program, and advisors will play an important role.

PART 4 – Faculty

Are faculty competencies/credentials appropriate to the level of the program, and do they at least meet the SACSCOC qualifications? Do faculty specialties correspond to the needs of the program? How might the program address needs for additional/different qualifications/expertise?

The faculty hold necessary credentials and competencies, and more importantly, they are engaged and committed instructors and active researchers. Since the last review, it appears that turnover has led to a younger faculty, which has translated to more engaged instructors and researchers. As mentioned elsewhere, I was impressed by the passion and energy that faculty members expressed towards teaching. Students shared their satisfaction with their experience and their admiration of the faculty. The faculty is generally research productive. The fields of expertise represented among the faculty appear to meet the needs of the program. There is an over-reliance on adjunct faculty, which negatively affects the program. As mentioned elsewhere, an additional faculty member would benefit the program.

Is the faculty adequate in number to meet the needs of the program with reasonable and efficient teaching loads and/or credit hour productions? Are the regular-to-adjunct faculty ratios appropriate for the program?

The small number of faculty present issues that warrant some attention. As mentioned elsewhere, an additional faculty member would improve the offerings of courses, reduce class sizes and support more co-curricular activities. These outcomes, in conjunction with other efforts, would translate to better student experiences and more majors. Scheduling can address some issues, but the program would benefit from additional course offerings, smaller class sizes and additional co-curricular activities (all requiring additional personnel). The balance of tenure track and adjunct faculty is not atypical but still concerning. The Adjuncts serve an important role but they simply cannot provide the critical non-instructional contributions required for a well-functioning program. Improving this ratio is particularly important for a relatively small program.

With respect to ethnicity, gender, and academic background, is faculty diversity appropriate for the program?

Yes. The diversity of the faculty is appropriate for the program. Full-time faculty consists of three women and five men, which is a more balanced ratio than many departments. Of the eight faculty members, four are American, two are French, one is Bangladeshi, and one Jamaican. Relative to similar programs, the faculty of the BA in Economics program is relatively more diverse, particularly in respect to gender.

Does the program use a faculty evaluation system to improve teaching, scholarly and creative activities, and service? Does the system include information from the teaching evaluations of student, alumni, and employer surveys? Are the faculty evaluation procedures adequate and successfully implemented and used?

Faculty members are evaluated annually. Faculty members meet with the Department head to discuss his/her research, teaching and service performance during the previous year and objectives/goals are set for the next year. The faculty members receive ratings of either ‘exceeds expectations’ or ‘meets expectations’ or ‘does not meet expectations’ based on performance. Maintenance of Scholarly Academic status and progress towards tenure are components of the evaluation. The process appears to be a meaningful evaluation that is impactful for faculty performance and ongoing development. The faculty evaluation process corresponds to other processes in other departments at similar institutions.

Are faculty engaged in scholarly, creative, professional association, and service activities that enhance instructional expertise in their areas of specialty?

Faculty are engaged in scholarly activity and professional associations. The members are recipients of summer research grants and faculty development grants. They regularly present their research at professional conferences. This activity has increased markedly since the last program review. There is ample opportunity for professional development at the college and university levels. The Walker Center for Teaching and Learning offers for professional development, including classroom observation/feedback, seminars on teaching, and workshops on technology in the classroom. The faculty have taken advantage of these resources over the past five years. Development resources are adequate and consistent with other programs at similar institutions.

Are faculty engaged in the planning, evaluation and improvement processes that measure and advance student success?

Yes. The faculty are engaged in the planning, evaluation and improvement processes. Faculty members coordinate course content in core courses to ensure students are exposed to a common core across sections and instructors. This faculty coordination improves how individual courses work together in the curriculum, while also improving student learning and success. As mentioned elsewhere, the Department receives feedback on the program via a survey of majors. This is coordinated by faculty members. Individual faculty receive student feedback on their instruction and courses via a student evaluation system.

PART 5 – Learning Resources

Does the program regularly evaluate its equipment and facilities and pursue necessary improvements?

The Department appears to have access to equipment necessary for their operations, including a copier, printer, etc. Individual faculty members are equipped with necessary computers and software. There is a program that replaces computers every four years, which may be a bit long in some cases. For special needs, faculty members can request additional equipment, software, databases, etc. Students have access to the necessary computers and software. UTC provides IT support for faculty and students, and the Rollins College of Business has a dedicated IT staff member. The budget priorities appear consistent with the needs of the program and correspond to programs at similar institutions.

Are library holdings and other learning and information resources current and adequate to support the teaching and learning needs of the discipline?

Discussions with faculty and administrators indicate that library and development resources are adequate. Faculty generally reported sufficient resources. The library does not have EconLit, which is a core database for the economics literature. This is a standard resource that is enjoyed by faculty at similar universities, but general search engines offer adequate if imperfect substitutes.

Part 6 – Support

Is the program's operating budget consistent with the needs of the program?

Based on the self-study and visit, the program's operating budget appears consistent with the needs of the program. Faculty reported adequate instructional and research support, as well as sufficient travel support. The Department has access to development funds and gift funds (via UC Foundation). Additional meaningful support is provided at the college and university levels.

Though the program's operating budget is adequate, there is an opportunity to dramatically elevate the program. The Probasco Chair is a separate unit, but it should coordinate with the Department. By coordinating the activities and budgets of the Probasco Chair and the Department, the potential for impact and success expands for both units. There should be an expectation that the next Probasco Chair should accept the role of contributing leadership to the department, which includes coordinating some initiatives and activities. The separation that existing in the past wasted important opportunities to elevate the department and college. As mentioned during my visit, this is an opportunity to transform and elevate both units, so it's critical to hire the right person for this position.

