

June 15, 2007

Dr. Nik Varaiya, Chair  
Dr. David Ely, Finance Department Assessment Coordinator  
Dr. Thomas Warschauer, Financial Services Coordinator  
Department of Finance

Dear Drs. Varaiya, Ely, and Warschauer:

National conversations about higher education, as well as WASC expectations, emphasize the importance of assessing student learning and using the results for program improvement. As you may know, assessment and student learning outcomes continue to figure prominently in current discussions about reform of higher education, including on-going negotiations between government agencies and various accreditation organizations. The intensity of the national conversation is but one of many indicators that point to increased scrutiny of university assessment. That said, the SDSU Student Learning Outcomes committee is most concerned with *the intrinsic value of the process*, one wherein the goal is “finding out if whether the students know and are able to do what you expect them to know and do.” This process necessarily begins, of course, by defining what we want our students to know and do. By earnestly undertaking the annual process, programs and departments can then identify precisely where and how to improve—so that student learning can be enhanced to meet the goals that faculty have established. The Annual Assessment Report at San Diego State University furthers this conversation by requiring the inclusion of evidence of student learning outcomes assessment and discussion of how the results are used for improving a program.

Put another way, the SDSU annual assessment reports are intended as a means to an important end, that is, as a process that adds value to programs and that is aligned with related evaluation efforts (WASC Accreditation, Academic Program Review, annual Academic Plans, and for some programs, professional accreditation). Although the Student Learning Outcomes committee provides a list of questions to help departments structure their report, we encourage departments and programs to respond in a manner that best aligns with their particular accreditation and academic review format and cycle. Some accrediting organizations, for example, already employ well-developed standards for evaluating program components and treat assessment as a critical part of accreditation. In such cases, we encourage programs to submit their annual reports in the same style and format as used for accreditation, *with one caveat*: If a respective professional accreditation process does not include measurement of student learning, then the program would need to do so independently. For programs and departments that do not undergo professional accreditation, we encourage you to align the annual reports with the institutional accreditation cycle and with your academic program review cycle. It is our fervent wish that the annual reports assist you in this endeavor, rather than become an additional burden on your faculty and staff.

Within this context, we thank you for submitting your annual assessment report. Members of the Student Learning Outcomes Committee have reviewed the report, using a review template that aligns with the annual report questions (when applicable), and we offer specific comments, suggestions, and questions by way of this letter.

## **Committee Response to Your 2006-2007 Annual Assessment Reports**

### **BSBA, Finance**

This year's assessment study appears to identify students' lack of preparation for solving ill-structured problems. We think that departments such as yours, which approach such assessment findings constructively and with candor, are well positioned to address the identified challenges and search for additional targets for improvement. We could not tell from Appendix I whether future progress in addressing the problem areas will again be assessed, but many programs find it productive to integrate assessment issues into any redesign or revision of programs so that assessment complements major modifications in teaching methods and instructional resources.

### **BSBA, Real Estate**

The curriculum review currently underway in the Real Estate program appears to offer opportunities for addressing assessment issues in ways that are more foundational than those in settled CBA programs. Among the approaches that may be propitious is the use of data from systematic needs assessments in conversations with benefactors of the new Real Estate Endowment. Similarly, a well-designed program for assessing learning outcomes might be a way to assure benefactors that appropriate strategies for stewardship of educational components of the endowment will be in place.

### **BS Financial Services**

The focus of this year's assessment report seems appropriate and is based on well-stated learning outcome statements. The report indicates that criterion-based assessment of five student projects in FIN 589 met or exceeded the specified learning outcomes—essentially a pilot study. As with a number of other CBA departments that employed similar methods involving in-house rubrics and faculty readers, accreditation reviewers might raise concerns about sampling procedures and the reliability and validity of assessment measures.

In situations such as the FIN 589 assessment, a relatively straightforward measure of reliability would be to calculate the correlation of ratings by multiple raters of the assignments (a straightforward process, assuming there are two raters, but more complex if not). The Certified Financial Planner National Exam, which appears to be a *direct* measure of learning outcomes, serves to complement in-house assessment instruments and methods. The department may want to investigate the correlation of scores on the CFPNE with department assessment measures or use similar approaches for partially validating internal assessment measures against more general professional standards. Overall, this availability of a nationally-vetted instrument may reduce the need for the department having to develop its own instrumentation in certain areas. Committee members are unclear about the current or future role of the CFPNE in the program's future assessment, so this could be addressed in next year's report.

### **MSBA, Concentration in Finance**

As with the BSBA in Finance, this year's assessment helped identify significant areas for improvement with regard to unstructured problems and scenarios, but also identified writing skills as a major strength. Teaching students to solve authentic, ill-structured problems is a particularly challenging issue in professional preparation programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The Center for Teaching and Learning may be able to provide assistance in identifying relevant approaches to course and/or learning activity design. The department

may also want to consider how it might obtain resources to support a long-term strategy to develop solutions in this area, including recruitment of faculty or benefactors who are interested in conducting relevant research or scholarship or funding curriculum development efforts.

### **MSBA, Concentration in Financial and Tax Planning**

Several of the issues noted above regarding the BSBA in Financial Services seem to apply to the MSBA: reliability, validity, and sampling procedures.

We note that several other CBA programs are employing the general strategy of assessing work products in capstone courses. This is an important and appropriate strategy and may even offer benefits down the road in terms of cost-management through replicability. However, this approach might best be coordinated with embedded indicators (e.g., test items) at the course level that could support finer-grained and more immediate analyses and that are less time-intensive (i.e., in terms of faculty and staff resources required).

In closing, the committee and I wish to convey our belief that the self-reflection that ensues from assessment is very valuable. The committee appreciates the time and effort that you and your department expend in examining student learning. We urge you to consider how these efforts can be aligned most effectively with accreditation and academic program review processes. We also wish to extend an invitation to a summer conference on assessment, developed by Dr. Marilee Bresciani and SDSU's Center for Educational Leadership, Innovation and Policy, *Evaluating Institutional Learning Centeredness*, to be held at the San Diego Marriott in Mission Valley, July 12-14, 2007. (<http://interwork.sdsu.edu/elip/assessment>) And for a quick introduction to learning outcomes and assessment, please refer to the *2006 SDSU Curriculum Guide* (<http://www.sdsu.edu/curriculumguide>), pp. 102-106.

Highest regards,

*Chris Frost*

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