

Chapter 3

Economic Journeys in Alaska



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Abstract In May of 2015 and 2018 a group of students participated in “Economic Journeys—Alaska” an intensive learning course to Southeastern Alaska. Led by an economics professor and an assistant, the group explored three economic drivers, both current and historical, of the northernmost state: tourism, fishing, and gold. Guided by daily prompts the students journaled about their experiences, offering insight and observations through an economic lens.

3.1 Introduction

In May of 2015 and 2018 eleven students from a small liberal arts college participated in “Economic Journeys—Alaska” a one credit, intensive learning course in Southeastern Alaska during a May Term.¹ Led by an economics professor and an assistant, the group explored three of the four primary economic drivers, both current and historical, of the northernmost state: tourism, fishing, and, gold.² The oil industry was omitted since it is in a portion of the state not visited by the group. Guided by daily prompts the students journaled about their experiences, offering insight and observations through an economic lens. Students returned rate the course highly and their writing assignments and discussion indicate that they learn a considerable amount on the trip and develop a deep appreciation for the state and its economic forces.

¹Most courses at the College are one credit. Students must pass 33.5 credits to graduate. A one credit May Term course is required of all students at the College. Some May Term options are travel courses, but all are intensive, exploratory courses covering a 2–3 week period.

²The institution requires all travel courses to have an adult assistant. In this case, the assistant was another member of the economics faculty and husband of the faculty leader.

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3.2 Learning Objectives

The learning objectives, noted on the course syllabus, are “[u]pon completion of the course students will be able to:

1. Display a firm grasp of economic knowledge and concepts.
2. Demonstrate proficiency in a variety of communication skills.
3. Critically reflect on their learning about economics journalism and the Alaskan economy in an intensive learning environment.”

The sole prerequisite of the course is principles of microeconomics or principles of macroeconomics so that each student has a working knowledge of basic economic concepts.

3.3 Logistics

The group met at an airport hotel in Charlotte the afternoon before the flight. Students got to Charlotte on their own. Many came from campus which is a 3-h drive. Flights to the west coast are often in the early morning. It is best to have everyone gathered the day before to avoid missing a flight. The group flew to Seattle a few days prior to the embarkation, again to avoid logistical issues due to travel delays through the airline. Inexpensive, clean, and safe lodging is available through a variety of online sites. In 2018 the group stayed in rented condominiums, each housing up to six people and considerably cheaper than comparable hotels.

A cruise of the Southeastern portion of Alaska, particularly in May before the peak tourism season begins, is a cost-effective way of visiting the distant state. The ample entertainment aboard is enjoyable for the students while traveling from location to location. The group selected a tour that embarked and disembarked in the same locale which made airline reservations easier and cheaper. Students submitted \$2900 for the entire 12-day trip, including airfare, hotel, food, and the ship ticket. The faculty gave over \$400 back to the students to spend on the trip. The \$2500 net amount included the faculty and assistant fares.³

3.4 Schedule and Assignments

The course is divided into two parts, travel and post-travel. The travel portion is the period in which students gather most of the content for their written submissions. When in port, the class meets in the morning to establish an agenda and discuss the

³The College’s policy is that the student fee, which is due several months prior to the trip, includes the faculty member and assistant’s costs. The amount also includes an administrative fee by the College.

assignment and in the evening to review the day. On “at sea” days the faculty leaders schedule individual meetings with students to review and edit student assignments. Once the class returns to the mainland the course enters the second portion in which students independently edit their assignments for final submission. Students are also required to submit a take-home final exam that includes reflection and course assessment.

The course includes four assignments, three of which are graded using the grading rubric. The rubric is the same one used college-wide to evaluate writing in the social sciences. The initial drafts reviewed during the individual meetings are scored using a check system (✓-, ✓, and ✓+). The first assignment is a trial-run in Seattle, the location of embarkation for the Alaskan journey. The final three assignments are equally weighted and are a formal part of the course assessment. A brief outline of each assignment and student responses are shown below.

1. (Seattle) Discuss the real estate market in Seattle. Comment on the economic factors driving the market.

The class spends a few days in Seattle before embarking. Some of that time is used to prepare students for the Alaska portion of the class, including giving them a ‘dry run’ of an assignment. In 2018, a lunch meeting with a Seattle-area real estate agent was hosted at the Rainier Club. The agent shared the current status and history of the Seattle real estate market over lunch. Students were encouraged to ask questions and used information from the meeting and their own research to complete the assignment. While not graded, the assignment went through the same process as the remaining, graded assignments, including sharing a draft with the faculty to review individually with the student author. One of the faculty knew the Seattle real estate agent who met with our group. For those without such a connection, you might consider contacting local offices via email well in advance of the trip.

2. (JUNEAU) Discuss the economic impact of the salmon hatchery.

The class travelled by public transportation to the Macaulay Salmon Hatchery and took a tour of the facility. The group learned about the life cycle of salmon and the role of hatcheries in maintaining the Alaskan fishing industry. Students asked the guide various questions and explored the facility after the tour taking notes along the way for their written assignment. Tours of the hatchery are open to the public for a small fee per person but contacting the hatchery ahead of time is ideal to ensure that they are open and not booked for the day by a cruise ship group.⁴

3. (SKAGWAY) Discuss the economic impact of the Klondike Gold Rush (before and after).

