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# **“WHERE’S THE BEEF?” ECONOMICS, THE MAIN COURSE, IS MISSING FROM THE NEW TEXAS CORE CURRICULUM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In 1998, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board mandated a 42 semester hour Core Curriculum for all institutions of higher learning. An economics course was not mentioned as either a specific course or as an optional course. Yet, Macroeconomics Principles meets all the criteria the Board established for core course selection: (a) that the course develop intellectual skills, and (b) that it be taught in a manner so as to develop students’ perspectives and interest in learning. For the past five years, Macroeconomics Principles has been taught as a Core course at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Data reveal that the Macroeconomics Principles course is as important as any other course in the Core curriculum. It is uniquely significant in enhancing the mathematical and critical thinking skill areas, and students perceive that the course contributes to their knowledge and perspectives of the world.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1998, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) mandated that each general academic institution and community/technical college in Texas design and implement a core curriculum with the “Texas Common Course Numbering System,” with no fewer than 42 lower division semester credit hours. Beginning in Fall 1998, THECB Rule 5,402 also provided that core curriculum would be transferable among institutions:

If a student successfully completes the 42 semester hour credit core, curriculum at an institution of higher education, that block of courses may be transferred to any other institution of higher education and must be substituted for the receiving institution's core curriculum. (THECB Rules, 1999, 5402(d), [http](#))

Early in 1998, THECB Advisory Committee on Core Curriculum set out several guidelines for the development of a state core curriculum. Among them were:

1. To mandate no fewer than 42 semester credit hours.
2. To include intellectual skill development across the core curriculum.

Basic intellectual competencies would include:

Reading - ability to analyze and interpret a variety of printed material.

Writing - produce clear, correct, and coherent prose adapted to purpose, occasion and audience.

Speaking - communicate orally in clear, coherent, and persuasive language appropriate to purpose, occasion and audience.

Listening - be able to analyze and interpret various forms of spoken communication.

Critical thinking and problem solving - ability to organize and analyze ideas and information - including written texts, visual representations, artifacts, and experimental and statistical materials - using logical methods. Applying both qualitative and quantitative skills analytically and creatively to appropriate subject matter in order to evaluate arguments and to construct alternative strategies. Problem solving is application of critical thinking to address an identified task.

Computer Literacy - ability to use computer-based technology in communication, solving problems, and acquiring information.

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3. To provide perspectives on human experiences derived from specific courses. The core should contain courses that establish multiple perspectives on the individual and the world in which he or she lives and

that stimulate a capacity to discuss and reflect upon individual, political and social aspects of life to understand ways in which to exercise responsible citizenship; recognize the importance of maintaining health and wellness; develop a capacity to use the knowledge of how technology and science affect their lives; develop personal values and the ability to make aesthetic judgements; use logical reasoning in problem solving; and integrate knowledge and understand the interrelationships of the discipline.

4. To modify teaching methods:

Since the objective of disciplinary studies within a core curriculum is to foster perspectives as well as to inform and deliver content, the way subject is taught is an important as the subject matter itself. Disciplinary courses with a core curriculum should include outcomes focused on the intellectual core competencies as well as outcomes related to establishing perspectives - basic concepts in the discipline methods of analysis and interpretation specific to the discipline (Working Document, THECB Advisory Committee, 1998, 2-5, [http](#)).

Based on these guidelines the State Core Committee chose five component areas of 36 hours, with six additional hours to be added at the discretion of the individual institution. In four of the component areas, specific course were either mandated (e.g.), Communication included English/rhetoric/composition, and Social and Behavior Sciences included U.S. History and political science, or options were given as in the areas of Mathematics where logic, college level algebra equivalent, or above, and Humanities and Visual and Performing Arts where literature,

philosophy, modern or classical language/literature and cultural studies were specified (THECB Rules, 1999, Chart 1, [http](#)).

The Texas Core Curriculum did not emphasize or suggest in any way that a course in economic principles be included. This omission is regrettable. If other states look to the Texas Core as a model they, too, may ignore economics principles as a core-specific course. Yet, experience after five years of teaching Macroeconomics Principles as a core-specific course at TAMU-CC suggested that such a course had addressed well all six intellectual skills that were important for the state core curriculum. In addition, students at TAMU-CC perceived that Macroeconomics Principles had helped them develop perspectives on urbanization, societal changes, political changes, economic changes and interconnection of urbanization, society, economics and the natural environment. They also indicated that the Macroeconomics Principles course had helped them to develop learning communities that would be helpful in the remainder of their university experience.

