Economics Department

CCVC meeting

December 8, 2014

*1)      What are the strengths of your department/program? What do you already do well?  Remember that these responses will be shared with the community at large, so please use this opportunity to brag a little bit.  What do you want people outside your department/program to know about your successes and strengths?*

The Economics Department has a well-structured curriculum which provides a foundation in theory and empirical methods, a variety of applications, and is well-focused towards the capstone. Conversations with senior econ majors indicate that they judge we have a well-structured program with variety, well-focused on the goals towards the capstone. The curriculum and capstone project are designed with the intent of having students do undergraduate-level economic analysis and demonstrate this ability to potential employers and graduate programs. Upon graduation the senior economics majors report they feel capable and able to this. Program review, assessment activities, and verification from employers, as well as recent conversations with senior econ majors, confirm these features and the high quality of the program.

We have brought about noticeable improvement in student capstone performances over past five years (We have had the capstone project since 1990). We’ve used assessment feedback and been more intentional about what we are want students to do. We have revised the rest of the curriculum to better prepare students for the capstone. The most important example of this occurred in the late 1990’s, when the Department developed ECON 334 (Quantitative Methods in Economics) as an additional quantitative course for major on top of the MT124 requirement. The course is designed to prepare students to better succeed in completing quantitatively based capstone projects. The course has been revised regularly in light of departmental findings about student quantitative abilities.

Some capstone students could do master’s level work after the training, as seen in senior presentations. Our students demonstrate that they can use undergrad level tools to answer interesting and important questions. In the past ten years, we have observed that our student’s undergraduate papers compete well with those from Carleton, Macalester and other institutions that have year-long thesis courses. On the whole, the department’s evidence suggest that there program has more “value added” than many other schools.

Assessment has shown that ECON 334 not only helps in the capstone but in other level (Tier III) courses within the curriculum. Moreover, students are seeing the need for these quantitative tools as they graduate as well. They now have better statistical and spreadsheet skills than they have in the past.

*2)      What do you wish you could do better, or do more of?  What would it take (resources, support, etc.) for you to reach those goals?*

We’d like to be able to offer more quantitative coursework that students are asking for. We do not have the faculty to offer these courses, given the other courses that must be offered). Our classes are close to capacity (94% of capacity), and there is little room to teach outside of the major.

We contribute to FYS as much as possible. Usually we teach 1 section of FYS a year. We typically teach an ethics seminar once a year. Sucharita has finally been allowed to teach in a non-economics Gender Studies course, but normally this is not an option. In the past, the department has been able to contribute more to the common curriculum but the needs of the departmental courses have decreased this ability. Staffing has needed to focus on the departmental needs as economic majors have grown and the number of ECON 111 sections required to serve ACFN, GBUS, and the SS common curriculum has remained high.

 *3)      Leaving aside discipline specific knowledge, in what ways does your department/program best contribute to providing our students with a liberal education for their lives beyond college, as informed and engaged citizens, productive employees, ethical beings, etc.?*

We contribute a way of looking at the world that is unique. We believe our approach helps students as they become employees, entrepreneurs, leaders, public servants, citizens, and ethical beings. We continually ask students to think about the real world significance of the numbers and the predictions of quantitative models.

We have a focus on the liberal arts and prepare students for work and career, and we also prepare our students for service. Economics and public policy is an example. The skills that they are gaining are not just for jobs but for broader service (Peace Corps, non-profit, public policy, et cetera). We have a new program which pays students that take internships in public policy arenas. These internships are not credit-bearing parts of the major, but they are an outward sign of our commitment and support of students pursuing bigger questions beyond their narrow pecuniary interests.

We take seriously our advising role and make students aware of their options. We encourage students to identify their goals and aspirations but also make them aware of other opportunities that involve service or engage in society in a different way.

 *4)      Are there ways in which you would like to see your department/program contribute to liberal education that so far it has not been able to?*

Economics is a social science. It employs basic theories and models to investigate contemporary issues. Thus, while we offer courses that many non-majors are interested in (e.g., environmental economics, Asian economies, political economy of race and gender, and public sector economics), these are Tier II courses and bear a prerequisite of ECON 111, our basic introductory course. Unfortunately, many majors in environmental studies, Asian studies, Gender studies, and political science do not take these “applied” courses because they would first need to take ECON 111.

We would have liked to have been consulted concerning changes to other majors before they dropped various economic classes. There is a lack of communication between departments as majors have changed, and this has impacted economics courses. We need to have continued conversations with departments to help reach across disciplinary boundaries. There are other departments and programs where we would like to be part of the curriculum if we had the necessary staffing.

Some members of the department feel like people are more siloed than they used to be. People are moving things more “in house,” and there is less collaboration between departments than there used to be.

One of the biggest mistakes our colleges made with CC is moving to one SS requirement. We are not preparing our students to go out in the world. We need to require two courses in the same discipline to build proficiency and gain some depth of knowledge and skills.

We need to think about what outside credits count as fulfilling CC. We have not been allowed sufficient feedback on whether transfer and outside courses “count” towards the common curriculum. The colleges need to make sure that we have clear policies, and we need to make sure that these credits actually accomplish what our CC does.

With specific regard to courses such as FYS, we need adequate accountability for common curriculum courses meeting the needs of the course goals. The proficiencies expected of students appears to be different when comparing outcomes from different FYS instructors. While the Department of Economics has regular conversations and data to support common outcomes in ECON 111 with regard to the common curriculum requirements, there appears to be chronic disparities in training of students coming out of FYS. We need common standards and learning goals that maintain common preparation.