Skagway played a crucial role in the Klondike Gold Rush in the nineteenth century. Today the town pays tribute to that history as a national park. The group took a private tour of Skagway. The faculty leaders contacted the park office in

⁴All contact information is available on their webpage: <http://www.dipac.net>.

Skagway prior to the trip and the tour was adjusted to focus on the economic impact of the Gold Rush. The park ranger brought black and white photos along to complement the tour. Skagway is always the favorite stop and assignment amongst the students. The tour is free of charge, but to customize the tour and reserve it just for your group, you must contact the park office well in advance.⁵

4. (KETCHIKAN) Select a several square block area near the waterfront and count the share of locally owned shops. Ask at least three people if ownership (local vs. cruise line) influences their decision to shop in a store. Why or why not? If so, are they willing to pay more for a locally owned product? Might there be different motivations for local store owners compared to those owned by the cruise line? Explain. Go into at least one of each type of store. Do you notice any differences? Explain.

Cruise lines own a large share of the prime commercial real estate along the common cruise routes in Alaska which causes some local resentment. Locally owned stores place a sticker in their window indicating resident ownership. Shops owned by the cruise line primarily employ within and shift their workers to warmer locations after the Alaskan tourism season is over. Prior to this assignment, students are instructed to remember their role as representatives of the College and respect individual requests to not answer their questions. The questions are informal and no identifying information of interviewees is collected. Students took notes on their observations and answers to their questions.

3.5 Process and Required Materials

Students are encouraged to type their assignments on a tablet or laptop but are required to bring a notebook on the trip due to both the mobile nature of the assignments and the inconsistent Internet access in Alaska. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, students found that typing on a tablet was inconvenient, and taking a pen to paper was preferable. Students are encouraged upon returning to the ship to type up and detail their handwritten notes while ideas are fresh and to prepare for the daily group discussions and recaps.

⁵The park office webpage provides all needed information: <https://www.nps.gov/klgo/planyourvisit/walking-tours.htm>.

Students ranged from sophomores to seniors, with a range of writing experience. In addition to the daily feedback from the faculty leaders, students are required to purchase and bring Knight's (2010) *Journalistic Writing: Building the Skills, Honing the Craft*. Available in both paperback and electronically, the reference is concise and clear in explanation with ample examples of common writing issues such as lack of word economy. Students are encouraged to read the book in its entirety, but sections are assigned to assist in various assignments.

The faculty leaders also curated various references pertaining to the Alaska economy, primarily the current tourism and fishing industries and the historical impact of the Gold Rush. The files are shared with the students prior to leaving for Alaska using a shared electronic file. Students are encouraged to read through the items while traveling to Alaska. The readings are discussed in group meetings aboard the ship and inform the students prepare the students for their assignments.⁶

3.6 Tips

The following is a list of tips accumulated during the trips to Alaska.

1. Make a list of places students should explore, including hiking trails and museums, while on their own. Students enjoy the freedom of exploring on their own without the forced participation in group activities. For example, a tour of the Starbucks facility in Seattle was the lowest rated activity of the entire trip. Some reported that they might have done it on their own, but overall did not enjoy the organized nature of the tour.
2. Most major airlines allow bidding for blocks of tickets for groups larger than ten. Instructions for each airline are available online. The faculty organizing the Alaska trip bid in both 2015 and 2018 and saved close to \$100 per student over the ticket prices offered through other discount sites.
3. Buy the plane tickets as a block so that the entire group can check in at once, saving time at check-in at the airport.
4. Arrive in the city of embarkation at least 1 day in advance. If flights to the location are cancelled, the ship will not wait for the group.
5. Cruise lines often offer discounts on cabins with three or more people. The Alaska trip got the fourth student at no additional cost for several rooms.
6. Remind students of forbidden items and activities to avoid issues with ship security.
7. Remind students that ships do not wait for tardy passengers and make a plan for students left in port.

⁶A good place to start is Goldsmith (2008) and various issues of *Alaska Economic Trends* by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

8. Cruise ships require passports be valid for several months after embarkation. Given the time required to get or renew a passport, faculty should personally inspect student passports several months in advance of the trip. The cruise line often requires a copy of the passport during the ticketing process.
9. Create social media accounts (ex. Facebook and Instagram) for the group trip to keep parents up to date on planning prior to the trip and experiences during the trip.
10. Encourage students to pack economically but prepare for the anticipated weather in Alaska.

3.7 Conclusion

Alaska is a location not often considered for undergraduate travel courses. For a relatively small amount of money, a course that explores the current and historical underpinnings of the economy for the northern-most state is possible. The course applies economic lessons while cultivating student observation, critical thinking, and writing skills.

“Economic Journeys—Alaska” was taught in 2015 and 2018. Most of this chapter includes lessons and tips learned from the first iteration in 2015 that were applied in 2018. If the course is taught a third time, there are a few things that we would adjust. First, when using public transportation, there is often a short walk to and from the bus stop. Not all students are used to walking distances of a half mile, so tell them all in advance how much walking is involved. This will help avoid inappropriate footwear and complaints about walking. If you have students or faculty who cannot walk, you will need to investigate the best way to travel to and from the ship and to various activities. Most ships have vans to take passengers into town from the ship, but not to specific destinations (without an additional charge.)

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References

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