

Profs. Blonigen and Harbaugh, Jan. 2006

EC 418/419: Economic Analysis of Community Issues
Potential Projects – 2006
Working Draft

1. UO Student Retention Issues

Brief Description: An important issue for any university is continuation of its students toward graduation. Retention of students varies significantly across universities and student population groups. UO Admissions desires to have much more analysis of its retention patterns and this is another in a series of topics which it has employed Prof. Larry Singell to study for them. The project would be econometrically oriented with lots of excellent student level data.

Community Contact: UO Admissions and Prof. Larry Singell
Likely Class Supervisor: Bruce

2. Oregon Reorganization of High School Athletic Conferences

Brief Description: This past fall the Oregon State Athletic Board approved a reorganization of athletic conferences. The stated goal was to group schools more similar in size to enhance competition. For Eugene-area schools this meant taking South Eugene and Sheldon out of their current conference and putting them in a conference with southern Oregon teams, greatly increasing the distances between them and other schools in their conference. This has led to great concern for students and parents in these schools. A cost-benefit analysis would shed light on the tradeoffs that will occur.

Community Contact: Eugene and Springfield School Districts
Likely Class Supervisor: Bruce

3. Child Development

Brief Description: Psychology Prof. Helen Neville does research on child brain development or “neuro-plasticity.” Her lab’s website is at <http://bdl.uoregon.edu/>. She has devised a program of early childhood education that stimulates brain rewiring, in ways that promote the ability to learn, and she is interested in a benefit cost-analysis of this intervention. This would involve a statistical analysis of the effects of her intervention, and a comparison with other early childhood intervention projects such as Head Start. The methodology would involve using the results from Professor Neville’s study, comparing them with results from programs such as Head Start, and using existing evidence on the effects of the Head Start type programs on schooling and employment to predict the likely benefits of this new program.

Community Contact: Psychology Prof. Helen Neville
Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

4. Development of Economics Summer Camp for Local Disadvantaged Youth

Brief Description: The UO economics department would like to offer an economics summer camp for disadvantaged middle-school children. Its goal would be to not only introduce them to economics and application of logic to real-world issues, but increase the likelihood they will obtain a college education. This project would research the pedagogy of teaching children economic concepts, the economics of poverty and education, and help devise an appropriate curriculum for the summer camp. We would also design a method for evaluating the effects of the camp on the students.

Community Contact: Eugene and Springfield School Districts and UO Economics

Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

5. Commercial and Residential Planning of Areas Along Franklin Ave.

Brief Description: The City of Eugene, UO and others are intensely interested in future development of the commercial and residential areas north and east of the UO, primarily along Franklin Ave. (the official study area is called the Walnut Street Mixed Use Area). The possible projects include investigating whether 1) the area could support a new high-quality hotel (and possible convention center), 2) the economics of parking in this area with the expected construction of a new UO basketball arena, and 3) using current data on property values in Eugene to examine what types of properties (commercial, residential, multi-family) would fare best with the expected events in that area and current characteristics.

Community Contact: Planning officials with the City of Eugene

Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

6. Supply of Commercial and Industrial Land in Eugene-Springfield Area

Brief Description: The city staffs and Chambers of Commerce for both Eugene and Springfield are currently examining and determining the current supply of land for commercial and industrial development within the current urban growth boundary (UGB). This is a very contentious issue with business-oriented groups often complaining of land scarcity and others opposed to increasing the UGB. A related issue is the additional costs for firms to use brownfield sites (with pre-existing structures) versus greenfield sites. A possible study would be to do a statistical study to determine the premium firms are willing to pay for greenfield sites over brownfield sites.

Community Contact: Eugene Chamber of Commerce

Likely Class Supervisor: Bruce

7. Index of Economic Activity for the Bend, Oregon Area

Brief Description: Prof. Tim Duy in the UO Economics Department has developed an index of economic activity for the State of Oregon, which is regularly reported on in the Eugene Register Guard and Portland Oregonian. The Bend Area Chamber of Commerce is very interested in the development of a similar indicator that would be specific to their area. This project involves collection of relevant data, study of the issues in devising an appropriate index, and construction of the index. There would also be study of how the Bend index varies in its movements from overall state activity.

Community Contact: Bend Chamber of Commerce and Prof. Tim Duy

Likely Class Supervisor: Bruce

8. How Much Do People Value Green Spaces in Eugene?

Brief Description: Cities have to make decisions on how much land to allocate for green spaces such as parks and running/biking trails. Determining costs of these projects is relatively easy, while estimating benefits can be difficult since enjoyment of these spaces are intangible. This project would infer benefits of these green spaces through statistical estimation of how much more a home is valued that is closer to a green space, holding all other characteristics of the home constant. This technique is becoming accepted even by policymakers in recent years to measure such benefits and we have used it with a previous-year's group to inform city planners on benefits of the Spencer Butte ridgeline trail. This project would require significant data and econometric analysis.

Community Contact: Eugene Parks and Recreation

Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

9. Generating Revenues from Video Poker Machines

Brief Description: Bars and other retail establishments around the state house video poker machines for which the state allows them to keep a certain percent of the revenues generated (commission rate). After intense pressure from various groups that felt the state was being too generous with the commission rate in a time of budgetary crisis the commission rate was lowered despite objections by the Restaurant Association that many of their members would no longer be able to afford to house these machines. This "natural experiment" is perfect for estimating the elasticity of video poker machines demanded by retail establishments and the impact on revenues generated by the state.

Community Contact: Oregon Lottery Commission.

Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

10. How Representative are the Views of Citizen Participants of City Meetings

Brief Description: Government agencies often hold public hearings and elicit public input on policy decisions. This public input presumably has some impact on policymakers ultimate decisions. However, it's not clear to what extent the people who participate in these public hearings are representative of the general citizenry. City staff members are concerned that the result is that citizen participation via meetings may be less representative than, say, doing randomized surveys. This project would survey citizen participants of public hearings and compare their demographic background and views to a random sample of citizens in Eugene.

Community Contact: City of Eugene (Brenda Schmidt)

Likely Class Supervisor: Bill

Other possible topics

11. Sustainable development issues. Eugene Mayor Piercy is very enthusiastic about this concept, but what this term really means, much less the economics behind it, are still very murky. A project in this area is more likely to be a conceptual piece and investigation of literature and other cities experiences.

12. Hospital Capacity in Eugene. Eugene currently has two hospitals that are in the process of moving to two different locations, with the first mover (Sacred Heart) projecting that they will keep space at their old facilities, and the smaller, second mover (McKenzie-Willamette) concerned that Sacred Heart is trying to monopolize the market. Prof. Whitelaw's consulting firm has been involved in litigation between the two hospitals over Sacred Heart's attempts to monopolize certain parts of the market. A related question is how many hospital beds can Eugene support? One could undertake a statistical study, sampling other cities and see what number of hospital beds is appropriate for Eugene given its characteristics.

13. Issues for the Port of Portland. We have had initial conversations with them, but little real talk of topics yet. Issues for them would include impacts of 9/11 on port costs and operations and comparison of their port to other ports.

14. Economic Impact of UO. Prof. Larry Singell has written a paper that estimates the economic impact of the UO on Oregon's state economy. UO administrators would like to have an update of this study and would also like a specific focus on the impact of the nanotechnology center here on campus which has been the recipient of numerous federal grants in recent years.