Assignments for a Writing-Intensive Economics Course

Murray S. Simpson and Shireen E. Carroll

An assessment of the undergraduate economics major commissioned by the Association of American Colleges (AAC) identifies the lack of writing assignments in intermediate theory and upper-level economics courses as a weakness. It suggests using the writing-across-the-curriculum approach to integrate more writing into these courses (Siegfried et al. 1991, 207 and 211). That assessment concludes that a “respectable” economics major program must include substantial writing, feedback on all writing assignments, and a synthesizing final project (Siegfried et al. 1991, 211 and 218). Reflecting these goals, recent articles describe efforts to incorporate more writing into economic courses and to assess the results of such changed pedagogic approaches on student performance (Hansen 1993; Cohen and Spencer 1993; Davidson and Gumnior 1993; Palmini 1996; McElroy 1997).

Neither the AAC assessment nor these studies specify which types of writing assignments are better for helping undergraduate majors learn economic theories, models, and policies and for preparing them for the writing they will do in higher degree programs and future occupations. Without this information, writing-intensive (WI) economics courses may include projects that improve student writing but do not enhance student knowledge of the discipline or prospects for successful careers any more than do traditional economics courses. Such an outcome thwarts the goals outlined in the AAC study and raises questions about the need to offer WI courses within the economics major.

In this article, we present the results of a survey of alumni who majored in economics at Davidson College. The survey was designed to assess the value of the types of assigned writing in the college’s WI economics courses. Our goal was to discover which writing assignments best succeed in teaching students to write well, guiding them toward thinking like economists, and preparing them for their professional lives.

WI COURSES

Beginning with the class of 1990, the economics department at Davidson College has required its majors to pass at least one three-credit WI course. Two prin-

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Principal features distinguish a WI course from other courses that require writing in the form of papers and essay exams:

- A WI course emphasizes the entire writing process—from identifying one’s purpose, persona, and audience to drafting, editing, and revising—rather than only its outcome.
- Writing assignments determine at least 50 percent of the course grade.\(^2\)

With enrollments capped at 12 in WI courses, professors have sufficient time to work closely with each student writer.

Currently, five of the eight department members teach a total of eight WI economics courses: corporate finance, econometrics, economies of Latin America, environmental economics, industrial organization, labor economics, money and banking, and public sector economics.\(^3\) These courses are classified by the types of assigned writing in Table 1. In the first short-paper category, the professor does not comment on drafts. Instead, multiple short writing assignments permit students to incorporate detailed feedback on prior assignments into subsequent assignments. In the second category, students write three or four short papers and receive feedback on a draft and on a final version of each. The weight applied to a draft in determining assignment grades increases over the semester, encouraging students to improve their revision and proofreading skills. In the third category, students receive feedback on the final versions of several short writing assignments early in the semester. The professor also comments on topic selection and a draft of a longer research paper later in the semester. In the research paper category, students receive feedback on sections of the paper throughout the semester and submit a draft of the entire paper for comments at or near the end of the course.

**ASSESSING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN WI COURSES**

How do particular writing assignments in WI courses prepare students for advanced degree programs and occupations? One way to answer this question is to consider how economics students use their skills after graduation. For example, assume that students majoring in economics become professionals in the field. Laband and Taylor (1992, 676) argue that the prose quality of professional economists does not influence publication acceptance.\(^4\) This finding suggests that a focus on writing in economics courses would have little or no benefit if students pursue careers in the economics profession. Very few undergraduate economics majors, however, become professional economists.\(^5\) Thus, questions remain: What do our graduates do with their degrees? Is the writing included in Davidson’s undergraduate major adequately preparing them for the demands of study and work ahead?

To explore this issue, we surveyed alumni who majored in economics from the classes of 1947 to 1994 to gather information over the entire span of their careers. Our purpose was

- to learn what graduates did with their degrees,
- to ascertain the role writing plays in their professional lives, and

\(^1\) Laband and Taylor (1992, 676)
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\(^3\) Laband and Taylor (1992, 676)
\(^4\) Laband and Taylor (1992, 676)
\(^5\) Laband and Taylor (1992, 676)
• to identify the types of writing assignments they consider most helpful to learning economics and to preparing for higher degree studies and careers.

