March 26, 2008

TO: Dr. Fred Hartmeister, Dean of the Graduate School
FROM: Dr. Scott Hein (Chair), Dr. Robert Ritchey, and Dr. Comfort Pratt
SUBJECT: Economics Graduate Program Review

Executive Summary

A strong graduate program in economics is a key element in Texas Tech University’s mission of improving its reputation as a leading research school in the country. The department serves a much wider student constituency than its declared majors. While the graduate economics program has grown in terms of enrollment in recent years, there are strong signs suggesting concerns about the program going forward. Most notably, the morale of the faculty seems quite low. The low faculty morale appears to have stemmed from faculty salaries below the national market, a lack of good, effective communication between the economics faculty and administration, and dissatisfaction with having a history professor as department chair. This low faculty morale has manifested itself in a very high turnover rate amongst recent hires in the department and is probably responsible to some extent for the lack of significant faculty research productivity. The lack of effective communication within the department is made worse as the department currently has a very weak senior leadership in place, evidenced by no full professors currently on the faculty. The department is in need of a significant injection of leadership and it does not appear likely to be forthcoming quickly from within. This suggests the need to hire at more senior level faculty positions and preferably hiring an economist to take over as department head very soon.

I. Program Overview and Vision – Poor

A strong, vibrant graduate program in economics would appear to be an important element in the mission of Texas Tech University to grow its graduate programs and in improving its reputation as a leading research institution of higher education. This is especially true as
Economics provides graduate education services beyond the College of Arts and Sciences, most especially to the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, and the Rawls College of Business Administration. A strong Ph.D. program in economics is also a useful tool in recruiting and retaining high quality economics faculty members. The mission and vision statements for the graduate program of the Department of Economics and Geography do recognize these elements and appear to be well conceived.

However, while the department has succeeded in growing the graduate program in economics in terms of graduate enrollment since the last review, the department also appears to have slipped in terms of national prominence. Several factors, including faculty salaries that lag significantly behind the national market in economics, the lack of an economics trained department head, high faculty turnover, a loss of senior leadership in the department, and severely limited financial resources for faculty research and travel support, have made the goal of achieving the respectable national standards in teaching, research, and service an elusive one.

While the department head has done as good a job as possible, for someone far removed from the discipline, it would appear that having such a department head is now showing signs of serious problems. Lack of adequate financial resources and an unconventional organizational structure seem to be responsible for serious problems in the department. Specifically, morale of the economics faculty is quite low (on this point, see Professor Adkins' external review, for more discussion). This seems to be driven in large part by the absence of a separate economics department with an economics trained department head, administrative organization of the department, inadequate salaries at all ranks, a substantial lack of senior leadership in the department faculty and a lack of support for faculty travel and research development. Currently, the department has no full professor and, more importantly, it does not appear that there is any near term prospect of any being promoted to the rank of full professor. Not surprisingly, existing faculty, as evidenced by the faculty survey instrument, generally expressed dissatisfaction with research and professional guidance offered.
Communication problems between the department head and the faculty appear to be quite serious, as many of the faculty indicated they had no clear understanding of program policies and procedures and felt disengaged from the decision making process in the department. Many of the faculty feel completely disengaged from important decision items in the department and are broadly critical of the research and professional guidance offered them.

Little or no progress has been made on these issues as recommended in the 2002 review. If these issues of organization and resources problems are not addressed soon, further attrition of faculty at the assistant and associate levels will likely have dire consequences for the Ph.D. program.

II. Faculty Productivity – Poor

The department has been able to attract good junior faculty in recent years, but the department continues to experience high turnover due to the large disparity in salaries at competing schools and in the private sector. For example, the department has lost its two most prolific researchers over the current period under review. Increasing salaries at the Assistant Professor level, to retain productive new faculty, must be accompanied by increases at the higher ranks where salary compression and inversion are also a problem.

The transition to retirement of the department’s only full professor leaves a serious void in the Ph.D. program, which would reasonably be expected based on its size to have a minimum of two. Promotion of current associates to fill this void does not seem likely with the present high dissertation and thesis work amongst a few select Associate Professors, and relatively high teaching loads for all faculty.

Hiring problems at all ranks would appear to be exacerbated by the department head not being an economist, as noted in the 2002 Graduate School review of the department. Regardless, the department must be able to enhance compensation at all levels, to reduce future faculty
turnover. Only two of the faculty hired during the review period, out of a group of ten, are currently still on the faculty. This turnover forces the department to spend excessive faculty time and effort interviewing and recruiting. In a very competitive job market, not all positions are being filled with qualified candidates, so the department ends up hiring visiting Assistant Professors, frequently its own graduates, to the detriment of the department teaching and research goals.

