

## **Improving the Communication Skills of Economics Majors: A Course Proposal**

**Department of Economics  
University of Arizona**

The Economics Department proposes a new undergraduate course, titled **Communication in Economics**, to be numbered **Economics 479**. Over the last three years we have incorporated a writing component into several of our upper division courses. That innovation has improved the writing of those students enrolled in the selected courses, and we've learned some things about what works and what doesn't work. We have concluded that what's needed is a *program* devoted completely to writing about economics, in which *every* student who majors in economics writes, and receives coaching on his or her writing, in parallel with other economics courses. That program will consist of the proposed semester-long one-credit course Econ 479, which every economics major will complete three times, for a total of three credits.

### **Background**

The University of Arizona's Economics Department is fortunate to have a faculty that not only excels at research but is also dedicated to undergraduate education. All of our faculty members are good teachers and care a great deal about their teaching. Several are acknowledged star teachers. Consequently we provide our undergraduate students with first rate training in economic theory, methods, and a wide variety of applications to individual, business, and social decision making. But while our students are well equipped to *use* economic analysis, nearly all our students are deficient in communicating their analysis in written form.

The writing component that we have incorporated into several of our 400-level courses consists of typically three two-page memos to the student's "CEO," explaining in lay terms, without technical jargon or mathematics, the student's economic analysis of an assigned issue. These courses have been provided with a writing consultant and coach, someone who is experienced as a writer and as a writing instructor. The writing coach helps those students who ask for assistance and grades the writing and the rewriting – memos are generally to be rewritten after the initial grading, driving home the point that good writing usually requires rewriting.

This writing program has been successful, but in a limited way, reflecting the program's inherent limitations. The students who have been enrolled in the selected courses have typically seen their writing improve, in some cases quite dramatically. But many economics majors have not been enrolled in these courses, and the writing of most of the enrolled students has improved only marginally, reflecting the fact that they're writing only a few times in only a single course. A great deal more would be accomplished by the student writing over a longer period than one semester. An additional limitation is that the writing component is grafted onto the course, therefore playing only a marginal role in the course. In short, the current system, while a big step forward, does not provide the opportunity to improve the expository skills of *all* our students, *early* enough or *long* enough, to accomplish the improvement we think is essential.

### **Proposed Writing Course and Program**

The writing program we propose is expected to overcome the limitations described above. The program will consist of the one-credit Econ 479 course, taken for three semesters by every economics major, in parallel with his or her other economics courses. The course will be taught by an Economics Department lecturer who is experienced in economics writing for business and government. Each student will be assigned to write short pieces on topics drawn from the other economics courses he or she is currently taking or has already taken. The course will have a two-hour final exam which will again consist of a short piece the student is to write, this time in the supervised exam setting. The course will meet only occasionally, but the students will be expected to meet individually or in groups with the instructor for assistance and advice when needed.

### **Summary**

The new course we are proposing, Econ 479, and the program based on the course, will allow our students to develop and enhance their expository skills over the course of several semesters. They will be guided by a lecturer who is both an economist and who excels in interacting with the “external” world in a clear and concise manner. When coupled with the analytical training our students receive in economics, we expect that the value added by the new writing program will produce students who are especially attractive and marketable to prospective employers.