Does the program have a history of enrollment and graduation rates sufficient to sustain high quality and cost effectiveness?

Enrollment in the program is smaller than one may expect. This appears to be a result of past instability and previous ineffective leadership. These issues have been addressed, so the program appears poised for development and growth moving forward. The program is cost-effective, even at low enrollments, because the marginal cost of related course offerings is essentially zero. Again, the program has untapped enrollment potential that would strengthen the program, as well as other programs in the department and college. The Department Head is leading multiple efforts to increase enrollment and engagement. The Department generates considerable credit hours via general education and business core requirements. This production appears steady and provides a foundation for growth.

Is the program responsive to local, state, regional and national needs of the discipline?

The program is responsive to local, state regional and national needs. The curriculum provides critical skills for students and employers. Students and faculty engage in relevant issues. The limited number of faculty is a constraint on further engagement. As mentioned elsewhere, the hiring of a new Probasco Chair is a tremendous opportunity to elevate the program's impact at the local, state, regional and national levels.

PART 7 – Summary Recommendations

Overall, what are your impressions of the program?

The program is well-designed and executed by a qualified and effective faculty. Enrollment is low but the program is cost-effective. The program corresponds to those at similar institutions. Students are impressive and extremely pleased with the program and faculty.

The strengths of the program are the faculty, which are engaged and passionate about their instruction. Equally, the Department Head is truly impressive. He is a tremendous asset for the program and Department. He is well-suited to lead the program forward, which presents great potential for meaningful growth in enrollment and impact. Following years of instability and scant leadership, the program has more stability, more resources and great leadership. The transition is challenging, but the opportunities are exciting.

The weakness of the program is its size. An additional faculty member is needed to enhance offerings, reduce class sizes and expand co-curricular programs and activities. These outcomes will improve student experiences and likely more majors. This would also address another concern—the adjunct-faculty ratio. Currently, the Department is too reliant on adjuncts, which affects the vibrancy of the program and therefore the ability to attract majors.

It is also critical to seize the previously missed opportunity from not integrating the Probasco Chair in the Department. The long-standing academic and operating distance between the Probasco Chair and the Department has greatly diminished the success of both. The missed possibilities are tremendous, but with the hiring of a new Probasco Chair, there is an opportunity to seize these missed opportunities for the future. The energy and resources would immediately make a difference. Thus, it is important to hire a person that will prefer to be a scholar in an academic department, rather than an influencer that operates separately from the academic mission of the university. By integrating the Chair and Department, the next hire could transform the program and Department, even elevating it to regional and national prominence. The Department simultaneously could elevate the standing and influence of the Probasco Chair. Integrating their operations would be a game-changer for both units. This may require leadership at the college and university levels, but the importance of getting this right warrants such attention.

What goals would you suggest the program set for the next five years? Please list goals in order of priority (i.e., the most important goal first, followed by the second most important goal, etc.)

1. An additional faculty member to relax the pressure of course offerings, class sizes and scheduling. It can also improve the concerning adjunct-faculty ratio.
2. Increase enrollment in the BA in Economics program.
3. Hire the ‘right’ person as the new Probasco Chair. This is a unique transformative opportunity.

4. Enhance curriculum by creating concentrations in the BA in Economics program and exploring joint-programs with other departments across campus.
5. Review and improve scheduling to assist students' progress to graduation.
6. Address possible unconscious bias against Economics in advising office.

How can the program work to achieve these goals over the next five years?

An important goal is to hire the 'right' person for the Probasco Chair. If this is done, it would greatly improve the ability to meet program goals. The leadership and resources, combined with a strong Department Head and engaged junior faculty, is a recipe for transformative success in student learning, faculty productivity and public engagement. I expect the enhanced energy and activities will draw students and majors, while expanding campus, local, state and regional impacts.

An easily obtainable goal for the BA in Economics program is to create concentrations in the BA in Economics program. As mentioned elsewhere, the 'packaging' of curriculum options can help draw students. It provides direction within a general degree. However, I would argue the concentrations should be in addition to the general BA program, which is a valuable option in itself. Similarly, the Department should explore creating joint-programs by collaborating with other departments on campus. This requires effort, but there is a well-defined process to realize an outcome.

The staff in the college advising office have a difficult job. The introduction of a new department surely makes it more challenging. There is a learning curve to understand how the new department fits in the curriculum and prepares student for their futures. This is not a new issue, particularly for economics programs. Student feedback indicated there have been problems with the advising office. I suggest that departments create a short video that explains the content and relevancy of their academic programs, along with an explanation of how the program prepares students for careers and life. Advisors can solidify their knowledge and understanding, but they can also direct students to the videos. This allows students to learn about the programs and career opportunities directly from the department. The videos are relatively inexpensive, but serve as a durable resource for advisors and students.

Another goal is to enhance or expand co-curricular programs and activities. Given the instability in recent years, these types of activities have not maintained necessary momentum. The new environment should allow the Department to pursue these programs and activities, which are important because they provide opportunities for student learning while also generating energy that attracts students to the program. A first step could be to reenergize the Economics Club, while other options include an undergraduate research program and regular participation in the Fed Challenge. As mentioned elsewhere, these activities are time-consuming and faculty time is particularly scarce in a small department.

Lastly, students mentioned there were past problems with getting access to needed courses. The Department has taken steps to address this issue, but with limited offerings, it is important to avoid scheduling conflict that affect majors and potential double majors. I suggest that scheduling coordinate with other departments to eliminate (minimize) conflicts between departments. This is particularly important for students pursuing double majors.