Assurance of Learning: Implementing a Uniform Assessment Process Across Multiple Sections of a Managerial Communication Course

Gary May, Michael Tidwell

Clayton State University

Abstract

This case study documents how two business school professors worked together to design and implement a process for uniformly assessing learning outcomes across all sections of a managerial communication course. The study demonstrates and provides examples of the answers to the five questions in the school's assurance of learning process model. The study also provides prescriptive tips for administrators and instructors on how to avoid the typical pitfalls of implementing an assurance of learning process.

Introduction

Assurance of learning is a hot topic in higher education. State legislatures, regional and professional accreditation agencies, and employers are asking a key question: are we graduating students who actually have the knowledge and skills that we promise (Martell & Caldron, 2005; Suskie, 2004)? Reflecting this movement, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has established new accreditation standards requiring business schools to produce direct evidence of learning in their courses and programs (AACSB, 2003).

Implementing and maintaining the type of on-going comprehensive assessment plan called for in the AACSB standards presents many challenges related to time, resources, and culture and often generates significant resistance by faculty. In many cases, faculty perceive the increased emphasis on assessment as a threat to their academic freedom, an additional demand on their time, and another tool to be used as a form of performance evaluation (Walvoord, 2004).

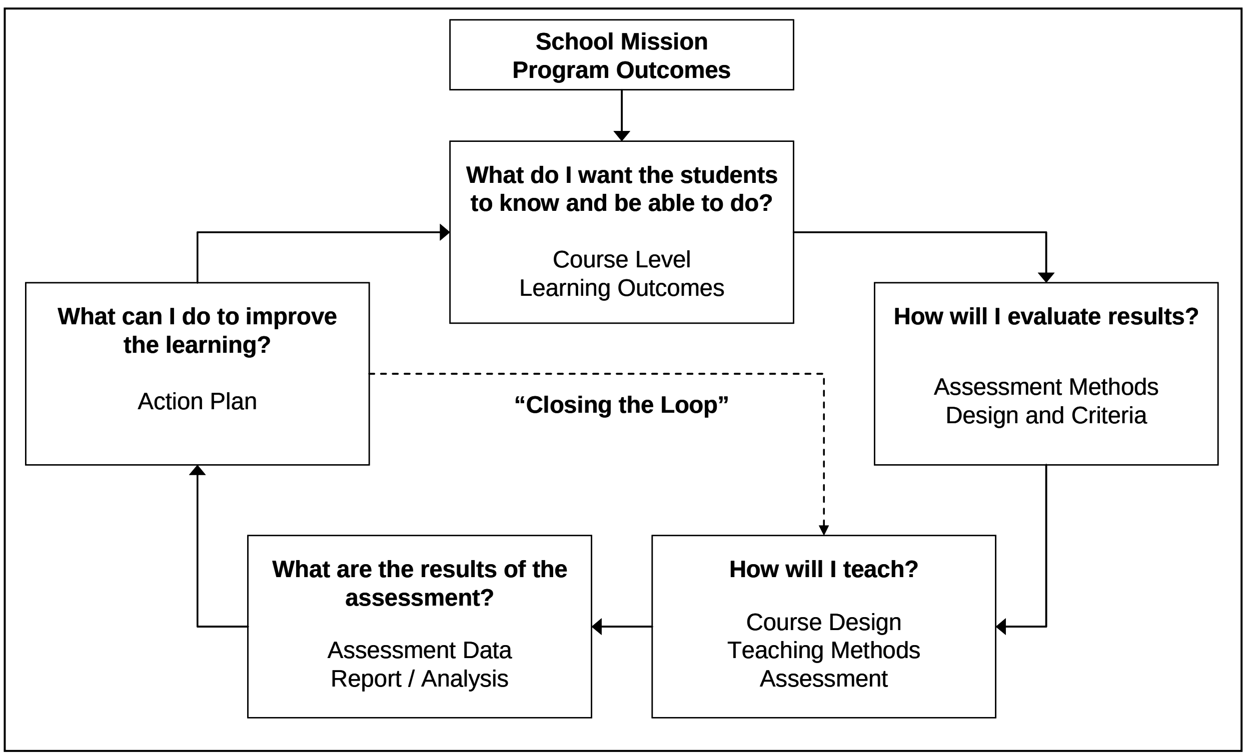
One especially challenging issue is requiring different faculty who teach different course sections to agree on the same measurable learning outcomes, assessment methods, and a process for collecting, analyzing, reporting, and responding to the assessment data.