### **ECONOMICS AS A CORE COURSE**

Macroeconomics Principles became a course in the University Core of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC) when the University changed from a two-year, upper-level institution to a four year comprehensive university in Fall 1994. Expansion of the University provided a feasible opportunity to make distinctive curriculum changes that would set the University apart from those with traditional programs. One of the most convincing arguments to the Faculty Core Curriculum Committee for inclusion of Macroeconomics Principles as a core-specific course was that it could enhance all fundamental intellectual skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, listening, and critical thinking, a goal they had set for the core curriculum as a whole. The second convincing argument to the committee was that Macroeconomics Principles could depart successfully from traditional pedagogy of lecturing and instead create a classroom environment for active learners (TAMU-CC Core Course Selection, 1993).

Macroeconomics Principles, as a core-specific course, was changed dramatically. First of all, it was taught by experienced professors who were interested in serving student needs rather than by less experienced faculty or graduate students, as is often the case for teaching a general education course in larger universities. Second, the number of students per class was limited to no more than 60 so that classroom environment could be conducive to interactive learning. Third, in an attempt to motivate young students, the teaching style emphasized linking course content to the students' world. Finally, intellectual skills development was stressed early in the course and applied to learning economic principles. As a result of these changes the classroom was much more interactive.

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The following is a sample list of activities and strategies used in teaching the Core economics course, with skills that each emphasized in parenthesis. Each activity broadened students' perspectives:

1. Connecting students to economics by first looking at the local economy and then linking to the national and world economy (reading, writing, listening, mathematical).
2. Increasing economic knowledge as well as written and oral skills by selecting for group discussion and reports controversial topics such as welfare reform, increasing minimum wage, farm subsidies, trade policies with Japan and China, and so forth (reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking).
3. Developing interactive skills by assigning students to teams to research controversial topics and local business decisions (e.g.), competing teams in class analyzed possible cost-benefits of a decision made by a large South Texas food chain to develop a convenience store with fuel pumps on a corner of its parking lot (speaking, listening, mathematical, critical thinking).
4. Having students locate the census tract of their residence and interview a business in the same census track to familiarize students with their immediate neighborhood (writing, speaking, listening, mathematical critical thinking).
5. Using the Internet to locate government sources of information from which to write a brief report on current economic conditions (computer literacy, reading, writing, mathematical critical thinking).
6. Using marginal analysis to show the importance of time in determining future value as a way to encourage students to plan for financial independence (mathematical, critical thinking).
7. Communicating continually with students through various forms of fast-feedback methods (reading, speaking, writing, critical thinking)
8. Providing opportunity for extra credit through various activities such as optional credit class quizzes, writing essays on economics topics of student choosing, interviewing business owners and making oral reports to class, registering with the Placement Center, and filing resume electronically (reading, writing, speaking, computer literacy (McMinn, DSI Proceedings, 1998, 15).

## EVALUATION RESULTS

Students in each section of core curriculum courses during the fall and spring semesters complete a standard course evaluation. Data from Fall 1994 through Fall 1997 has been analyzed and are shown in the following three tables. Overall mean data of each evaluation item for Overall Core courses was compared to mean data for sections of Macroeconomics Principles. The mean ranged from 5 for “strongly agree” to 1 for “strongly disagree.” Table 1 shows evaluation results of intellectual skills.

<b>Table 1</b> <b>Texas A&amp;M University-Corpus Christi</b> <b>Core Curriculum Courses</b> <b>Evaluation of Intellectual Skills</b> <b>Fall 1994-Fall 1997</b>			
Evaluation Skill	Overall Core	Macroeconomics	Percent Difference
Reading	3.46	3.55	2.7%
Writing	3.63	3.44	-5.3%
Listening	3.73	3.92	4.9%
Speaking	3.30	3.21	-2.8%
Mathematical	2.38	3.56	49.4%
Critical Thinking	3.71	3.94	6.2%

For Overall Core courses students agreed that core courses they had taken so far had, with the exception of mathematics, significantly enhanced the six intellectual skills. Unlike the data for the Overall Core, the data representing the mean for Macroeconomics Principles sections reflected significant enhancement of all six of the intellectual skills. The weakest skill in Overall Core courses, mathematics, was one of the highest averages in the macroeconomics course.

