

Cal Poly Pomona BS-MS Economics Program Review

External Review Report

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The purpose of this external review of the BS-MS Economics programs is to provide an unbiased examination of the quality of education and service in the program, and to identify opportunities for improvement and growth. After carefully reviewing the program's Self Study, we took part in a two-day visit on Sept 16th (virtual) and Sept 23rd (in-person) 2024. We met with Camille Johnson (Dean) of the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Science; with Bruce Brown, Chair of Economics Department, with students in both the undergraduate and masters programs; with tenured/tenure-track faculty and adjunct faculty. This report is divided into sections on strengths, challenges, and recommendations.

Strengths:

1. In both the BS and MS programs, faculty are student focused, and students report that coursework is teaching them useful skills for the future. Students in every interview indicated their satisfaction with the program and their instructor's willingness to help. Students receive personalized attention in classes and advising, and can demonstrate their understanding through different hands-on assessments. Instructors are updating their curriculum, particularly in data analysis with their integration of R and ArcGIS, to keep up with the changing demands of the labor market.
2. The undergraduate economics program at Cal Poly Pomona has a very diverse student body with lots of transfer students and what appears to be a high percentage of female majors. With the help of very strong staff, and paid student support, the department is emphasizing helping students find jobs and prepare for a successful career. The department holds an annual event that connects current students with alumni, while taking other steps to build a strong community among students through the Economics Club and social media outreach.

3. The evidence available to the committee indicates that the MS program provides a superb broad, graduate-level technical training. Both current students and recent alums of the program praise the close mentoring from faculty and the curriculum's focus on valuable skills for the labor market. While most students in the program appear interested in career advancement – master's level economics can serve as an MBA substitute for students with a taste for technical material the MBA won't satisfy – we also observed students using the MS as a training ground in preparation for PhD programs. This is also a valuable service the department is well placed to provide. The design of the program, with an up-front semester of preparatory coursework, also provides access to students without all of the college-level math and statistics training anticipated for graduate study in economics. A current effort to have the program "STEM designated" in the federal system promises improved recruiting of international students.

Challenges (Threats and Weaknesses):

1. Enrollment is falling in both programs.

Declines in the undergraduate program are at least, if not entirely, due to a change in the general education requirements at the university level. The change removed Principles of Microeconomics and Macroeconomics as courses that fulfill the social sciences D4 classification. Students at the university are now only given the option to take a history course and a political science course to fulfill the social sciences requirement. The choice to remove economics entirely from social sciences education is perplexing. Cal Poly Pomona is the only university in the California State University and University of California systems with this characteristic.

The immediate clear challenge for the MS program is enrollment: around 5 students per incoming cohort in recent years, down from around 10 in the immediate pre-pandemic period. Probable external causes for the decline include the relatively tight labor market and increased regional competition in recruiting students from newer programs offering data analysis training, often in innovative and convenient formats. Regardless, it is fair to inquire about the minimum viable size of the MS program given the substantial resource cost required to operate it. The program provides important benefits to the students, and the faculty plainly value the opportunity to work with and mentor more advanced students. The next section outlines opportunities to improve recruiting and grow enrollment.

Changes in the population also likely play a role in enrollment declines, at both the department and university level. These larger shifts in demographics are something that all departments across the California State University system, including this one, will need to address in the medium to long term.

2. The department's strategic plan is out of date.

Falling enrollment, combined with the challenges of the pandemic and institutional changes to the general education requirements have had a negative impact on overall departmental morale. Since the last external review the department has had to rely heavily on lecturers, as tenure lines have decreased. In addition the department has recently lost two productive mid-career faculty members. While the lecturers are very strong and successful, they do not have the same incentives to invest in the department, college and university as full-time faculty members. This increases the service load borne by tenure track faculty, and in particular, the person in the position of department chair. This is potentially a reason why the department appears to lack a strategic plan or vision that will address some of the challenges they will face in the upcoming years.

Recommendations (Opportunities):

The BA Program

1. Economics is a strong and popular undergraduate major in most universities, as it was at Cal Poly Pomona until recently. A first-order goal should be to allow economics to count toward the general education requirement for social sciences, but the department does not appear to have much control in that decision. Absent that change, we believe that the department's ability to address short-term enrollment declines is directly related to how many students at the university are exposed to economics courses. The department should continue to develop innovative electives not offered in the other colleges and consider having faculty teach in the Honors program. In addition there seems to be potential to cross-list courses with other departments across both the College of Arts and Science and the University. Some departments identified in our discussions are environmental science, urban studies, engineering, psychology and philosophy. This strategy would work both to increase the number of students exposed to the economics department curriculum, while increasing the number of elective course offerings which students mentioned were limited (especially with respect to the classes listed in the course catalog).