This case study documents how a team of business school professors collaboratively designed and implemented a process for uniformly assessing learning outcomes across all sections of a managerial communication course as part of the school's comprehensive assessment plan. The process represents an application of the assurance of learning model developed by the Clayton State University School of Business assessment committee and approved by the faculty (see Figure 1). This case demonstrates and provides examples of the answers to the five questions in the model. We will conclude with prescriptive tips for administrators and instructors on how to avoid the typical pitfalls of implementing an assurance of learning process at the course level. Before we share our experience, it will be useful to set the context by providing some background on the school.

Contextual background

Thinking about contextual variables is important when attempting to generalize or compare assessment practices. Smaller schools with a primary mission of teaching have a different set of concerns and challenges at the faculty level regarding assessment than large research-oriented institutions. For example, small school faculties tend to have heavier teaching loads and access to fewer support resources. On the other hand, gaining faculty buy-in and coordinating faculty efforts is more difficult in large schools due to the number of faculty and the expected focus on research (AACSB, 2007). The context for this study is a small business school environment.

Figure 1
The Assurance of Learning Process at the Course Level



Clayton State University (CSU), a unit of the University System of Georgia, is primarily an undergraduate institution with a mission focused on teaching excellence. CSU serves the southern metropolitan area of Atlanta with an enrollment of about 6,000 students. While student dorms are on the drawing board, CSU is currently a commuter school, with approximately 65% of the students classified as non-traditional (typically students working full time and with families). The average age is 28.

The School of Business, with 23 full-time faculty, is AACSB accredited and offers four majors (Accounting, Marketing, Management, and General Business). The School has been working on adapting to the new AACSB assurance of learning standards since 2004. The organizational structure is flat, with a Dean and Associate Dean. All faculty members report directly to the Associate Dean. An assessment committee, made up of a chair and four members representing the different disciplines, guides the assurance of learning effort with full faculty involvement. The committee's responsibilities include:

1. developing a long-term assessment plan
2. researching best practices
3. designing systems and processes, including data capture and reporting
4. educating the faculty on the basics of assessment
5. mentoring, coaching, and motivating the faculty

Because of the importance of communication skills to employers, written and oral communications are at the top of the School's overall program outcomes. Therefore, the faculty has spent a great deal of time building a robust assessment process for these important skills. It has been an iterative process, with many adjustments along the way, and is still a work in progress. The School's Managerial Communication course serves as the primary assessment vehicle for written and oral communication skills. This required course is usually taken at the junior level. The two professors who teach the Managerial Communication course led the work on the assessment design and implementation with support from the Assessment Committee and input from the whole faculty. The first task was to agree on course learning outcomes.

Course learning outcomes

Table 1 provides the current learning outcomes for the Managerial Communication course. We emphasize the word current because the outcomes are being continually refined as we complete each assessment loop. The outcomes, which must be clear and measurable, are the product of much discussion and debate. We learned to avoid vague phrases that are difficult to operationalize, such as "have familiarity with," and the use of vague qualifiers such as "very" or "completely."

Beyond the need for measurable and clear learning outcome statements, the most important lesson learned for this stage was to limit the number of primary learning objectives for formal assessment purposes. We subscribed to Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) concept for establishing learning priorities within a course. Wiggings and McTighe use a three-circle model with the outer ring designated "worth being familiar with," the next ring labeled "important to know and do," and the center ring labeled "enduring understanding." The term *enduring* "refers to the big ideas, the important understandings, that we want students to . . . retain after they've forgotten many of the details" (p. 10).

The Managerial Communication course has a number of learning objectives, but we determined that the "enduring understanding" we wanted our students to take from this course as it relates to the School's program outcomes on communication included:

1. knowledge of the principles of effective business writing based on the first five chapters of Locker (2006).
2. the ability to write a clear, concise, and correct message that accomplishes a given purpose, and
3. the ability to design and deliver an effective persuasive oral presentation.

