Microeconomics Course Outline

This course has a dual purpose. First, it teaches the student the fundamental principles of microeconomics, a theory of how agents interact in individual markets. Second, it shows the student how these principles can be applied to managerial decisions and firm optimization.

At the end of this class, a student should

1. Understand how to frame business problems to help maximize a desired objective
2. Be able to evaluate and interpret public policy discussions about economic matters more critically and sensibly
3. Understand how his/her own decision-making and the decisions of the business of which he/she is a part, fit into the overall economy and affect overall welfare
4. Be able to think like an economist, or at least understand the way in which economists analyze problems.

Books

The main reading books for the course should all be on reserve in the business administration library, except that some of the editions may not be the current ones. The books are as follows:

(L) Landsburg- Price Theory and Applications, 8th or 9th ed. -(required). This is the basic required text that should be purchased. It is written to get students to "think like an economist," with a style that students find unusually good. It has good theoretical development as well as good applications. Previous editions of the main text (7th and earlier) are similar and should be OK for almost all purposes. Landsburg is also author of a less formal book, The Armchair Economist, which many students have enjoyed as a supplement to class. Many examples are common to the two books.

(HH) Hirshleifer and Hirshleifer - Price Theory and Applications, 6th edition (or Hirshleifer, Glazer, and Hirshleifer, 7th edition) - (not required). This was the required text in some previous years. It is written by one of my former professors and his son. It combines excellent theoretical development with some good and fairly extensive applications. The primary reason that this is not the required text is that a large fraction of students find it too abstract or difficult.

(S) Silberberg – Principles of Microeconomics, 5th edition or earlier (not required). This book is more basic and less mathematically rigorous than the other two. It will be useful for students with little economics background to solidify basic concepts. It is not detailed enough to serve as the main text and is also organized a bit oddly.
Another book that might be helpful to students is Froeb and McCann, Microeconomic Problems, which has only a little bit of theory but many application examples from a business perspective.

In addition, students who have trouble with the abstraction and the algebra required for homework, or derive benefit from drill type problems, may want to get a workbook in Microeconomics. One useful one, especially for computation, is Schaum’s Outline of Microeconomics (4th edition). This will not be at the bookstore, but can be obtained on the Web relatively cheaply. Other resources can be found free on the web.

**Required Work and Evaluation**

Students should read the required material to be covered in the day's lecture before class.

Grading in this class will be based on two exams, a midterm and the final, homeworks, and some group outlines relating to discussion questions. These will count as follows:

- Midterm: 35%
- Final: 45%
- Homeworks: 10%
- Group Outlines: 10%

*Homeworks* must be handed in. The homework assignments will be graded with one of three grades: G, S, and U. G, for "Great," will be given only for outstanding insight and explanation in a homework. U, for "Unsatisfactory," will be given when a student did not put forth enough effort to learn what the homework was designed to teach. Almost all homeworks will receive some form of an S, for "Satisfactory," as their grade. Within the S grade, an S+ will be given for an entirely correct (or virtually entirely correct) solution to the homework problem; an S- will be given for a solution with severe errors; and an S will be given for everything between S+ and S-. Only a single question on a particular homework will be graded. I will randomly select this question after you submit your answers.

The purpose of the homeworks is to ensure that you achieve some basic computational competence in the subject matter and that you struggle with some of the material enough to operationalize it. How correct your answers to the homework are is not my primary concern; my primary concern is that you do the homework! Thus, you will be severely penalized in my evaluation if you do not do homeworks (or you do them so poorly that you do not get to the point where you have to face the key concepts involved). You will not be severely penalized for doing homeworks relatively poorly.

The *examination questions* will require a student to apply the course material to real situations. Unlike some questions, which ask for regurgitation of the professor's lecture notes, these questions will attempt to test how well you can apply the concepts of the course to unstructured new problems. They will thus test whether you can discern the correct concepts to apply, as well as whether you can apply these concepts correctly. Sample past exam questions will be made available to you on the Canvas website at least a week before the midterm. The exam questions are NOT LIKE THE HOMEWORK for the most part. The exams will be in-class with closed book and closed notes.
Students will also be asked to work on two discussion questions. These questions will require application of microeconomic principles to real situations. Students should think about the answers and discuss the questions in their groups before class. Each group/team will be required to submit the outline of a suggested answer in 1 or 2 double-spaced pages (I will not read past page 2). The answers should make precise use of economic tools. During class, a period of approximately fifteen minutes will be devoted to student suggestions about answers to the questions. I will supply my answer after the student discussion.

