

June 30, 2008

Chris Graham  
EMBA

Dear Mr. Graham,

The American Association for Higher Education developed a number of “Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning.” With apology to David Letterman, I have adapted the list slightly, to structure those principles as a “Top Ten” list:

1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values; it begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for our students.
2. Learning is a complex process that entails not only what students know, but what they can do with what they know. It involves not only knowledge and abilities, but also values, attitudes and habits of mind that require thoughtful (and diverse) approaches to measurement.
3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes. Assessment as a process leads a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes, but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. To improve outcomes, faculty and administrators need to know about student experiences along the way—about the curricula, teaching and student effort that lead to particular outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. Improvement comes when assessment entails a linked series of activities that occur over time, and assessment strategies must be continually evaluated and refined in order to ensure success.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved. Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Educational quality is a collective effort.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of relevance and illuminates questions that people really care about. To be useful, information collected must be connected to issues or questions that people value.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change. Successful assessment is directed toward improvement, and its most important contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at.
9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public; assessment provides a way to document outcomes and to inform constituents of the ways in which campus programs and services positively affect students, community and society.
10. Assessment is less about oversight and more about improving student learning. All assessment efforts need to be handled in a mutually supportive environment. It is essential for faculty to understand the importance and benefits of assessment and to recognize its intrinsic value.

Within the context of these assessment principles, I thank you for submitting your annual report. Members of the Student Learning Outcomes Committee have reviewed the report, and I convey their specific comments, suggestions, and questions by way of this letter (next page). It is my hope that you will perceive this review process in the same manner as do we: as a collaborative process, with the goal of enhancing student learning.

## Committee Response to Your 2007-2008 Annual Assessment Report

The Student Learning Outcomes Committee is pleased with the conscientious response to last year's recommendations regarding the EMBA program, in particular your specification of program-level learning outcomes, the mapping of these high-level outcomes onto specific courses, and your identification of specific assessment items. We also appreciate that you have outlined an assessment timeline. We are particularly pleased that you have focused on holistic learning outcomes that emphasize such high-levels of performance as problem solving, critical thinking and leadership, rather than over-emphasizing rote learning.

Members of the committee expressed some concerns that your proposed scheme will over-emphasize course-embedded assessment items and will confuse *program level assessment* with evaluation of student work products for grading purposes. We believe that, particularly in master's level degree programs, such embedded assessment items (components of graded exams or assignments) should be balanced with assessment that transcends individual courses—a comprehensive exam or professional certification exam, for instance—that can measure skills and knowledge that involve integration of skills across specific course venues. As we have noted above, *program level assessment* items need not be administered to all students, but only to a reasonable sample, thus allowing more careful and probative appraisal of work products or other evidence of student capabilities.

Your decision to adopt the learning outcomes of the MBA program for the SMBA program raised some very interesting questions for us. On the one hand, the use of a single set of learning outcomes for both degree programs provides an example of the potential value of student learning outcomes as a kind of language that allows program faculty and coordinators to see more clearly the commonalities of different academic programs. On the other hand, an assertion that the outcomes are identical for both programs stimulates a question: Why, then, are they distinct degree programs? If original proposals for these degree programs had been submitted to the Chancellor's Office or to the California Post-Secondary Education Commission simultaneously, with exactly the same learning outcomes, would we not anticipate that reviewers would ask, "why have two programs that prepare MBAs with the same skills and knowledge?" No other MSA or MBA program from COBA, and no other master's level program at SDSU with which we are familiar, has adopted this "program clone" approach for student learning outcomes.

One defense against such criticism might be that the MBA and SMBA programs prepare students to apply the same concepts, principles, methods, etc., but in different *contexts*—the core knowledge is the same, but that various program elements such as internships, field experiences, and capstone courses, challenge students to apply the core or foundational knowledge in differentiated ways. This approach to curriculum design is widely used in many schools and organizations. But would it be helpful to identify *some* learning outcomes that are differentiated by these contexts? Perhaps this could be done by selectively adding a third level of outcomes that differentiate the specialized aspects of the program from the common core. This approach might also help the program (in its marketing and advisement) to answer the obvious question of prospective students: "What is the difference between the two programs in terms of what I would learn and how my professional skills and knowledge would be enhanced?"

It might appear as if the Committee is being picky or skeptical in raising these issues. However, the impetus for our questions is not skepticism about your intentions, but rather optimism that you have in fact used learning outcomes to identify commonalities that might lead to efficiencies in course articulation and the elimination (or consolidation) of redundant course offerings, thereby developing a more elegant "core" to serve both programs. Put more simply, might you be able to leverage these insights to improve the overall efficiency of the MBA and SMBA programs?

In closing, we applaud your thoughtfulness and diligence regarding assessment of student learning. While it is clear that you have a promising foundation, the SLO Committee reviewers wish to leave you with a recommendation that underscores the overall effort. We caution you to always keep in mind the purpose of your assessment efforts, which is to use what you have found to drive change that will strengthen your programs. In the parlance of the AACSB, your professional accrediting organization, “closing the loop” is ultimately the most critical measure of a successful assessment effort. In next year’s report, we will look forward to reading about detailed efforts to institute programmatic change in response to the findings that your assessment program has produced.

Highest regards,

*Chris Frost*

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Chair, Student Learning Outcomes Committee