GRADUATE PROGRAM REVIEW

THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL AND APPLIED ECONOMICS

Submitted to

THE TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL

Committee Members:

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Introduction
The internal graduate program review committee for the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics (AAEC) met twice in February prior to our joint meeting with Dr. Jeffrey Royer, a professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Nebraska who served as the external reviewer for this committee. We examined the Program Review Document prepared by the faculty and the Chair of the Department and discussed areas we wish to look at in greater detail. The complete committee held separate meetings with the faculty, graduate students, staff and administrative team from February 14-15. As a result of group meetings and the review of the documentation provided, the internal graduate program review committee prepared this document which only briefly includes comments from the external reviewer who has submitted his report under separate cover.

Program Overview and Vision
AAEC has several graduate programs leading to the following degrees: M.S. in Agricultural and Applied Economics (thesis or non-thesis), M.Ag. in Agricultural Business Management, M.Ag. @ Distance and Ph.D. in Agriculture and Applied Economics. In addition, AAEC participates in the M.S. and J.D. cooperative programs with the Law School and in the M.B.A. program in Agricultural Business Management from the College of Business Administration.

The Department views their program as “preparing general applied economists” with a good foundation in theory. The faculty is very unified in their vision of the type of students they are preparing for the marketplace. AAEC at Texas Tech has found a niche market for their graduate students who are successful in obtaining competitive positions upon graduation.

AAEC is a small department with very productive faculty members. The Department is experiencing growth in both student numbers and in research funding. In addition, they have increased the number of refereed articles, technical reports and presented papers over the past few years. The Department has been successful in leveraging State funds and is competitive with other agricultural economics departments located at land-grant universities.

Grade: Good

Recommendations: Give due diligence to the recommendations provided by the review team.

Faculty Productivity
AAEC has a distinguished faculty, some who have been serving students at Texas Tech for over 27 years. They have over the past 3 years added 6 new faculty members to their ranks, all assistant professors with the exception of one at the associate professor rank. According to information provided by the Chair, when averaged, 40% of faculty time is
spent on teaching, 35% on research, 10% on service and 15% on administration. They are low on tenure track faculty when compared to their sister institutions, but appear to be very good stewards of their resources. Graduate students in the Department stated the AAEC faculty are good teachers and mentors. In addition, the graduate students are appreciative the faculty teach almost all of the course offerings at the undergraduate and graduate level—virtually no GPTI’s are utilized. Though this provides for quality teaching, something the Department has tried to assure by keeping the ratio of faculty to students at an appropriate level, this does not allow for much teaching experience for the graduate students. This has also limited the rapid growth of AAEC programs given faculty numbers have been lower and resources scarce.

Workload per FTE is reported in 2006 to be 16.97, less than the College but higher than the University as a whole. With the total of 14.25 FTEs they report, 5.9 are available for teaching, 4.55 for research, and 1.5 for outreach. Given their limited FTEs available for research, they do an impressive job of publishing in peer reviewed journals, submitting and presenting at national conferences, and submitting and receiving grant funding. The AAEC faculty have increased their average number of publications by almost 10 (from 16 to 27) over the past 3 years and have increased grant funding proposals and money awarded. One example of their extraordinary effort is the increase in federal grant monies they have received, increasing from $203,386 in 2000/01 to $1,381,152 in 2006/07. It would appear that in most areas measured by specific benchmarks, AAEC has been very productive. As one student that was interviewed stated, “the department over performs, given its limited resources.”

One additional area of consideration which should be noted is the lack of any women on the AAEC faculty. Though the faculty and students would like to have more women faculty (according to their report in our meetings), they all seemed to suggest there is a limited pool of women in this field and their attempts to recruit qualified women have been unsuccessful. Given there are bright woman who are part of the graduate program in AAEC, it would seem imperative that greater efforts should be made to recruit qualified woman as teachers, researchers and mentors for these students.

Grade: Excellent

Recommendations: Consider utilizing qualified graduate students to teach some of the undergraduate courses as GPTI’s so that greater faculty resources can be diverted to graduate programs. Continue the excellent job of increasing federal grant funding—this is a real strength of this Department.

Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates
The graduate students we interviewed were clearly excited about their programs of study and the faculty who are mentoring them. The diversity of students in this program is provided by a high number of international students and a fairly equal dispersion of males and females when considering both the Masters and Ph.D. programs (more men in the Ph.D. programs and more women in the Master’s programs). GRE and GPA scores for
entering AAEC graduate students are down, but the faculty suggests that this is not affecting the quality of their students at graduation nor their ability to be competitive in the marketplace. The AAEC faculty is desirous to grow the Ph.D. program; however, they are struggling with the size of qualified applicant pools.

The Department has also done an excellent job of funding graduate students (RAs) with external funding (80% externally funded). Based on earnings from their Departmental scholarship endowments, every graduate student receives $600 per year in scholarships. Students suggested they have access to excellent resources, funding and travel monies. Most are research assistants and are able to get significant research mentoring and training (the Department uses no GPTI’s and only a few TAs). Though there are few opportunities to teach, the students suggest this is not a problem in being competitive in their professions and are appreciative of the research training and focus they receive. There was some disparity in the report from faculty that graduate students had lots of grant proposal writing opportunities while the graduate students were asking for more opportunities to write and be apart of grant proposals. With the increased proposal writing and funding being received in this department and the willingness to mentor by the faculty, this should not be a problem in the future.

