June 1, 2009

Dr. Theo Addo, Assessment Coordinator
Dr. Bruce Reinig, Chair
Department of Information and Decision Systems
College of Business Administration

Dear Professors Addo and Reinig:

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

The committee notes with pleasure a very substantial improvement in the clarity of program-level learning outcomes (goals), for both the BSBA and MSBA; a well organized assignment of outcomes to individual courses; and clearly defined targets for course-level assessment. We also note significant efforts to survey alums and compare their perceptions with students. (As one suggestion regarding the latter, we think you all might find it useful to conduct a simple chi-square analysis of that data).

These are excellent foundations for program assessment. Thus, we encourage the department to move ahead with its schedule and plan, and we highlight (below) some challenges.

The assessment schedules call for parallel implementation of a variety of assessment strategies and instruments over several semesters. It appears that exams will be designed and administered by individual instructors. Perhaps a better way to slice this plan, given IDS' expertise in information systems, might be to begin with a focused effort to build a pool of multiple-choice and short answer items (matched to discrete outcomes), constructed so that the pool can be enlarged over future semesters. Items for assessment exams would be drawn randomly (within subject domains) from this pool, and usage, reliability, and validity data tracked. This approach will take time, but is probably better accomplished early on, so that it can be used repeatedly and with more efficient use of faculty time. The item pool strategy has been adopted by the Department of Marketing. Other types of assessment can be conducted on a selective basis or piloted according to accreditation requirements or other factors.

For *program assessment* purposes, the Committee discourages routine use of exams designed and administered by individual instructors primarily for their own classes (although that tack is obviously highly appropriate for course-level assessments). Routine reliance on individual, instructor-designed exams does not build a common resource, and tends to promote an ad hoc and fragmented approach to selection of outcomes to be evaluated. In addition, it obstructs attempts to establish baselines, monitor program level trends, or improve item reliability iteratively over successive administrations.

Scales are not necessarily the best rubrics. Although the term "rubrics" is used fairly broadly and somewhat inconsistently in education, using a scale (such as the four-point, "Unsatisfactory"-to-"Very Good" scale on the unnumbered 2nd page of the MSBA report) is less likely to provide guidance to colleagues and students than the well developed rubrics in Appendices C-G of the BSBA report. Using scales without descriptive language simply defers discussion about what is "very good" and how it is different from "good." On the other hand, descriptions for the rubricated levels of achievement in MSBA Appendix C (SLOs 1.2 and 1.3) are not well differentiated.

In closing, we commend you on your commitment to assessment of student learning, and your progress toward efforts aimed at "closing the loop." We look forward to next year's report.

Highest regards,

Chris Frost

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