

■ KRISHNA S. DHIR, Feature Editor, Campbell School of Business, Berry College

AACSB International, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, is a not-for-profit organization of educational, corporate, and other institutions devoted to the promotion and improvement of higher education in business administration and management. The Association's membership has been growing beyond the U.S., creating new opportunities and challenges for its role as a source of information, training, and networking. In addition to its accreditation function, AACSB International offers development programs for faculty and administrators, conducts research on trends and issues specific to the field of management education, maintains relationships with disciplinary associations and other groups, and interacts with the corporate community on a variety of initiatives.

Setting Standards for Assessment

by John J. Fernandes, President and Chief Executive Officer,
AACSB International



John J. Fernandes

is the president and chief executive officer of AACSB International, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Prior to joining AACSB International, he was executive vice president and

chief operating officer for the Institute of Internal Auditors, with responsibility for the Learning and Business Centers. Previously, he also served as vice president and general auditor for New York City Transit and held staff and management positions with Exxon Company USA, Cameron Iron Works, and Houston METRO. Mr. Fernandes has 28 years' internal auditing and management experience. He has managed and conducted audits of energy, manufacturing, marketing, transportation, and management operations throughout the United States and in 16 other countries. He received a bachelor's degree in accounting and communications from Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Houston. He is a graduate of the Program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and the University of Texas' Public Executive Institute.

Some of our management education colleagues are surprised when they learn about AACSB International's long tradition of history and leadership in learning outcomes assessment. The organization's first formal incursion into assessment research and practice began more than three decades ago. Initiatives generated by staff and volunteer leadership in 1974 evolved into a 10-year process of research and development for two separate assessment programs—content knowledge and professional abilities. Assessment tests were developed and became available in 1985.

In 1988, Bill Bennett, then the U.S. Secretary of Education, declared that American school programs should provide information about their outcomes assessment activities if schools wanted to be approved for federal funding. Despite Bennett's mandate, plus the outstanding work of AACSB and other organizations, a significant number of educational members regarded assessment as an "intrusion" into their programs and resisted these developments. The assessment movement didn't take wings.

Nonetheless, the convictions of many AACSB leaders around the power

of assessment continued. Moreover, pressures for greater accountability and more hard evidence of student learning continued to escalate across all educational environments. In the U.S., governments, corporations, regional, and other accrediting agencies, and students and their parents were among the entities insisting on concrete answers to their questions about the skills and knowledge students could be expected to acquire through their educational programs.

Not surprisingly, when AACSB standards were overhauled and revised in 1991, renewed emphasis was placed on "outcomes measures," especially as they related to the organization's new mission-linked standards. At that time, however, "outcomes" was a broadly interpreted term, and schools could use either direct or indirect assessments, such as field tests or surveys of students or employers, to demonstrate they had met their goals and achieved their mission. Within AACSB membership, even schools that were once reluctant participants in assessment activities began to accept the drive toward greater accountability and the need for practices and measures of student accomplishment against school missions and goals.

By the year 2000, when AACSB convened its Blue Ribbon Committee on Accreditation Quality (BRC), the topic of assessment had continued to escalate at virtually all levels of education. The BRC, a group of management education leaders with strong accreditation knowledge and experience, was asked to review and reassess the accreditation standards in terms of their relevance for the 21st century and a global membership. Their work, which spanned almost two years, led to a set of bold new standards, which included a key segment on student learning as “the central activity of higher education.” Of the 21 standards, seven are linked to “assurance of learning”—the AACSB expectation that “graduates achieve learning expectations.”

As the BRC formulated its procedures, they ruled out the “competency” approach used by many other specialized accreditors, consciously avoiding a situation where AACSB would establish the competencies. The BRC maintained that, while specification of competencies might make sense in some fields, the complexity and diversity of business school environments did not lend itself to the kind of codification that might work in more technical areas. Rather than defining competencies, the new AACSB standards require each school to establish its own specific learning goals for degree programs and then to demonstrate that the learning goals are met.

In precise terms, accredited schools must provide direct evidence that learning is happening, and not just that appropriate material is being taught. For each degree program, four to ten learning objectives must be developed, and schools must show how they have confirmed that these objectives are being met.

Part of the thinking in the development of the standards was that the process of establishing operational definitions and establishing learning goals would be a healthy community-building exercise for schools. BRC members suggested that one potential benefit would be to encourage faculty to think

of the degree programs as a whole, as opposed to a particular disciplinary viewpoint, and to think about how the various dimensions of the business school dovetail and contribute to the whole.

Assurance of Learning

The assurance of learning standards, which encompass assessment, were designed to evaluate how well the school accomplishes the educational aims at the core of its activities. Whereas previous standards had focused on what was being taught, the new standards looked at what was being learned. In other words, the new standards require schools to establish direct measures of learning accomplishment, rather than to rely on curriculum standards that merely signaled learning intent.

Guidance in the standards directs each school to establish its own unique learning goals with input from alumni, faculty, students, and prospective employers of graduates, with the stipulation that these learning goals should reflect what is most pivotal in the school's programs. In fact, the mandate for every school to “enunciate and measure its educational goals” is at the heart of the assurance-of-learning concepts represented in AACSB accreditation. According to the standards, “few characteristics of the school will be as important to stakeholders as knowing the accomplishment levels of the school's students when compared against the school's learning goals Measures of learning can assure external constituents such as potential students, trustees, public officials, supporters, and accreditors that the organization meets its goals.”