Of the 405 randomly selected alumni surveyed, 189 responded, yielding a response rate of 47 percent. Some respondents, however, either did not answer all the survey questions or their answers were difficult to interpret. As a result, the total number of responses reported in some of the data in Tables 2–4 is less than 189.6

Of all respondents who are or have been employed, a majority ranked office memoranda (59 percent), business letters (81 percent), and internal reports (56 percent) as extremely or very important to achieving success in their primary occupations (Table 2). In terms of frequency of writing, 76 percent reported that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of assignment</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short papers</td>
<td>Corporate finance</td>
<td>4 3-page papers each justifying the decision the student would make after reading an unresolved case study; 16 2-page discussions of journal articles or case-study readings (students elect to write the discussions individually or in groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with no drafts</td>
<td>Environmental economics</td>
<td>1 case-study paper on natural resource use; 1 case-study paper on pollution control; 2 short papers on endangered species preservation; 1 analysis of survey results; 1 op-ed column; journal describing the main points of required readings (feedback provided on journal entries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short papers</td>
<td>Public sector economics</td>
<td>3 5-page debate preparations; 1 3-page book review; 2 2-page videotape reviews; (no drafts accepted for the videotape reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with drafts</td>
<td>Latin American economies</td>
<td>2 6-page country-study papers; 1 12-page country-study paper; journal describing the main points of required readings (no feedback on the journal entries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor economics</td>
<td>1 3- to 4-page op-ed column (U.S. labor issue); 1 4- to 6-page paper (foreign labor issue); 1 10- to 15-page research paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money and banking</td>
<td>3 or 4 3-page papers; 1 research paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>3 3- to 5-page papers; 1 approximately 15-page research paper; 1- to 2-paragraph opinions on legal case readings (no feedback on case opinions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization</td>
<td>Econometrics</td>
<td>1 research paper with the following sections: introduction, theory, discussion of the data, econometric analysis, conclusion, bibliography</td>
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they wrote office memoranda daily or weekly, 84 percent wrote business letters daily or weekly, and 52 percent wrote internal reports with a frequency of one a month or less (Table 3). In short, a majority of these respondents wrote correspondence and internal reports often, and they acknowledged that skill in these types of writing influenced their professional success.\(^7\)

We asked individuals who had attended graduate school to evaluate how helpful different writing assignments were in preparing undergraduate economics majors for the writing requirements of their advanced-degree programs. We posed a parallel question to those alumni with work experience. Because all respondents had been economics majors at Davidson, we asked everyone how helpful different writing assignments were in learning economic theories, models, and policies. Five types of writing assignments are ranked according to the percentage of respondents who declared each type of writing to be extremely or very helpful in Table 4.\(^8\) Short papers and analyses of class readings were judged as best in preparing students for graduate programs and future occupations. Quantitative research papers, followed by short papers and analyses of class readings, were considered the best to enhance student learning of economics.

The survey offered opportunities for open-ended responses. Concerning the role of writing in their primary occupations, 66 respondents commented that clear, concise, effective writing, geared toward specific audiences, is essential. No respondents asserted that college graduates in general write well; 12 respondents were quite negative. A representative respondent noted, “One of the major complaints that I have with some of my employees is that many of them with economics or business degrees (MBAs included) can handle the quantitative side but can’t assimilate the data into understandable or verbal analysis form . . . . We miss business because they cannot communicate effectively with a client.” Although suggestions for enhancing writing in the undergraduate economics major varied, respondents argued that students should learn to write both in their discipline and for diverse audiences.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Correspondence and Reports to Achieving Occupational Success: Percentage Distribution of Responses from Alumni Who Are or Have Been Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office memos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business letters</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal reports(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External reports(^c)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The total number of responses appears in parentheses.

\(^b\)An internal report circulates only among company employees.

\(^c\)An external report circulates among company employees and people outside the company.
The survey results indicate that Davidson’s WI requirement for economics majors conforms only partially to alumni experience. Brief assignments geared toward different audiences, such as analyses of readings, opinion pieces, and cover letters, are more helpful for professional life. Longer research papers requiring quantitative analysis are more effective for learning economics. Only two of the eight courses, Latin American economies and industrial organization, come close to combining these suggested types of writing assignments.

These results offer two lessons. First, the Davidson faculty should experiment further with integrating the various assignments suggested by the alumni survey as we continue to develop our WI courses. One possibility is to couple the longer research assignment with several short essays on the same material but for different audiences, for example, a business letter accompanying a long report, an opinion/editorial piece based on the research for the report, and a summary of the report’s results for a board of directors. As preparation, students could compare several class readings related to their research topics. Together, these assignments would exemplify “real-life” uses for formal academic research. Alternatively, an instructor could select a general topic for a final class symposium. Students would develop research papers to present at the symposium. They would begin with one-page announcements identifying unresolved questions for the symposium and submit two-page abstracts and cover letters seeking acceptance of their papers. To introduce critical analysis of reading material into the project, paired students would exchange drafts prior to the symposium and write three-page critiques of these drafts to present as discussants during the symposium. Following the symposium, students would incorporate peer suggestions for improving content and style into the final versions submitted to the instructor.