2. The department's small class sizes allow faculty to create hands-on opportunities. The undergraduate students in the department find these opportunities compelling. If resources can be found to expand these opportunities this may be beneficial for both students and faculty. Directed research and internship style courses are used at other institutions to support faculty research while also providing students with valuable research experience. In addition, supporting faculty to apply for research assigned time and being creative about other opportunities could be a useful strategy.
3. The department currently offers a large number of its Principles classes in an online or hybrid format. This is great for student access, and this was especially true during the recent pandemic, but it may no longer be serving the department. While students were overwhelmingly positive when discussing in-person teaching, they seemed to feel that the online classes did not meet the normally high standard of the departmental teaching. We suggest that the department reexamine its strategy in terms of offering online courses. Offering relatively more in-person options, may give the largest number of students the best opportunity to engage with and understand the far-reaching applicability of the material.
4. Economics makes a compelling second major. The economics minor and double major are great additions to a Business, Engineering, or Urban and Regional Planning undergraduate degree. While historically this seems to have been discouraged at CPP, students at undergraduate institutions these days are extremely interested in adding second majors, minors and additional programs. The department can also explore increasing the visibility of its minor and making the minor requirements more salient for business students who are required to take principles courses.
5. Some efforts have already been made to increase the department's presence on social media. This effort should continue, highlighting the department's ability to offer personalized attention, hands-on assessments and the potential for undergraduate research opportunities. Transfer students are a lifeblood of the department so working on a more structured plan for reaching the students at your local community colleges could be fruitful.
6. The diversity of the students in your undergraduate program is unique in the discipline of economics. We encourage you to reach out and connect with the Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession, the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession, and the

American Society of Hispanic Economists. There may be resources available to support your students.

The MA Program

1. The department has already submitted a proposal to designate the MS as a STEM program, which will offer international students extended work authorization following graduation, and is developing a 4+1 program that can be marketed to prospective and current students and build a reliable pipeline of graduate students. The committee commends these forward-looking steps to address concerns about enrollment. Additional recommendations for the MS program are below.
2. The first semester preparatory courses are effectively required; we learned that few students don't take them. It is worth reconsidering this design for two reasons: (a) it may discourage well-prepared students, and (b) with these courses the program of study is left with just one true elective course. Related to the above, the department does not offer a set of graduate electives and given resource constraints this is unlikely to change. Elective offerings can be expanded through access to graduate courses offered by other departments, even in other colleges. Math, statistics, finance, geography, urban planning are clear opportunities, and courses where a specific method or software application is learned are also useful. If political barriers limit economics MS students' access to those courses, what force can the college offer to break those barriers? Short of supervising a thesis, faculty can offer authentic research experience for students as research assistants under independent study units in place of elective courses.
3. A further consideration for reforming the MS curriculum: is there a particular field or strength of the department around which a more focused program could be designed? Possibilities include spatial analysis (GIS), urban/regional modeling (good preparation for government and consulting careers), forecasting (emphasis on time series econometrics), and others. The committee makes not a recommendation on what this focus should be, but rather a general one pointing out that it is difficult to offer a program with something for every prospective student. A program with a distinctive strength in training students in a core area

and set of skills may counterintuitively serve more students.

The department has been given the opportunity to hire a new faculty member this upcoming academic year. It will be important to think carefully about the necessary skills for the new faculty member to bring to the department and its students, and what a person starting out in 2025 needs to build a successful career at Cal Poly Pomona. Hiring can be a good opportunity for the group to craft a vision for the department going forward, for example by developing a hiring plan for the next handful of lines (whenever they are invested in the department). That exercise can clarify the department's vision of and goals for itself.

In conclusion, the BS and MS Economics programs at Cal Poly Pomona demonstrate significant strengths, particularly in student-focused instruction, practical skill development, and career preparation. However, the department faces critical challenges, primarily declining enrollment due to changes in general education requirements and increased competition. To address these issues, we recommend several key actions: advocating for the reinstatement of economics courses in the general education curriculum, increasing visibility and engagement with students, continuing to develop a distinctive 4+1 program for the MS degree, and thinking more carefully about a long run strategic plan. The Economics Department has the potential to reverse enrollment trends and continue providing valuable economic education to a diverse student body. The department's ability to adapt and innovate in the face of these challenges will be crucial for its long-term success and growth in the evolving landscape of higher education.

Sincerely,

Reviewer 1 Signature and Date: *Bevin Ashenmiller* 10/25/2024

Reviewer 2 Signature and Date: *C. M. Z...* 10/25/2024

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