

June 1, 2009

Dr. Mehdi Salehizadeh and Dr. Thomas Warschauer
Department of Finance
College of Business Administration

Dear Professors Salhizadeh and Warschauer:

If your department is typical, it is likely you have heard such comments as the following during recent weeks and months: *“Given the budget crisis, we’ll probably be teaching more students with fewer faculty members. So, it’s time we just forgot this whole assessment business – who can afford the time, or the resources?”* Indeed, it does appear more than justified to approach our financial crisis by “circling the wagons,” steadfastly agreeing to continue only with the most essential aspects of the program.

One problem, of course, is how to decide where to make cuts. Which classes can effectively be taught in large theater classrooms? Which classes can be taught using distance technology, or infused with a distance component (a hybrid course)? Which parts of our curriculum are working effectively, and which parts could be ordered differently—for greater effectiveness? To answer such questions requires a perception of the whole, an understanding of the overall architecture of the curriculum, and then data—evidence—in order to answer questions of effectiveness, and value. Put another way, making important curricular and pedagogical decisions in the absence of evidence is akin to confirming a research hypothesis—without ever conducting the inquiry.

For these reasons, the goal of the Student Learning Outcomes Committee is to assist departments and programs in the process of making tough decisions, by helping them to focus on questions of value. Because we understand the issue of time and resources, we are also trying to improve our own processes as well, to find ways to help departments assess student learning more effectively. To this end, we will introduce a simplified assessment manual by summer, and we will continue to explore possible software applications that might lead us to more parsimonious approaches. In it our sincere hope that you will see us an ally in the process of making difficult choices.

Committee Response to Your 2008-2009 Annual Assessment Report

Representatives of the committee have carefully reviewed the approach employed for assessing the department’s degree programs. We applaud the persistence of department faculty who this year completed an entire assessment cycle for the BSBA and MSBA Finance programs. (This is the first assessment report for the BSBA in Real Estate). The committee also notes a consistent effort throughout these reports to match exam items to clearly stated SLOs adopted by the department, and we appreciate the new and consistent matrices mapping SLOs to courses and assessment methods. We also appreciate the wealth of detailed examples of exam items and the straightforward analyses of success rates.

We note the very detailed development of SLOs described for the BSBA and MSBA in Financial Services and the excellent matrices illustrating assignment of SLOs to courses, as well as the significant effort evidenced in establishing goals and SLOs for the new BSBA in Real Estate.

We do want to raise one concern regarding the long-term viability of the way in which the direct assessment data is collected, i.e., piecemeal over several years by numerous individual instructors. Although this was certainly a reasonable strategy during earlier years of the university's assessment initiative, which dates back to 1999, there may now be more efficient approaches. Thus, we urge the faculty and chair to carefully consider the drawbacks of relying solely or primarily on exam items selected periodically by individual instructors. Among other drawbacks, the approach:

- does not allow the department to obtain complete samples of achievement each year regarding cohorts or groups of students, and it does not permit timely monitoring of results of programmatic interventions or improvements;
- seems labor intensive (long narratives explaining who's responsible for administration of what), unnecessarily repetitive and ill-suited to automated data processing, analysis, and data presentation;
- obstructs serious analytics (e.g., correlations between various measures, baselines, trends, calculation of item-discrimination indices or reliabilities);
- discourages eventual coordination with other data such as exit surveys or employer surveys; for example, a simple way to partially cross validate exit survey items (student self report) and exam items (direct assessment) is to calculate correlations or construct indices (or even use a chi-square analysis);
- subjects the data to unnecessary uncertainties regarding instructor bias such as "teaching to the test" or employing certain exam items in favor of others; (one reviewer suspects that accreditation teams would have concerns about long-term use of this approach); and
- does not lend itself well to measurement of learning outcomes not tied to specific courses; for example, outcomes that transcend or integrate concepts and skills acquired in different courses or incidental learning related to co-curricular experiences.

For these reasons, we urge the department to consider such strategies as those implemented by the Marketing Department, which has developed a pool of ~160 items that are randomly sampled within sub-domains, to yield a 70 item test administered to students in capstone courses. It seems to the committee that items accumulated during the Finance Department's just-completed assessment cycle would make a handsome down payment on such an item pool. (Please note that we certainly do not want to discourage individual instructors from analyzing their own exams as a basis for improving courses.)

Finally, we also acknowledge the listing of benchmark institutions and the brief note on contacts with employers and informal conversations with recent graduates. We think these efforts represent vital lines of inquiry that could be formalized and thus provide additional evidence. The committee commends the effort and attention devoted to student learning and outcomes!

Highest regards,

Chris Frost

Christopher Frost, Ph.D.
Chair, Student Learning Outcomes Committee