Although business schools provide a variety of learning experiences at a number of levels, the standards include definitions regarding learning expectations at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. With regard to curriculum management, the standards stipulate that: “The school uses well documented, systematic processes to develop, monitor, evaluate, and revise

the substance and delivery of the curricula of degree programs and to assess the impact of the curricula on learning. Curriculum management includes inputs from all appropriate constituencies, which may include faculty, staff, administrators, students, faculty from non-business disciplines, alumni, and the business community served by the school.” The standard provides curricular guidelines and requires use of a systematic process for curriculum management, but the standard does not mandate specific courses.

The standards definitions stipulate that undergraduate degree programs should, as one example, “achieve knowledge and skills for successful performance in a complex environment requiring intellectual ability to organize work, make and communicate sound decisions, and react successfully to unanticipated events.” At the master's level, students should be educated “at a professional level that includes both the accumulation of knowledge and abilities for participation in the business world” and “gain an understanding of how to evaluate knowledge claims in their area of focus.” The standards require that “graduates of doctoral programs have sufficient understanding to participate in knowledge creation in their fields of study.” In all cases, these requirements represent successful applications of achievement of learning goals.

AACSB's position is that development, communication, and measurement of these goals establish accountability. All stakeholders benefit as a result of well-defined expectations and precise measures; but schools and faculty members are perhaps best rewarded because they receive information that can be invaluable in striving for continuous improvement—a concept at the heart of accreditation. Assessment feedback is a vital tool for improving and enhancing programs and courses. Such information cannot be derived from student grades; the results are used for program improvement, not individual student performance.

The “assessment advantage” is clearly meaningful to everyone with an interest in the business school, whether in an “official capacity,” as with accrediting organizations, or “informally,” as might be the case with potential students and their parents. When goals and measures are more closely aligned with the expectations of corporations, for example, assurance of learning measures can help to bridge the gap between management theory and practice, thereby enabling a more effective transition from student to manager/leader. Potential employers not only know what grades a student might have earned, which might once have been the full extent of information provided, but also what other strengths the student might have developed, how outcomes are measured, and whether or not the graduate might, therefore, be a good match.

Employers might know, for example, that one of the school’s goals is to produce students with outstanding communication skills, or exceptional knowledge of information technology. When schools share and confirm the achievement of their goals, all parties benefit.

Support for Schools

Despite the full commitment of the AACSB board, staff, and other volunteer leadership to the assurance of learning concepts and standards, there was also recognition that “assessment isn’t easy.” Even before the membership voted to accept the standards—which they approved by an overwhelming majority—observers were soon reporting that “some of our deans are scared to death of it,” and that some faculty members saw it as an “evil force to be resisted at all costs.” Some faculty apparently felt strongly that the assessments they made of student performance—the grades they conferred—should be enough information for anyone. Others wanted a precise “recipe” or formula about how to do assessment. Others just didn’t want to hear about it.

The reaction was not totally unexpected, and AACSB leadership had already geared up to offer support to its members. After the approval of standards, an immediate campaign to provide assistance and resources to members was launched. Seminars that offered hands-on instruction and guidance were developed and presented across the country, and they continue to draw packed houses. Top-notch conference speakers with extensive assessment knowledge and experience were recruited. Accreditation teams were

The “assessment advantage” is clearly meaningful to everyone with an interest in the business school, whether in an “official capacity,” as with accrediting organizations, or “informally,” as might be the case with potential students and their parents.

given additional training in the area of assessment. Topical articles and other information were published and disseminated. Extensive research on available assessment tools was compiled and utilized. Organizations with assessment expertise, connections, information, and tools were also brought into the assessment resource assembly.

The AACSB board also established a Learning Assessment Task Force (LOATF). The LOATF worked with accreditation committees and others to identify effective learning outcomes and assessment techniques to guide members in implementing the standards related to assurance of learning. Working with staff, the LOATF established a Web-based learning resource center, <http://www.aacsb.edu/arc>, which serves as a central repository for much of the information and guidance assembled by AACSB. The Assessment Resource Center (ARC) has been a meaningful tool in the early stages of the new standards implementation and is now scheduled

for an updated version designed to take members into still another level of assessment knowledge.

No Turning Back

Our AACSB leadership, volunteer and staff, acknowledge that assessment represents a rocky new frontier; as our standards reflect, we believe totally in this initiative. We see assessment as one of the key elements in our drive toward continuous improvement. Helping our schools to develop and maintain effective assessment practices in this area is clearly an important priority. After all, we’ve been leaders in this area for years, and the payoffs are just beginning.

There is no turning back. We expect the pressure to continue on all of us to show evidence of what we’re doing and whether or not it’s working. But even if there were no external forces bearing down on us, we would still be serious about assessment.

AACSB’s leadership in this area is critical. We have helped to change the paradigm, and we will make it work. We’re proud of what our schools have accomplished, and we are fully committed to doing whatever is needed to help them retain their positions as the best business schools in the world.

Web Site Resources

Web-based learning resource center that serves as a central repository for much of the information and guidance assembled by AACSB: <http://www.aacsb.edu/arc> ■

Feature Editor Krishna S. Dhir invites papers, essays or notes for the Deans’ Perspective feature column from administrators and faculty members. It is hoped that this column will become a thriving forum for dialog among our readers on issues pertaining to academic leadership. It offers an opportunity to administrators and faculty members alike to speak their minds on any and all aspects of the various leadership issues confronting them. Please contact Dean Dhir at kdhir@berry.edu, or call him at (706) 238-7942 or (706) 346-5066, or send fax to him at (706) 802-6728. Articles may be of any length up to a maximum of about 2500 words.