A goal of the Faculty Core Curriculum Committee was to make core courses a relevant learning experience for students that would be related to some major concerns of modern society. It was decided that a university theme of “Toward the Urban Environment” would be appropriate for meeting this objective. In Table 2 five evaluation items addressed these core curriculum perspective.

CONNECTORS	Overall Core	Macroeconomics	Percent Difference
On the environment, helped me to understand the effect of:			
Changes in society	3.51	3.75	6.8%
Political changes	3.41	3.87	13.4%
Economic changes	3.38	4.41	30.5%
Helped me connect urbanization, society, economics, and the environment	3.39	4.00	18.1%
Helped me understand the process of urbanization	3.30	3.46	4.80%

Overall students agreed that Core courses helped them to understand the process of urbanization and the effect changes in society had on the environment. In the evaluation of Macroeconomics Principles, each mean for Macroeconomics was higher than for the Overall Core courses and highest in evaluation items relating to economic impact.

Core course evaluations included four relevant questions relating to the way students perceived the development of learning communities. Evaluation results are summarized in Table 3.

Data showed that students perceived Overall Core courses would help them in other courses they expected to take in the Core and throughout their university experience. They perceived as well, that macroeconomics would provide a valuable learning experience. It was hoped that these positive experiences would connect the student closer to the university. This goal seems to have been confirmed by the fact that TAMU-CC has a high retention rate of its freshmen. The latest retention data available from THECB reports that TAMU-CC ranks 13<sup>th</sup> of 35 Texas universities. However, when only the Master Degree granting institutions are considered, TAMU-CC ranks fifth and second among the border institutions, located in South Texas (THECB Retention, 1998).

Connection to:	Overall Core	Macroeconomics	Percent Difference
Understand other courses	3.49	3.60	3.1%
Experience helpful in rest of Core	3.65	3.85	5.6%
Experience useful in rest of college	3.72	3.99	7.3%
Enhanced my ability to work in groups	3.55	3.47	-2.4%

To summarize, data in Tables 1-3 suggested that Macroeconomic Principles had made a positive contribution to the University Core Curriculum. Without the macroeconomics course, evaluation results of the Overall Core curriculum would not have been nearly as positive.

Other semester surveys were taken to determine how students regarded economics. Both Macroeconomics and Microeconomics Principles students were asked two questions in these semester surveys that were first asked by Saunders (Saunders, 1980, 1-13). "How important do you think a general understanding of economics is in today's world?" and "Do you feel that all students should be required to take an economics course in college?" Responses to these two questions for 1997 and 1998 are presented in Table 4. Responses for earlier years are similar (McMinn, SAM Special Reports, 1998, No 1, 2).

It is obvious from the responses reported in Table 4 that university students who have taken at least one course in economics considered the course important and that all university students should be required to take it. The same response came from Microeconomics Principles students who were taking at least their second course in economics. They still continued to consider economics an important course should be required of all students.

**Table 4**  
**Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi**  
**Importance of Economics as a Required Course for all Students**  
**Fall 1994-Fall 1997**

	1997		1998	
	Macro	Micro	Macro	Micro
“How important do you think a general understanding of economics is in today’s world?”				
Very important or important	76%	87%	78%	85%
Fairly important	21%	11%	18%	14%
Unimportant or very unimportant	4%	2%	5%	1%
“Do you feel that all students should be required to take an economics course in college?”				
Strongly agree or agree	81%	85%	74%	89%
Undecided	12%	11%	13%	6%
Disagree or strongly disagree	6%	3%	13%	4%

## CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from having experienced Macroeconomics Principles as a Core course at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi:

- , Macroeconomics Principles can be taught in a way that develops and enhances all intellectual skills and strengthens students’ perceptions of self and world.
- , Students at TAMU-CC perceived macroeconomics to be valuable as a Core course.
- , TAMU-CC students perceived macroeconomics to be an important course that should be required of all university students.

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- Macroeconomics Principles meets all the objectives and guidelines set by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.
- The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Core Curriculum would have been strengthened if a course in economics principles had been required.

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