Fellow Students and Other Learning Aids

Talking through the material and the homework with other students should significantly enhance your learning and reduce your stress. On homeworks, however, you should discuss with others the approaches to (as opposed to final solutions to) homework problems. Final solutions to homeworks MUST BE DONE INDIVIDUALLY.

I also encourage you to apply the principles you are learning to problems you encounter outside the classroom. Trying to interpret unstructured situations in terms of economic principles typically improves your depth of understanding and illustrates where gaps in your knowledge are. Situations written about in the Wall Street Journal, as well as those encountered in everyday life, provide excellent application practice. You would ideally discuss such situations with other students.

A problem that students sometimes have with the class is that the lack of structure to the exam questions requires some creativity in the application of theoretical principles. I know of no easy shortcuts to acquiring the skill of application; usually application skill is acquired through experience and practice. There are, however, some profitable directions that I can suggest for channeling your energies to get useful applications practice. One useful direction, mentioned above, is to attempt application of economic principles to situations encountered in the Wall Street Journal and other areas of your life. Another strategy is to work out many homework type problems, in addition to the ones assigned. Such additional problems can be found on the publisher’s website, in online microeconomics materials, as well as in other texts and workbooks. A third strategy is to get some private tutoring. A fourth is to read textbooks other than the required one, and see if these provide better connections and explanations. In any event, students with special difficulties should contact me to discuss their particular situation and ask about particular solutions.

To help you prepare for the exams, I also strongly encourage you to work out the old exam questions. I will provide written feedback on one exam per team per quarter (except for multiple choice questions without explanations), if your answers are written up carefully and submitted to me more than 72 hours before the exam – that is, I promise 72 hour turnaround from the time I get them. I encourage students to share my comments with other students before the exam. My comments will not provide answers to the old exams; they will, however, provide some guidance to help YOU find some better answers.

Missing Classes and Audiotape

Attending class is required. But sometimes, attending class is not possible because of unavoidable alternative commitments, travel problems, or illness. In these cases, it is the student’s responsibility to make up the work covered in class, by getting notes from other students, reading the textbook, etc. Questions that remain after using these other sources of catch-up can be addressed in office hours.
One strategy I strongly encourage for those missing a class is getting one of your fellow students to audiotape the class for you. This, in conjunction with notes which include all things written on the whiteboard, seems to me to be “the closest thing to being there.” Some students have found it worthwhile to audiotape classes even when they are present!

The Honor Code

I employ the principles and procedures espoused by Foster School of Business MBA Honor System to maintain academic integrity in the course. The Honor Code of the Foster School expressly prohibits cheating, attempted cheating, plagiarism, and lying to administration or faculty as it pertains to academic work. Suspected violations of the Honor Code will be handled by referral of the matter to the Foster MBA Honor Council.

The Honor Code will apply to course deliverables in the following manner:

1. Homework – As previously mentioned, approaches to solving the homework should be discussed with other students. But final solutions to the homework should be solved, written-up and submitted individually. Previous classes of students SHOULD NOT be consulted for homework assistance or solutions. If you have questions about what is an “approach,” you should contact me.

2. Exams – These should be done individually in class. You should never use outside material, including those available on Internet and phone, other than calculators and language dictionaries for students for whom English is a second language. Exams will be CLOSED BOOK and CLOSED NOTES.

3. Group Outlines – Group outlines should be done entirely within your group, with no assistance from former students and other students in the class.

4. Practice Exams – Practice Exams submitted for my comments should be done entirely by yourself or other current students, with no assistance from former students.

Other Matters: Attitudes, Inflexibility, and Idiosyncrasies

A few matters that may concern students relate to my philosophy towards teaching, classroom sessions, and grading. First, I enjoy teaching itself -- that is, communicating ideas to students eager to learn. Teaching is one of the two key inputs in the production of your knowledge. I get a thrill from having an impact on the way many bright young people will think and act. I also usually learn quite a few things myself in the process.

Different teaching techniques seem to work best for different teachers. I find my teaching to be most effective when students actively participate in class. This means that students must think along with me during class sessions. There must be substantial student-teacher interaction—typically through student questions, comments, and answers to my questions. Despite the class being structured in a primarily lecture style, students have a strong impact on the class session.

The worst part of teaching is the grading and evaluating required of teachers. Grading consumes a large portion of professorial time and student attention despite the fact that, in the long
run, grades are of little importance to anyone. Consider how disproportionate the time spent on grades is, given that nobody ever asks about your grades once you have been out of school for more than a year or two. (As proof of this latter proposition, consider my own situation. When I took introductory MBA Corporate Finance, I received the equivalent of a C. Yet no one at UW asked me about this grade, or any of my other grades, when deciding whether I should teach introductory Finance. As a result, I taught Finance in the MBA core for more than 20 years.) De-emphasizing grades and emphasizing learning would seem to be in all of our interests.

