

## REBELS IN THE LAND OF CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a response to evolving AACSB curriculum standards, specifically outcome measurement, that strays from the traditional approach (using an outside service provider) that is taken by most universities. An internal program for assessing core curriculum was developed and implemented using the marketing department as a pilot.

### INTRODUCTION

Reaccreditation: a word that is sure to strike fear in the hearts and minds of administrators and faculty alike. Many (most?) aspects of the AACSB Reaccreditation process are nerve wracking. The two areas that have received the greatest attention and concern on this campus during the past several years as we have prepared for reaccreditation, however, are Intellectual Contributions and Assessment. Colleagues at other business schools who are preparing for or who have recently undergone the AACSB reaccreditation process seem to share the view that meeting these two AACSB standards are challenges for most institutions.

While striving to meet the Intellectual Contributions standard continues to be a challenge for many colleges of business, it is at least a familiar challenge. Assessment, on the other hand, represents a relatively new challenge for most schools. AACSB expectations for the level and depth of assessment processes have increased over the past years. The new AACSB standards that are being introduced will call for yet stronger levels of program assessment, on a more frequent basis.

AACSB is not alone in increasing the amount of attention it pays to assessment. Many individual universities and multi-university systems are also calling for more stringent assessment processes. The Chancellor's Office of The California State University system, for example, requires an annual accountability report from all units (down to the department level) that includes ten performance areas (modified from thirteen) and requires detail of the processes that are in place to assess whether the unit is meeting its objectives, the results of the

assessment procedure, and the outcome of changes made as a result of the assessment ("closing the loop" in AACSB language).

The challenge presented by the increased demand for clear assessment processes and procedures is heightened by the fact that few administrators, faculty, or staff members in Colleges of Business possess expertise in the design and/or implementation of assessment programs. This lack of internal expertise has created a significant opportunity for entrepreneurs to step in and offer their services. The use of external sources to provide assessment instruments, analysis, benchmarking, and other services has become quite common in Schools of Business. The purpose of this paper is to provide an account of one university that chose a different path.

### THE PATH WELL TRAVELED

"Do you do EBI?" This question is often heard in any discussion of reaccreditation. Educational Benchmarking Incorporated (EBI), a well known company that provides a wide variety of instruments, tools, and follow up analyses designed to help institutions assess their programs, faculty, and units, is a popular service provider. Specifically, EBI states its mission as:

to provide the most comprehensive and highest quality comparative assessment methodologies, instruments, and analysis to organizations in support of their continuous quality improvement efforts.

[<http://www.webebi.com/Index.htm>]

Established in 1994, EBI formed a strategic alliance with AACSB in 1995. The firm currently has a client list of more than 250 colleges and universities world wide that use its services to provide management education assessment.

Well known, well respected, and strategically aligned with AACSB, the use of EBI services to provide assessment is clearly the "path well traveled" by most schools of business today. Indeed, the university being described in this paper has used EBI services to perform alumni and faculty surveys and has been well satisfied with the results.

EBI is not the only provider in this industry. Another is The Educational Testing Service Network (ETS). Established in 1947, ETS describes its mission as: to help advance quality and equity in education by providing fair and valid assessments, research and related services. Our products and services measure knowledge and skills, promote learning and performance, and support education and professional development for all people worldwide.  
[\[http://www.ets.org/aboutets/mission.html\]](http://www.ets.org/aboutets/mission.html)

Similar in many ways to EBI, ETS offers a variety of products that can be used to aid in the assessment function of programs. One of their products offered for higher education assessment is a series of "Major Field Tests." Major Field Tests are designed to reflect the basic knowledge and understanding gained in the core undergraduate curriculum.

### UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

In the spring of 2000, the Undergraduate Curriculum committee in the College of Business Administration at a large, public university faced the task of "making progress" on assessment of the undergraduate preparatory and core courses in the college's curriculum. Table One lists the courses in these two categories. Encouraged by the college's associate dean, the committee evaluated the use of the ETS Major Field Test in business. The test is described on the ETS web site as "designed to measure a student's knowledge and ability to apply significant facts, concepts, theories, and analytical methods." [<ftp://ftp.ets.org/pub/corp/mftbus.pdf>] The test consists of 120 multiple choice questions and covers the broad topics of accounting, economics, management, quantitative business analysis and information systems, finance, marketing, and the legal and social environment.

Throughout parts of the spring and fall semesters of 2000, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee debated the pros and cons of using the ETS Major Field Test to assess prep and core curriculum in the college. Table Two identifies the major points of debate on the issue.

As indicated in Table Two, the advantages of using a test purchased from an outside supplier were not insignificant. The facts that the test would be provided in a complete form (no need to develop a test internally) and was recognized as both valid and reliable were very strong arguments in favor of proceeding in this direction. Further, the testing

service provided valuable analysis that would benchmark our student's results against those of comparable institutions. While the price of purchasing the test and other services was not insignificant, the process was important and the dean was willing to budget the item – hence it was not that "we couldn't afford it."