Students suggested that the faculty are very available (very much an open door policy) and provide excellent mentoring. Communication between faculty and students in this Department appears to be fairly good. This is a program that requires a lot of its students, with 12 hours of course work being required by graduate students in the summer. One student was unaware of this and stated it was a “kick in the teeth.” This was about the only negative comment we heard with the exception of some discussion of the need for women on the faculty and the lack of hiring them when in the hiring pool (this from only one student). Though not a negative comment, one other concern was raised by graduate students. Many of the students were not clear about the future direction of the Department in relation to a focus on “applied economics” (where they have been) and theory (where some of the newer faculty appear to be more focused). When following up with the faculty on this topic, they seemed to have little concern about the future vision of the Department, with one member of the faculty stating that they are “training applied economists with a good foundation in theory.”

According to the information provided by the Department, the faculty, and graduate students, students appear to be getting good jobs with good starting salaries to boot. When students chose academic positions, they appear to be competitive. Based on data from prior years as reported by the Chair, students headed to academic careers are being employed at tier one research institutions. Some distance education is being used by a few of the faculty, but there appears to be no Departmental plan for growing distance education and some concern about the resources required to provide a more comprehensive offering.

Grade: Satisfactory to Good
**Recommendations:** Continue to build the resource pool so they can attract quality graduate students to the Ph.D. program. The faculty seem committed to this and have plans to grow the program. Students could be given more opportunity to write and participate in grant writing efforts. Also, the Department needs to make sure the graduate students are as clear about the future vision of the Department in relation to "applied" versus a "theory" focus as the faculty appear to be.

**Curriculum and Programs of Study**

*Ph.D. program*

By design, the Ph.D. program in Agricultural and Applied Economics trains broad-based applied economists without (deep-rooted) specializations. This has been a relatively small program historically, but has experienced modest growth in the last few years. The degree requirements as listed seem consistent with the stated purpose of the degree.

Some of the graduate students in this program were concerned about the lack of specializations available to them, and suggested the possibility this feature of the program put them at a slight disadvantage when compared to graduates of other comparable programs. Others felt their research experience more than compensated for that in the job market. There were also some issues raised by students about the direction of the program, specifically the balance between theoretical and applied training. The faculty responded that recently-hired faculty added both breadth and depth to the program, allowing for a bit more rigorous theoretical instruction as well as more applied econometrics. Though there will always be trade-offs, the ability of the program to place graduates successfully suggests there is a demand for well-prepared general applied economists. Moreover, it seems there was wide-spread consensus among the faculty that the balance had not changed, but rather, the general quality of the program had improved.

The frequency of course offerings does seem to be more of a concern since it was mentioned by both faculty and graduate students. Small enrollments in some of the graduate courses indicate it may not be practical to offer all of these courses more frequently without a significant increase in the number of Ph.D. students. However, if the department can maintain the higher levels of students achieved more recently, they may be able to alleviate the concerns for some of these courses.

**Grade: Good**

**Recommendations:** The possibility of more workshop-type courses or special topic courses taught under a general topic heading was proposed by students so they could get more specialized training in various areas. This seems like a reasonable suggestion and one that could potentially be formalized to accommodate areas of concentration which would be more general than specialized fields, but still preserve the underlying philosophy of the program. Additionally, if graduate students from
related fields could be attracted to some of these courses, some of the frequency and numbers-of-students concerns could be eliminated.

*Masters programs*

The Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics offers several masters level programs, including the recently implemented Masters in Agribusiness. The Department also participates in a variety of masters programs involving other disciplines on campus. At first glance, it seems this represents a large number of degrees for such a small faculty, but even though there is some overlap in terms of courses taken and proposed outcomes, the programs as described by both the chair and the faculty are intended to attract students with distinctly different objectives, both real and perceived. With the given synergy, the programs can be operated concurrently without adding significant additional cost to the Department, and enables them to develop a much wider base from which to draw potential students. Moreover, the M.S. program seems to be a modest source for new Ph.D. students.

The faculty and the chair echoed the sentiment that the Masters in Agribusiness is the program with the most growth potential for numbers of graduate students, and in fact, it was introduced expressly for that purpose. Interest in the program is apparently significant and the Department is exploring additional ways to advertise it. This program also may offer the best opportunities for distance education, although the general sentiment in the Department is that to pursue such possibilities would require considerable resources, including faculty time, and would have to be developed without compromising the underlying mentoring component of the program.

**Grade: Good**

**Recommendations:** Rewrite the learning outcomes for some of the masters level programs so that the distinctions among them are as clear on paper as they seemed to be in the discussions with the review committee, emphasizing, for example, the internship experience component of the Masters in Agribusiness. Continue developing a marketing strategy for attracting appropriate graduate students to the various programs.

**Facilities and Resources**

The Agricultural and Applied Economics department is housed in a relatively old building, so though the facilities are adequate, both the faculty and the chairperson expressed the need to modernize some classrooms, which primarily affect undergraduate courses, and voiced concerns about space availability for graduate students as the graduate program grows. This suggests the constraint on office space could also be an important factor if the number of faculty positions expands in the future. The committee
was told the Department had made small physical improvements on its own, but even modest increments of additional funding from the University for updates could be readily put to use to benefit both the undergraduate and graduate programs.

The sampling of graduate students that met with the committee seemed satisfied with the facilities available to them. In addition to office space, they have access to a reference room/library, a meeting area, and a computer lab. The desires to add software for the lab and to increase online journal availability were mentioned specifically as areas where improvements could have positive effects.

The faculty felt the existing number of positions, including the recent hires, was sufficient to meet the current requirements of their undergraduate and graduate programs, and could in fact accommodate reasonable growth in the numbers of graduate students in the near future. However, if both programs experience significant growth, additional faculty resources will be essential.

Two of the departmental support staff met briefly with the committee. They were both very positive concerning the work atmosphere and the administration of the Department. Neither the faculty nor the graduate students expressed any concerns about the ability of the staff to meet the needs of the program.

Grade: Good

Recommendations: Seek to secure additional classroom upgrades and graduate/faculty office space from the University to support departmental growth.