Faculty productivity in terms of total external funding has been excellent. However, it would appear that many of these are collaborative grants with faculty from other departments. As such, it is not clear to what extent the counted external funding has benefited the department. Moreover, the future is unclear in the area of funding due to the recent retirement of a key faculty member.

In terms of scholarly research, the total output in terms of the number of research publications would appear to be good, but this productivity is limited to about half of the faculty. More importantly, publication in good, reputable Economics journals is lacking. Most of the publications of the faculty during the review period are in less well known specialized journal outlets. Such publications do little to strengthen the reputation of the faculty and the department, in comparison to the broader reputable journals. The burden of dissertation research supervision by faculty also seems to be borne disproportionately by a few, to the detriment of their research and publication efforts.

One issue that might be responsible for a lack of faculty productivity in the research area relates to the reward system in place for faculty. Most of the faculty members indicated that they had no idea how annual merit raises were determined and did not have any idea of the allocation of raises in the department. As such, the faculty questioned whether or not research success was indeed rewarded by higher raises.
III. Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Guidelines – Good

Since 2002 the department has achieved significant growth in the graduate program without a commensurate increase in resources. Without an increase in resources future growth would surely come at the expense of quality. Other commendable achievements include timely graduation, good placement and diversity of graduates. Increases in stipends will be critical to maintaining the quantity and quality of doctoral students, as competition for doctoral students in economics is strong nationwide.

Of significance is the discontent of some students with the program which may emanate from the poor morale of faculty members because of the lack of faculty governance and various resource issues.

It would appear that doctoral students are selected to teach based on language skills and once they have taught on how well they perform in the classroom. This may provide the best experience for students being instructed, but it also tends to exploit the time of those who teach effectively and fails to give others important teaching experience. The workload for doctoral students that are effective in the classroom appears to be quite high, with the standard two courses per semester teaching load. Other doctoral students that are not teaching seem to have a low workload. Faculty in the survey also indicated that the assignments to teaching assistants were not made equitably. This problem of teaching assistant workloads was emphasized in the last review of the graduate programs in Economics and Geography, and little or no progress seems to have been made on this front.

IV. Curriculum and Programs of Study – Good

The curriculum and graduate programs of study appear to be in good order, but with some room for improvement. The department offers two graduate programs in economics; the Masters of Arts and the Ph.D. This offering seems pretty standard for graduate economics
programs throughout the country. The Masters of Arts is offered with a thesis and a non-thesis option. As pointed out by Professor Adkins in his external review, the thesis option would appear to come with a significant cost to faculty in terms of direction, with little direct benefit to the instructor or the department. The department should consider dropping the thesis option in the Masters of Arts program. Also, to the extent that the master’s degree is not a common terminal degree in economics, one has to ask about the extent to which this degree serves students well. Admittedly, though, other than the thesis option the costs of the master’s degree would appear to be minimal, at least in comparison to the Ph.D. program.

The core economics courses in the Ph.D. program seem to be well designed and serving the students well. On the other hand, the requirement of three subfields in economics seems to be quite strong and possibly inconsistent with the state mandate to get doctoral students graduated with 99 or less credit hours. Modifying this requirement should be considered by the department. Students also complained that sometimes they are given very limited choices in terms of the subfields taken.

The academic counseling and guidance for both the Masters of Arts and the Ph.D. program appear to be generally good, at least following the initial advising. Responses from the graduate student surveys did indicate that the students find the offerings of graduate courses somewhat limited and would like to have more seminars, especially those designed to keep them up to date on developments in their field. They also remarked that they found the teaching and research stipends inadequate, a point agreed upon by the faculty as evidenced by the survey and also agreed upon by this committee.

V. Facilities and Resources — Satisfactory

For the most part, faculty and doctoral students appear satisfied with the level of resource support in the areas of computer support, library aid and support, and office support, although
some faculty complained that the office resources such as printers and copiers were not available after regular office hours.

When the issue of faculty support for research and travel came up, the committee noted a large disagreement between the assessment of the department head and the faculty, suggesting a serious lack of communication. The department head indicated that this support was more than adequate, as he received few requests he had to turn down. On the other hand, the faculty as a whole deemed this support as very inadequate. Indeed a few faculty members indicated that the support was generally so small and trivial that they had stopped asking for travel or research support altogether. While there is probably a little truth to each side, it is the opinion of this committee that the research and travel support for the faculty of the economics department is low by standards of comparisons with peer institutions. Of course, resource problems plague us all, and the more pressing issue would appear to be the communication breakdown noted by this anecdote.