Finally, I expect all of us in the class to behave responsibly. People who behave irresponsibly, imposing costs on others, should expect to bear the consequences of their actions. These attitudes, and other factors, give rise to the following policies:

1. I will use graders to do much of the grading, but will make sure that any grader is highly competent.

2. I will be happy to go over exam questions with students to explain the correct answer and/or where they went wrong. However, I refuse to listen to grade complaints. Complaints are almost always unsuccessful and a waste of everyone's time. In over three decades of teaching, never has a student complaint caused me to change a grade I have given (except when scores were added incorrectly). If you must complain about your grade, submit an explanation in written form.

3. I will expect all students to be prepared for class and to turn in assignments on time. Similarly, students can expect me to be prepared for class and to present them with assignments, handouts, and course materials on time.

4. I will encourage students to ask questions and otherwise participate in class. In some instances, "votes" on questions will be taken. ALL students in class will be expected to vote.

5. Students should not distract other students or themselves in class. This means they should NOT have phones turned on or laptops open in class, except in special circumstances previously approved by the professor.
Readings, Topics, and Tentative Class Schedule

Session 1- 9/24 "Introduction to Microeconomics and Philosophy of Science"
   Required Reading: (L) Preface and skim Ch. 19
   Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 1

Session 2- 9/29 "Basic Supply and Demand Analysis"
   Required Reading: (L) Ch. 1 and 2
   Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 2

Session 3- 10/1 "Taxes, Price Control, and the Role of Markets"
   Required Reading: See Session 2
   Optional Reading: See Session 2

Session 4- 10/6 "Prices and Comparative Advantage"
   Required Reading: See Session 2
   Optional Reading: See Session 2
   Assignment to turn in: Homework "Social Security Tax"

Session 5- 10/8 "Utility Theory and Consumer Choice"
   Required Reading: (L) Ch. 3 and 4
   Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 3 and 4

Session 6- 10/13 "Deriving the Demand Curve"
   Required Reading: See Session 5
   Optional Reading: See Session 5

Session 7- 10/15 "Elasticity and Applications of Demand Theory"
   Required Reading: See Session 5
   Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 5

Session 8- 10/20 "Applications of Demand Theory (Continued)"
   Required Reading: See Session 5
   Optional Reading: See Session 5 and 7
   Assignment to turn in: Homework "Utility and Demand Theory"

Session 9- 10/22 "Applications of Demand Theory (Continued)"
   Required Reading: See Session 5
   Optional Reading: See Session 5 and 7

Session 10- 10/27 "Firms and Costs"
   Required Reading: (L) Ch. 5 and 6
   Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 6
   Assignment to turn in: Homework "Applications of Demand Theory"
Session 11- 10/29 "Deriving the Supply Curve and Input Optimization"
  Required Reading: See Session 10
  Optional Reading: See Session 10

Session 12- 11/3 "Long Run and Short Run Supply Curves"
  Required Reading: (L) Ch. 7 and see Session 10
  Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 7

Session 13– 11/5 “Equilibrium, Long Run Adjustment, Surplus and Welfare”
  Required Reading: (L) Ch. 8 (but Edgeworth Box material not required), Section 9.1
  Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 13, Sections 15.1 and 15.2, (L) Remainder of Ch. 9
  Assignment to turn in: Homework "Supply and Surplus"

Session 15 - **Wednesday, November 12 -- MIDTERM EXAM**

Session 16- 11/17 "Monopoly and its Welfare Cost"
  Required Reading: (L) Ch. 10
  Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 8

Session 17- 11/19 "Price Discrimination"
  Required Reading: See Session 16
  Optional Reading: See Session 16

Session 18- 11/24 "Collusion, Strategic Behavior, and Market Structure"
  Required Reading: (L) Section 11.2
  Optional Reading: (HH) Section 9.1, 10.1, and see Session 16
  Assignment to turn in: Homework "Monopoly and Movie Theaters"

Session 19- 11/26 "Solutions to and Sources of the Monopoly Problem"
  Required Reading: (L) Sections 11.1 and 11.3
  Optional Reading: See Session 16

Session 20- 12/1 "Factor Markets Introduction; Externalities and Public Goods"
  Required Reading: (L) Ch. 13 and 14, Section 15.1
  Optional Reading: (HH) Ch. 11 and 15

Session 21- 12/3 "Property Rights, Sustainability, and Solutions to Externality Problems"
  Required Reading: See Session 20
  Optional Reading: See Session 20, (HH) Section 16.1, Ch. 19 (again)
  Assignment to turn in: Homework "Externalities and Rent Seeking"

**FINAL EXAM: Wednesday December 10**