We have also found the format of the learning outcomes shown in Table 1, with the primary objectives at the top together with the assessment plan and the secondary objectives listed at the bottom, provides a useful template for our faculty. This arrangement does not mean the secondary objectives are unimportant – they certainly will receive time and grading in the course – but it simply means that secondary objectives are primary objectives somewhere else in the curriculum. Indeed, another lesson in this process is the need to map both program outcomes and discipline outcomes against the matrix of individual courses to make sure all the learning outcomes are being addressed in an appropriate number of courses at the appropriate level. The next step, after agreeing on the learning outcomes for Managerial Communication, was to determine the appropriate assessment methods and design the assessment instruments.

Table 1 *Learning Outcomes for MGMT 3120: Managerial Communication*

Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:	**Assessment Method**
1. Know, comprehend, and apply four principles of effective business communication: a. building goodwill, b. adapting the message to the audience, c. making writing easy to read, d. using a process to plan, compose, revise, and edit a message.	Exam with embedded questions keyed to knowledge, comprehension, and application of the four principles.
2. Demonstrate written communication skills by writing a clear, concise, and grammatically correct memo that accomplishes a given purpose and meets the seven criteria for effective writing as defined by the grading rubric.	Grading rubric keyed to seven criteria for effective writing.
3. Demonstrate oral presentation skills by preparing and delivering a persuasive oral presentation using PowerPoint® that meets criteria in five performance elements as defined by the grading rubric.	Grading rubric keyed to five performance elements.

In addition to the primary course outcomes, this course will enhance students' ability to:

1. Think critically by completing a PAIBOC analysis (purpose, audience, information, benefits, objections, and context) for various communication situations.
2. Explain and demonstrate principles for building interpersonal rapport.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of team processes and group dynamics by working collaboratively in a diverse team to produce both written documents and presentations.
4. Use basic communication technology appropriately in a business context (e.g., e-mail, Web-based discussion boards, and PowerPoint®).
5. Identify their "ideal" job and produce a targeted resume that meets specified criteria.

Assessment methodology

When we formally assess, we are seeking valid and reliable evidence of learning. To comply with assurance of learning standards, AACSB expects direct methods of assessment. Direct methods include such techniques as standardized tests, program exit exams, and course-embedded assessment. Indirect methods, such as satisfaction surveys of alumni, can be part of the assessment process but are considered weak evidence of learning. For course level assessment, properly designed *classroom-based* techniques provide the strongest evidence of learning. Out-of-class projects and assignments can certainly be used as part of a comprehensive assessment program, but because we can never be sure the student is doing his or her own work, the evidence is less compelling. Given the learning outcomes, we chose two different assessment techniques. To assess the knowledge objective, we embedded the same carefully selected questions in the exam for each class section (delivered through the assessment module of WebCT). For the performance-based objectives, we designed rubrics and used outside assessors.

Embedded assessment questions

Guided by the operational definitions of the first three levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), we selected questions (true-false, multiple choice, and short answer) from the text's test bank to measure knowledge, comprehension, and application for each target principle. We applied the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, and application) in the performance tests for writing and presentation. Table 2 provides an example of our test matrix. The test matrix insures balanced coverage of content.

Table 2
Test Matrix

Taxonomy >	**Knowledge**		**Comprehension**	**Application**	
Question Type >	True / False	Fill in the Blank	Multiple Choice	Multiple Choice	
Point Value by Type >	1	3	2	2	
Learning Outcomes (Principles)	*----------------------	Number of Questions		-------------------*	Grade Points
L1: Building Goodwill	2	1	4	4	21
L2: Adapting Message	2	1	4	4	21
L3: Making Easy to Read	2	1	4	4	21
L4: Using Process	2	1	4	4	21
Sub Totals	8	4	16	16	84
Other Questions (Custom)*	1	1	3	3	16
TOTAL EXAM POINTS					100

Each question is coded for learning outcome, knowledge level, and type of question within the hidden title in WebCT for ease of sorting and analysis after the exam. Note that some room is provided for professors to add questions that relate to their custom content taught in the course.

Rubric for Writing Assessment

Our writing rubric was developed by a team consisting of two business school professors, an English professor, and two external professional business writers. The rubric assesses eight performance elements: knowledge of the subject, awareness of the reader, organization, format, punctuation, sentence structure, and style. The rubric can be tailored to specific writing assignments. Table 3 provides an example portion of the rubric.