**TABLE ONE  
PREP AND CORE CURRICULUM**

Prep Courses (Lower Division)	Core Courses (Upper Division)
Financial Accounting	Organizational Behavior
Managerial Accounting	Principles of Marketing
Legal Environment of Business	Operations Management
Principles of Information Systems	Fundamentals of Finance
Business Communications	International Business Strategy
Macro Economics	
Micro Economics	
Calculus for Business	
Statistics for Business	

**TABLE TWO  
PROS & CONS OF USING ETS MAJOR FIELD TEST**

Pros	Cons
Easy	Implementation Challenge
Recognized Valid and Reliable	Difficult to get students to take seriously
Results benchmarked against other schools	Large number of transfer students
Cost	Cost

The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, however, was impelled by the disadvantages listed in Table Two. Where and how would the test be administered? Its comprehensive nature suggested that it must be given near the end of a student's program (to ensure that he/she had completed all the topics covered). The committee was not optimistic that it could successfully require or entice students to take the exam outside of a class structure. The only viable class for administration (taken by all students near the end of their program) was International Business Strategy. Administering the exam in this course, however, required that faculty agree to give it time and potentially, to build

its result into their grading for the course. This latter issue brought the committee to the second problem listed in Table Two, how to get students to take the exam seriously. If Strategy instructors incorporated the test into their course but were not willing to "count" it toward a student's grade, students were most likely to exert little if any effort to perform well. In addition to these problems, the committee was concerned about transfer students. Approximately 50% of the university's upper division undergraduate students transfer from junior colleges. These students complete their prep courses outside the university. While the university does accept prep courses taken elsewhere, the committee was extremely uncomfortable with the idea of its program being assessed in topic areas (accounting for example) where at least half of the students being assessed had learned the material elsewhere. Finally, while the dean of the college was willing to budget the required sum to purchase the exam, the committee deemed that the expense to the college was significant.

Based on the above, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee decided to develop its own instrument and procedure for assessing core curriculum. While the long term plan was to follow this plan for all core courses, it was decided to initially develop a pilot program in the basic marketing course.

### THE PILOT PROGRAM IN MARKETING

The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee left the development and implementation of the core assessment pilot program to the college's Directors of Assessment and Undergraduate Programs. Marketing was targeted for the pilot program because it was an upper division core course (most students would have completed it at the current institution) and because the Undergraduate Program Director was also the group coordinator for the Principles of Marketing course thus increasing the likelihood of cooperation from the teaching faculty involved. Working together, the two directors developed a four step process.

The first step involved asking Marketing Department faculty who did not teach the Principles course to each write 2-3 multiple choice questions, based on course objectives that had been previously developed, in a specific area covered by the course. Effort was made to assign topic areas based on an individual's area of expertise. This was not always possible, however, and it was generally assumed that all marketing faculty were capable of writing questions on any topic covered by the Principles class. Faculty currently teaching the Principles

course were not asked to participate in this exercise so as to avoid the insinuation that they would be biased, hence writing questions that their students would be more likely to answer correctly.

Each non Principles instructor faculty member was provided with the following:

1. A set of the Principles of Marketing course objectives.
2. A specific topic area (in some cases instructors were assigned two topic areas).
3. A request to prepare 2-3 multiple choice questions in each topic area that would meet the relevant course objectives and that "any student completing basic marketing" should be able to answer correctly.

Step Two involved the Marketing Department faculty members who were currently teaching the Principles course. They were asked to inform students that the final exam in the course would contain some comprehensive multiple choice questions. The instructors were told that it was up to them whether the results of performance on these questions "counted" toward the test score and ultimately the course grade in the class. They were asked, however, not to suggest to the students prior to the exam that they might not count. If the students believed that the questions were a legitimate part of the exam, they could be expected to take them seriously.

Next, the questions written by the non Principles faculty were combined to form a pool of approximately 40 – 50 questions. From the pool, 25 questions were randomly selected.

Finally, the questions were provided to the Principles instructors shortly before the end of the semester (just in time for test preparation). They were specifically not provided earlier (despite requests from the Principles instructors), so as to avoid the potentially biasing behavior of the instructors "teaching to the questions."

The Director of Assessment gathered the test forms from the instructors after the semester. Analyses indicated for each of the 25 questions:

- Percentage of all students (across all sections) who answered the question correctly.

- For each individual instructor, percentage of his or her students who answered the question correctly.
- Significant differences between the group mean and an individual instructor's mean were noted.

These analyses provided feedback on two important aspects of assessment:

1. Questions where the average percent of students across all sections who got the answer incorrect was deemed inadequate (below 70% in this case), were looked at carefully. These results would suggest that the objective the question addressed was not being met.
2. Questions where the average percent of students from a given instructor who got the question incorrect was significantly below that of the course average also required careful consideration. The instructor in question might need to reorganize topic coverage in his/her class to better address the objective in question.

The Director of Assessment met with the Principles of Marketing instructors after the analyses were complete. Each instructor received a copy of the analysis and group discussion regarding how to use the information took place.

### **ONWARD AND UPWARD**

The Marketing Department Pilot Program was deemed a success and was repeated in the following semester. A new set of questions was solicited hence building the pool of questions to approximately 100. This pool can be randomly drawn from in future semesters making it less necessary to ask for new questions each semester. In the semester following the initial marketing pilot, the program was expanded to include Fundamentals of Finance. Organizational Behavior was added in spring semester 2002. Operations Management joined the program in fall 2002.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In hindsight, some of the initial evaluation of the pros and cons by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee of the path well traveled versus striking out on our own was remarkably accurate. Using an outside provider would clearly have been easier. It would also have provided benchmarking against other institutions which we do not have with the internal process. On the other hand, the process

described here allowed us to avoid the challenges that were seen with the more traditional path while still providing an assessment process deemed valid and reliable. As the process is carried out over multiple semesters, we will have longitudinal data that will allow us to continue assessing and closing the loop. If we had it to do again, we would continue to choose our position as rebels in the land of curriculum assessment.

### **REFERENCES**

Educational Benchmarking, Incorporated.  
[<http://www.webebi.com>]

The Educational Testing Service Network.  
[<http://www.ets.org>]