

Seattle University Economics Department's 2006-07 Assessment Project

[The following is an excerpt from the department's assessment report]

The Department of Economics began a study of its students' ability to communicate as a professional economist—focusing on graphical communication. Our interest follows from the department's student learning objectives. (Emphasis added.)

A Graduate of the economics or business economics programs at Seattle University should be able to:

4. *identify key relationships between important variables*
 - b. apply algebraic, *graphical*, and statistical tools to analyses of problems and issues in business and public policy
6. employ their discipline knowledge and skills in service to the community, for example,
 - a. present themselves and interact with others in a professional manner.
 - c. *convey economic ideas in a variety of written forms.*

Students in 10 economics classes were evaluated on their ability to understand and present information in a graphical form.

Department members were disappointed with the results. The data collected revealed two problems. First, students are inattentive and sloppy in their specifications of units of measure. Second, students do a poor job of combining the messages of two graphs into a single message. While the student results from higher level courses are slightly better than those from lower level classes, the department concluded that our students' performance was unacceptable.

The Economics Faculty members agreed to increase their own attentiveness to units of measure in their classroom teaching. Specifically, we agreed to:

- 1) Label the axes better—identify the variable we are measuring.
- 2) State explicitly the unit of measure.
- 3) Discuss the appropriateness of that measure.

The department also agreed to ask specific questions regarding units of measure. This would be done in exams, homework, and/or in-class assignments.

Final note: The assessment process is working well within the department. Evaluation of student performance is leading to curricular improvement.