Table 3
Written Communications Skills Rubric (Sample Element)

Performance Element	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good
Knowledge of the Subject			
✓ Content requirements	❑ Fails to address the important requirements of the assignment	❑ Fulfills the most important content requirements	❑ Exceeds assigned content requirements (e.g., evidence of supplemental research)
✓ Range of knowledge	❑ Displays limited knowledge of the subject; makes factual errors	❑ Displays adequate knowledge of the subject	❑ Displays good range and quality of knowledge
✓ Alternative viewpoints	❑ Lacks awareness of alternative viewpoints (when alternate viewpoints are expected)	❑ Demonstrates awareness of alternative viewpoints	❑ Demonstrates awareness and understanding of alternative viewpoints

Rubric for Oral Presentation

A team consisting of two business school professors and two external business professionals developed our oral presentation rubric. The rubric assesses five performance elements: opening, body, closing, visuals, and physical delivery. The rubric can be tailored to specific oral presentation assignments. Table 4 provides an example portion of the rubric.

Course design and assessment

Within the constraints of the agreed upon core knowledge for the course and the performance skills framed by the rubrics, each instructor is free to adapt the course design, content coverage, and teaching methods to fit his or her style and personal preferences. This flexibility is important to gaining faculty buy-in. However, the administration of the classroom-based assurance of learning assessments must be uniform across all course sections.

All professors administer the writing skills assessment near the end of the course during a regular 75-minute classroom period using MS Word on laptop computers (all CSU students are required to have laptops and Microsoft Office). Students in all class sections are given the same business case situation and instructions. They are required to prepare a one-page PAIBOC analysis (purpose, audience, information, benefits, objections, and context) and write a one-page memo following the genre pattern required by the case (e.g., a persuasive direct request message). Each student uploads his or her completed document to the WebCT Assignment Drop Box. The assignment counts for 10% of the course grade and the professor grades the submission using his or her normal point system. An ungraded copy of each student submission is also forwarded to an external assessor (one of the writing professionals who helped design the rubric) for the assurance of learning assessment using the rubric.

Table 4
Oral Presentation Rubric (Sample Section)

Performance Element	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good
Opening			
✓ Attention	❑ No attempt to gain audience's attention	❑ Gains audience's attention with a startling statement, anecdote, question, or quotation	❑ Gains audience's attention with a startling statement, anecdote, question, or quotation and establishes common ground
✓ Purpose and Benefits	❑ No clear purpose statement or indication of benefits for the audience	❑ Provides a general statement of purpose and identifies at least one benefit for the audience	❑ Describes the problem, the questions to be answered, the benefits to the audience, and the rhetorical purpose of the presentation
✓ Overview	❑ Does not provide an overview of the presentation	❑ Provides a general overview of the topics to be covered	❑ Provides a general overview of the topics to be covered,; notes the expected length of the presentation, suggests a plan for handling questions, and asks for affirmation

The oral presentation assessments follow a process similar to the writing. The last portion of the semester, students work independently to design and deliver a persuasive oral presentation based on a case situation. This assignment also represents 10% of the course grade and is graded by the instructor at the time of delivery. The presentations are captured by digital video and uploaded to a Web site, allowing an external professional to assess each student's presentation with the rubric. This project is currently in the pilot stage and we are continuing to refine both the rubric and the process.

We designate one member of the School's assessment committee to be the coordinator for the communication skill assessments. Each semester, he or she collects the exam data from the instructors and the completed rubrics from the external assessors and, with the help of an administrative assistant, enters the data and prepares the reports.

Data analysis

Table 5 displays an example tabulation of the results from the embedded exam questions at the summary level. Additional levels of detail, including a breakout of individual course results and the detail on individual questions, are also available. The results help determine the extent of actual learning produced in the course for each specific learning outcome. Our benchmark at this point is that at least 70% of the students should answer each question correctly. Scores less than 70% require investigation and provide the focus for continuous improvement efforts. For example, examination of Table 5 suggests that Learning Outcome Number 3, Making Writing Easy to Read, is below par for both comprehension and application.

