**BUILDING CONSENSUS AROUND ACADEMIC RIGOR IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**

**ABSTRACT**

With rising college costs, increased scrutiny on the value of a college education has led many to question how much students actually learn through higher education. These questions imply a perceived lack of academic rigor in many programs. In this symposium, presenters and participants will explore approaches to ensuring academic rigor in both undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as across institutional classifications, including masters’ and doctoral degree granting institutions and historically black colleges and universities.

**Key words: academic rigor, assessment, HBCUs**

**INTRODUCTION**

MOBTS has been a catalyst for sharing teaching and learning activities and experiences within the academic community to enhance student engagement and learning. This symposium seeks to facilitate discussions around academic rigor as the community shares insights, activities, and best practices.

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATION/TEACHING IMPLICATIONS**

Debates around academic rigor in business education are not new. Gordon and Howell’s seminal 1959 report, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, condemned business education as light on rigor, as business classes and materials at the time frequently focused on the “war stories” of instructors from “good ol’ boy” networks. As a response, the field lurched toward scientific rather than anecdotal approaches to business education. Despite a more scientific approach to content development, however, issues of rigor in content delivery have not gone away. This is complicated in professional schools like business by the need to balance relevance with academic rigor (Clinebell and Clinebell, 2008). More recently, in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (2011),* Arum and Roska asserted that university students do not learn as much as expected and cite academic rigor as the contributing factor. Speaking specifically about business students, they state, “Students majoring in business and communications showed the smallest gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills over time than students in other fields.” While there have been challenges to the methodology employed by Arum and Roska, their findings suggest a need to discuss approaches to academic rigor in business and management education.

Perhaps part of business education’s shortcomings in student learning relative to other disciplines can be attributed to confusion around the concept of academic rigor or a lack of consensus on the need for it. Draeger et al., (2013) provide a model of rigor that fits well with MOBTS and its focus on active learning. Based on their work with faculty, they note broad consensus among faculty across disciplines on their conceptualization of rigor as “actively learning meaningful content with higher-order thinking at the appropriate level of expectation in a given context” (Draeger et al., 2013, 278). While this model may resonate with faculty, Draeger, Hill, and Mahler (2015) note that students lack such a consistent concept of rigor. Moreover, even if faculty may agree on what academic rigor is, other pressures, such as the role of student evaluations in performance appraisal, may lead them to prioritize outcomes other than student learning (Crumbley, Flinn, and Reichelt, 2012).

**SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW**

This symposium seeks to examine the extent to which academic rigor factors into approaches for instruction and learning at the course and program levels. AACSB accreditation standards suggests general skill areas in written and oral communication, ethical understanding and reasoning, analytical thinking, and application of knowledge among others. It is then determined at the institution level how these skill areas are instructed and evaluated to determine whether outcomes are met. Presenters in this symposium will address institutional approaches to define academic rigor and the extent to which it is reflected in instructional approaches, assessment, and evidence from student learning outcomes and evaluation. One specific approach is to utilize the rubrics commonly used for assurance of learning to assess rigor in instructional approaches. We will provide an example of this process using written communication as the area of focus in the session. Written communication incorporates many other skill areas to include critical reasoning, analytical thinking, and application of knowledge so it is an appropriate topic for illustration in the symposium to assess rigor needed to accomplish outcomes.

This symposium allows the MOBTS community to address academic rigor with ample opportunity to discuss teaching and learning facilitation with a focus on the following discussion in the session:

1. Defining and integrating academic rigor in undergraduate vs. graduate programs, including institutional approaches to academic rigor in curricula
2. Achieving faculty consensus on academic rigor – course vs. program level strategies

**SESSION DESCRIPTION AND TIMLINE**

The presenters in this session represent different institutional, administrative, and career-level perspectives. Institutional perspectives include masters’ and doctoral granting institutions, as well as HBCUs. Administrative perspectives include the department chair, assistant dean, graduate programs director, and assessment coordinator perspectives. Career-level perspectives include early and later stage. These varied perspectives provide value in two ways. First, session participants will engage diverse approaches to ensure rigor. Second, this demonstrates how consensus across many backgrounds can be built around academic rigor.

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| 5 minutes | Welcome and introduction |
| 15 minutes | Group breakout - Think, pair, and share approach to identify how rigor is defined and/or modeled at institutions represented among participants |
| 10 minutes | Debrief on how academic rigor is approached to share with full audience |
| 20 minutes | Model how to define and assess rigor in undergraduate vs. graduate courses using “written communication” as the focus; Presenter will demonstrate how a rubric typically used for assessment of learning can be used to capture academic rigor; Participants will evaluate rigor and share best strategies |
| 10 minutes | Debrief on the application of the rubric for assessing academic rigor |
| 20 minutes | Strategies for achieving faculty consensus on academic rigor aimed for use at departmental and program-level |
| 10 minutes | Session wrap-up and introduction of Dropbox to share session materials |

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