Second, the Davidson faculty should evaluate the role of research papers in WI courses. Survey respondents appreciated research paper assignments that advanced student learning of economics rather than those that appeared to be

### TABLE 3

Frequency of Writing Correspondence and Reports: Percentage Distribution of Responses from Alumni Who Are or Have Been Employed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of writing</th>
<th>Daily/weekly</th>
<th>Biweekly/monthly</th>
<th>Bimonthly/quarterly</th>
<th>Semiannually/annually</th>
<th>Rarely/never</th>
<th>Totala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office memos</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100 (183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business letters</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100 (183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100 (183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal reportsb</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>100 (183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External reportsc</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100 (183)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aPercentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The total number of responses appears in parentheses.
bAn internal report circulates only among company employees.
cAn external report circulates among company employees and people outside the company.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

The survey results indicate that Davidson’s WI requirement for economics majors conforms only partially to alumni experience. Brief assignments geared toward different audiences, such as analyses of readings, opinion pieces, and cover letters, are more helpful for professional life. Longer research papers requiring quantitative analysis are more effective for learning economics. Only two of the eight courses, Latin American economies and industrial organization, come close to combining these suggested types of writing assignments.

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Second, the Davidson faculty should evaluate the role of research papers in WI courses. Survey respondents appreciated research paper assignments that advanced student learning of economics rather than those that appeared to be
mechanical exercises. This means that students should identify topics of personal interest, narrow these topics into significant research problems, formulate questions and hypotheses around these research problems, and present sufficient and reliable evidence to support their claims.\textsuperscript{11} Most undergraduate economics majors, however, struggle to meet these goals. They approach writing the research paper as a linear series of sequential stages, failing to recognize that successful research requires a circular series of overlapping stages: thinking, gathering information, drafting, gathering more information, revising, editing, more thinking, and so on (Booth et al. 1995, ix). Most students also struggle when developing arguments based on the quantitative analysis of mathematical models, data tables, and summary statistics.

Direct faculty involvement in class writing can help students overcome these difficulties. McElroy (1997) describes the merits of a mentor demonstration model, in which the professor writes a research paper in stages along with the students. Alternatively, the professor can collaborate with students on a group paper during the first half of a course and then have students write individual
research papers during the second half of the course. In the process of working closely with the professor on a group paper, students create a community of learners focused on a common topic, observe how a professionally trained economist thinks and writes, and learn the art of research. Armed with this experience, students should be better prepared to write individual papers that ask and cogently answer important research questions.

Davidson’s WI courses will benefit from these lessons. We have also learned, however, that certain costs may arise from requiring students to pass a WI course and offering such courses in place of traditional ones. First, although WI courses are not inherently more difficult than non-WI courses, the initial impact of the WI course requirement on the number of majors may have been negative. The department’s decision to institute this requirement, beginning with the class of 1990, coincides with an accelerated decline in the number of economics bachelor’s degrees Davidson College awarded in the early 1990s. Second, instructors of WI courses may need to sacrifice some coverage of economics, devoting class time instead to a discussion of writing. Two economics professors at Davidson cite this sacrifice as an important reason for their decision not to offer WI courses. To alleviate such concerns about coverage, the department might consider requiring two moderately intensive writing courses—a field course that emphasizes short, varied writing and a capstone course that emphasizes the research process—instead of one WI course that meets all curricular goals.

CONCLUSION

The decision of Davidson’s economics department to require WI courses reflects the college’s liberal arts emphasis on encouraging students to become flexible, critical thinkers who are simultaneously knowledgeable in a discipline and able to apply their skills beyond it. Alumni responses affirm the department’s decision, indicating clearly that writing is important for learning economics and for future success in graduate school and careers. To date, however, empirical evidence concerning how writing affects learning economics is limited (Palmini 1996, 213). Yet even if the net benefits of a WI approach merely approximate those of a traditional approach to educating economics majors, the economics faculty at Davidson probably would retain the WI requirement. We firmly believe that whatever our graduates do, they will achieve greater fulfillment professionally and personally if they are flexible writers who can meet the needs of diverse audiences in clear, unambiguous prose (McCloskey 1987, 548).