Table 5
Example Tabulation of Summary Assessment Results for Embedded Exam Questions

MGMT 3120 Spring 07: Three Sections (N = 73 Students)

Exam: Embedded Questions Learning Outcome	Question Type	Number of Questions	% of Students with Correct Answers	
L1: Building Goodwill	Knowledge	3	83.3%	
	Comprehension	4	89.1%	
	Application	4	73.6%	
	Composite	**11**	**82.0%**	
L2: Adapting the Message to the Audience	Knowledge	3	85.5%	
	Comprehension	3	86.4%	
	Application	4	90.7%	
	Composite	**11**	**87.6%**	
L3: Making Writing Easy to Read	Knowledge	3	81.8%	
	Comprehension	4	63.7%	*
	Application	4	69.3%	*
	Composite	**11**	**71.2%**	
L4: Using a Process to Plan, Compose, Revise, and Edit a Message	Knowledge	3	68.2%	*
	Comprehension	4	75.7%	
	Application	4	70.0%	
	Composite	**11**	**73.2%**	
Total: Assurance of Learning Questions		**44**	**78.5%**	

** = < 70% Investigate and take corrective action as necessary*

Table 6 provides an example summary tabulation of the seated writing assessment for each of the eight performance elements. Again, we want at least 70% of the students to score satisfactory or better on each element. Assessment results for the five performance elements of the oral presentation (which is still in pilot phase) would be presented in the same manner as the writing assessment.

Table 6
Example Tabulation of Summary Assessment Results for Writing Assessment

MGMT 3120 Spring 07: Three Sections (N = 66 Students)

Writing Assessment Performance Element	# of Students Scoring Satisfactory Or Outstanding	% of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Outstanding	
Knowledge of the Subject	43	65.2%	*
Awareness of the Reader	44	66.7%	*
Organization	60	90.9%	
Format (includes spelling)	30	45.5%	*
Punctuation	20	30.3%	*
Sentence Structure	48	72.7%	
Style	47	75.7%	

** = < 70% Investigate and take corrective action as necessary*

Recommended actions

The foregoing data analysis leads to the ultimate purpose of assessment – developing and implementing action plans for continuous improvement of learning. Armed with the data, we can “close the loop” by focusing our efforts in the next teaching cycle on improving selected areas of our course.

For example, the data from the embedded exam questions (Table 5) indicates that students are having some trouble with comprehending and applying the principle “making writing easier to read.” This section of the course includes a number of important concepts in business writing such as use of active voice and eliminating unnecessary words. The instructor would typically follow a two-step process in the investigation of the problem. First, he or she would review the item analysis (discrimination index generated by WebCT) for that portion of the exam to see if one or more questions need to be edited for clarity. Next, the instructor would review the teaching plans with an eye toward providing more emphasis on the relevant text chapter. This could involve adjusting a number of instructional strategies and methods, such as additional homework assignments with graded feedback and / or more time-on-task activities in class (i.e., less lecture and more active, collaborative, and problem-based learning).

The writing assessment data (Table 6) points to students having particular problems with format and punctuation. The format element includes such factors as spelling, use of abbreviations, numbers, caps, hyphens, and italics, as well as document format. The punctuation element includes all forms of punctuation. Our standard for punctuation is high. A two-page document (one-page PAIBOC analysis and one-page memo) with more than three punctuation errors will receive an unsatisfactory rating for the punctuation element.

Writing errors related to spelling and punctuation are common in higher education today and a continuing challenge to improve (Quible, 2004). In our case, the Managerial Communication course is supposed to focus on teaching business style, not writing mechanics. Also this problem cannot be solved in just one course but requires involvement of all the faculty and University support systems. After reviewing several iterations of our writing assessment data with the whole faculty, we are in the process of implementing the following action plan:

1. Adding a writing assessment to our School of Business entrance exam. We no longer admit students who cannot pass the writing assessment after three attempts.
2. Using adapted versions of the writing rubric in selected classes at the sophomore level to give students more feedback on writing errors.
3. Administering a "knowledge retention" test on grammar and punctuation the first day of class in Managerial Communication. We refer students who do poorly on this test and their first week writing assignment to our Center for Academic Success (CAS) for tutoring. Students who complete the required assignments in CAS are allowed to revise and resubmit their first assignment for extra grade points.
4. Including five grammar and punctuation questions to each weekly quiz in the Managerial Communication course to drill the students on the most common writing errors.

