

TO: Claudia Beversluis and Mike Stob
FROM: Roland Hoksbergen
DATE: September 9, 2003
RE: Department of Economics and Business Self-Assessment Report

The Department of Economics and Business takes self-assessment very seriously, in both formal and informal ways. We regularly receive feedback on our programs in planned ways from such groups as the Calvin Business Partners, a group of business people who advise our department, and the internship supervisors. We also use information from other sources, for examples GMAT scores and reports on how well our graduates do on their CPA exams. In the department there is an ongoing climate of self-questioning as we continually reflect on ways in which we can build on our strengths, overcome our weaknesses, and creatively imagine and implement new ways to serve our various constituencies. Our most important constituent group is our students, and it's especially helpful to us to learn how they view their educational experiences at Calvin once they have left Calvin and begun their professional careers. At that point they have a good sense about how well they've been trained in college and also how their own training compares with that of their colleagues from other colleges and universities. It is for this reason that we rely heavily on a periodic survey of recent alumni to give us relevant information about the success of our department's work.

Such a survey was completed last year with the help of the Social Research Center here at Calvin. 155 out of 379 alumni returned the questionnaires we sent them, for a response rate of 41%. The Survey is sent to alumni who graduated at least two years ago, but not more than 5 years ago. We have adapted the data from that survey to respond to the particular areas identified in the self-assessment plan of the department. In each case where data are available, we have shown the comparison with the results of the 1995 and 1998 surveys. The comparisons are approximations, not exact, because we made significant changes to the 2001 survey, dispensing with some questions and adding others. Many of the questions we added, for example on the virtues, are intended to bring about a closer match with Calvin's, and the department's, intended objectives as stated in our various mission statements and in the new core documents.

As a department, we discussed the assessment report in three forums: First, and briefly, in a department meeting in the spring of 2002 shortly after the report came in; second, in our subgroup sections (Accounting, Economics, and Management/Marketing); and third, in our department's fall 2002 retreat. After discussing the results of the survey, and taking account of earlier assessments and feedback from various other sources (e.g. GMAT scores, internship supervisors, success rates of graduates in grad schools), we continue to rejoice in the department's achievements even as we take account of the areas in which we must improve.

Overall, alumni are highly positive about their Economics and/or Business education at Calvin. In the various questions that asked whether students found their classes worthwhile and their professors highly competent and good role models, from 80%-90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. 86% of alumni agree or strongly

agree to being “very satisfied with my degree program in Economics and Business” at Calvin College. Apart from the survey, one piece of “hard data” we are able to use is pass rates of our accounting graduates on their CPA exams. Our accounting graduates as a group regularly outperform graduates from other state and national schools. Over the past five years 78% of Calvin graduates taking their CPA exam for the first time pass some or all parts of the exam. Comparable figures for Michigan and the whole United States are 65% and 66% respectively.

When alumni are asked specific questions about particular aspects of their education, many departmental strengths continue to show up, for example in problem solving skills, teamwork, and moral foundations. Some weaknesses also show up, however, in the areas of quantitative skills, public speaking, and working with people from diverse backgrounds. The weakness in quantitative skills is also seen in the reports of performance on GMAT scores of our alumni. While they perform exceptionally well on verbal and analytical parts of the exam, alumni do significantly less well on the quantitative portion of the exam. The issue of working in environments of diversity is problematic, because while department faculty value this highly, it appears that our alumni don’t care much about it. While only 36% of our alumni think they were well prepared in this broad area, significantly less than half of them think we should have spent more time working on areas related to diversity. In addition to these specific areas of weakness, one main theme that has arisen in recent assessments, in student evaluations, and in the faculty’s own assessments of our program, is that our overall program is not as rigorous and challenging as it should be.

Our department has always had a culture of constant improvement and this survey is among the assessment data that has gradually led the department to a major evaluation and reformation of our business major. Over this past year a large subcommittee of the department has been working at reengineering the major to build on our strengths, address some of our weaknesses, and restructure the major program to keep up with other changes in the world of business.

The subcommittee has written a comprehensive proposal for revising the business major. The proposal was discussed at a spring department meeting, it was rewritten over the summer, and it was the topic of the department’s daylong fall retreat in early September. There is a good degree of consensus in the department around the basic themes and recommendations of the proposal, and we expect to send it to the Educational Policy Committee this fall.

Our overall goal is “to prepare students to be agents of renewal in business,” by which we mean that we will work to develop business leaders who are liberally trained, morally grounded, highly skilled, and committed to business as a Christian calling. To achieve this broad goal, we are recommending changes in both curriculum and pedagogy.

In curriculum the most important recommendations for change are the addition of three required courses (Operations Management, Perspectives on Management, and an

integrative capstone) and the coordination of upper level business and economics courses to form a coherent and integrated package. Smaller, but still significant, changes include revision of the Introduction to Business course, a restructuring of the math courses and the use of quantitative techniques in other courses to make them more relevant to business, and requiring students to choose electives so as to provide depth in a particular area.

While the department has gained strength in such areas as problem-solving, writing, integrating technology, and teamwork, we will work harder in our pedagogy to emphasize active learning that involves synthesis and application of concepts in an integrated analysis of business activities. We also plan to incorporate a greater emphasis on quantitative techniques and presentation skills.

Our department has, for many years, tried to develop greater sensitivity, knowledge, and skills surrounding the area of diversity. Faculty have participated in a number of anti-racism workshops and many of the activities have been brought into the classroom. One of our department's bulletin boards is totally dedicated to appreciating, understanding, and living in our diverse world. The majority of our students and recent alumni tell us that this area is of little importance to them, and that we should not emphasize it in our program. Still, our department, along with the college, is not willing to accept this assessment, and we continue to work on it, planning workshops and diversity related activities every year, both curricular and co-curricular.

Two other issues deserve mention. First, recruitment and retention of quality business professors have been difficult. Turnover rates for business faculty have been unacceptably high. In response to this long term problem, this past year the department proposed, and the college accepted, a plan to hire top quality business professors who have a relevant masters degree and at least 15 years of business experience. This plan responds to our experience that many of our best professors did not have the academic requirements for tenure and so were not eligible for long term employment. On the other hand, doctoral degrees have not been good indicators of teaching success in the business area. This new policy will allow the Department greater flexibility in hiring the best faculty for the program.

The second issue is assessment itself. While the department has an approved assessment plan, we continue also to work at improving our assessment strategies. One of the topics we will address as we discuss our new business major proposal is how to assess our success in the achievement of stated goals. The alumni survey is one tool, and an important one, but we continue to work at improving the way in which we assess the department's success and incorporate a culture of ongoing improvement.