NOTES

1. Davidson College is an undergraduate liberal arts college in North Carolina with a current enrollment of approximately 1,600 students.
2. Requirements such as tests, quizzes, and problem sets usually determine the remaining percentage of the grade in a WI course.
3. The syllabuses for some of the WI economic courses are available on the World Wide Web at www.davidson.edu/academic/economics/simpson/simpson.html.
5. Siegfried and Stock (1999 forthcoming) estimate that 950 economics Ph.D. degrees are awarded in the United States each year. Of individuals recently receiving these degrees, they report that 42 percent are U.S. citizens and 70 percent majored in economics as undergraduates, implying 29 percent (42 percent × 0.70) are U.S. citizens who majored in economics as undergraduates. Accordingly, about 276 economics Ph.D. degrees (950 degrees × 0.29) are awarded each year to U.S. citizens who majored in economics as undergraduates. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show about 22,000–24,000 undergraduate economics degrees awarded annually in the United States from 1986–1993 (NCES 1996,307, Table 291). Using the midpoint of 23,000 and assuming these economics majors are all U.S. citizens and that 276 of them eventually will earn an economics Ph.D. degree, then a little over 1 percent (276 ÷ 23,000 × 100) of undergraduate economics majors in the United States become professional economists. Siegfried and Wilkinson (1982, 127) argue, however, that the NCES understates the number of degrees awarded because double majors are classified only by one discipline and that some economics majors are reported to the NCES in the category “social science, general.” Correcting this understatement would decrease the calculated percentage of undergraduate economics majors who become professional economists.

6. The distribution of respondents by decade of graduation is nearly identical to the distribution of the population of economics majors who graduated from Davidson College since 1947. Of the advanced degrees earned by respondents, 43 percent were professional master’s degrees, 24 percent were law degrees, 14 percent were academic master’s degrees, 9 percent were doctoral degrees, 3 percent were medical degrees, and 7 percent fell in an “other” category. In terms of primary occupation, 53 percent of the respondents worked in business, management, or finance; 17 percent in law; 8 percent in sales; 7 percent in education; 5 percent in public or social services; 3 percent in professional specialties other than law; and 8 percent fell in an “other” category. Only 1 of the 189 respondents had never been employed since graduating from Davidson College.

7. The survey also asked about the importance for occupational success of publishing in newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and edited volumes as well as publishing books. Of all respondents who are or have been employed, the percentages who either do not publish in these media or claim such publications are not at all important to achieving success in their primary occupations are: newspapers, 69 percent; magazines, 73 percent; professional journals, 64 percent; edited volumes, 80 percent; and books, 87 percent.

8. The survey questionnaire supplied the following definitions for the types of writing assignments. A short paper is typically 10 or fewer double-spaced pages in length in which the student develops arguments on both sides of an economic issue and draws conclusions about which position is best supported by economic theory and empirical evidence (short position paper); analyzes a household, firm, government agency, or other economic entity as an exemplary depiction of an economic theory (short case-study paper); or writes a commentary similar to that of a newspaper columnist, who supports his or her views concerning an economic issue (short opinion-editorial paper). A research paper is typically longer than 10 double-spaced pages in which the student thoroughly investigates and studies an economic topic. The student may or may not use quantitative analysis (i.e., statistical methods, econometrics, or mathematical modeling) to develop arguments and draw conclusions.

9. The last assignment could be presented orally with the class serving as the board of directors, asking questions, and making comments.

10. Palmini (1996) stresses the importance of using rhetorical cases to help students develop the writing skills to convey economic analysis to diverse audiences.

11. Booth et al. (1995, parts 2 and 3) describe these goals and the means to attain them.

12. The authors are grateful to John Wertheimer, an associate professor of history at Davidson College, for bringing his use of a group paper to their attention.

13. For the 1995–96 academic year, the grade point average in WI field courses (3.07) was only slightly higher than the grade point average in field courses (2.98) not classified as WI (economic development, economic history of the United States, economic systems, health economics, international finance, international trade, introductory accounting, and intermediate accounting). Both figures are higher than the grade point average of 2.79 for all economics courses, reflecting the greater difficulty of courses in economic principles, intermediate theory, and statistics for nonmajors, minors, and majors.

14. This number fell at an average annual rate of 5.1 percent from 1982–83 to 1992–93 compared to a 3.4 percentage average annual decline experienced by a sample of 32 selective liberal arts colleges (Siegfried 1995, 283, Table 1). The decline accelerated from 1990–91 to 1993–94 as the College suffered an 11.9 percentage average annual decline in economics bachelor’s degrees.

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compared to a 5.5 percentage decline for a sample of 41 selective liberal arts colleges (Siegfried 1997, 280, Table 1). Any potential negative influence of the WI course requirement on degrees awarded may be waning, however. After graduating only 19 economics majors in 1995–96, Davidson College graduated 35 economics majors in 1996–97 and 30 in 1997–98. This rebound is not an aberration since 48 students in the Class of 1999 already have declared an economics major.

15. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer who suggested this alternative approach.

REFERENCES