In addition, students who do not earn at least 70% on the formal writing assessment at the end of the Managerial Communication course are now required to enroll in WLAB 2999, a structured and graded laboratory administered by the English Department. Students must enroll in WLAB 2999 for their next term of attendance and in each subsequent term until they have passed by earning a grade of C in the course. Our intent is not to allow a student to graduate who does not have basic writing skills. Based on these initiatives, we expect assessment results for writing skills to improve over time.

Lessons learned

Based on our experience to date, we can share our "top ten" nuggets of advice for other small schools working to improve their assurance of learning processes.

1. Have patience. This is a journey, not a destination. Remember: no one has asked us to assess everything all at once. Develop complexity over time and with experience.
2. The goal is to develop an assessment plan that is sustainable, cost efficient, and useful to both the faculty and the school.
3. Don't think assessment must be perfect to be useful.
4. Begin by making sure your program outcomes support your mission and have faculty and stakeholder (e.g., employer) buy-in.

5. The process must be faculty driven; the conversations should be about student learning.
6. Start with program level outcomes and focus first on the obvious and less complex. Every school has a program outcome related to written and oral communications. Communication knowledge and skills are easier to access than the more affective goals such as “appreciation for diversity.” Members of the Assessment Committee (who hopefully are the “early adopters”) can lead and coordinate this initial effort.
7. After processes are in place for assessing program level outcomes, begin to work with individual faculty on assessing knowledge outcomes within each discipline. We have found three keys to getting individual faculty on board:
    a. Sharing results of the program level assessments gets everyone involved and interested; the value of collecting data in a meaningful format and taking action to improve learning becomes more obvious.
    b. Assigning each member of the Assessment Committee as a “mentor” to several faculty provides a personalized way to coach and encourage faculty.
    c. Providing workshops on assessment techniques and procedures builds faculty skills and confidence. For example, we offer workshops on writing learning outcomes, developing exams to capture assessment data, and designing and using rubrics.
8. After faculty become comfortable with managing assessment at the course level, begin having course-level meetings to reconcile learning outcomes and assessment methods across different sections.
9. Be careful about using analysis to create paralysis. Just do it, fix it, try it again.
10. Do <u>not</u> make assessment *results* part of the faculty evaluation process; however, *participation* in the assessment process should be part of the minimum performance expectations for all faculty. Assurance of learning is part of our job as professionals.

In summary, the assurance of learning movement is not going away. Market forces will dictate systematic “process and product” improvements, like those found in business. Corporations stay competitive by using total quality systems such as six sigma; this paper examines a similar tool for educators seeking to improve the “process and product” of higher education. Developing and maintaining a comprehensive assessment plan is hard work and takes multiple years of effort, but assurance of learning is part of our responsibility as teaching professionals. Can you imagine a business saying it doesn’t have time for total quality?

References

AACSB (2003). *Eligibility standards for business accreditation.* St. Louis, MO: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

AACSB (2007). Applied Assessment Seminar. Tampa, FL: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Bloom B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, handbook I: The cognitive domain.* New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Locker, K. (2006). *Business and administrative communication* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Martell, K. & Calreron, T. (2005). Assessment in business schools: What it is, where we are, and where we need to go now. In K. Martell & T. Calderon (Eds.), *Assessment of student learning in business schools*: Vol. 1, No. 1 (pp.1-26). Tallahassee, FL: Association for Institutional Research.

Quible, Z. (2006). Impact of error labeling on error elimination in business writing. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *69*(1), 8-24.

Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Wiggings, G. & McTighe, J. (2001). *Understanding by design.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Walvoord, B. (2004). *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Biographies

GARY MAY is an Associate Professor of Management in the School of Business at Clayton State University where he teaches courses in communication, leadership, and strategy. He holds a Business Administration degree from Duke University and a Masters and Ph.D. in Human Resource Development from Georgia State University.

MICHAEL TIDWELL is Associate Professor of Management at Clayton State University where he teaches courses in global business and general management. He holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Studies from Washington State University where he also completed his Masters degree.