Assessment Council on Learning Outcomes (ACLO) responses to the 2020-2021 assessment report submitted by:

School: School of Arts and Sciences

1. Did the SAS report adequately address the changes and disruptions to the learning outcome assessment processes for its departments and programs, due to the adjustments made to cope with the pandemic and its consequences? Were two examples provided showing of how processes were adapted?

The SAS report adequately addresses the response by SAS departments and programs to the dislocations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to remote and online learning. The report notes that SAS decided to write a full report, and include some of the information requested by the ACLO.

The report indicates that for the most part, SAS programs and departments (60%) made no changes in assessment practices in response to the pandemic, as was also the case in other schools. One-third of the departments and programs reported some adjustments, again, as was the case for other schools. The responses were course based for the most part, involved changes in testing procedures and types of exams, replacement of examinations with project based assignments, and attempts to substitute applications or ideas and more conceptual approaches to high-stakes, object examinations. As noted in the report, in a number of cases, these changes were supportive of best practices in instruction and assessment.

2. Did the SAS report discuss any change in learning goals or adjusted expectations for the learning outcomes of its departments and programs because of the response to the pandemic? Were two examples given?

The report notes that there were no changes to learning goals in the great majority of the SAS departments and programs (91%) because of the pandemic. This is also consistent with the experience in the other schools in the University. In the few cases in which changes in learning goals were made, they were caused by the disruption in field work or experimental techniques caused by the move to remote instruction. Steps were taken in these cases to substitute virtual or video activities for in-person activities. In one case mentioned, field research courses were not offered due to the pandemic restrictions. This required some disruption in the learning process.

There were some adjustments to exceptions and standards, about 28% of programs, but the nearly all of these were minor. Typically, these changes were manifested through more lenient grading, taking into account the difficulties students were facing during the pandemic. In some cases, adjustments were made in the type of assignments, i.e., more written or project based work, open book exams and less monitored testing, etc. The key was flexibility, respecting the challenges to both faculty and students in this period. In some cases, innovative techniques and ideas were implemented, often resulting in more effective learning. This is one of the most important results in SAS and in other schools, the willingness of faculty to experiment and innovate with teaching and assessment during the pandemic, necessity again driving change in
a positive way. The SAS Office of Undergraduate Education will monitor this change and encourage and support the changes that have been shown to improve teaching and learning.

3. Did the SAS report discuss any changes in students’ learning outcomes during this period of remote and online instruction? Does the report describe how these changes will be addressed, either to work to improve any declines that have been detected, or to build upon an improvements noticed?

The report states that, in general, there were no changes in observed student learning outcomes during the period under discussion. Fully 2/3 of the programs and departments report no changes at all, and approximately 30% of the department and programs report only modest changes. One language department did report substantial changes, mostly due to the inability to perform assessments of students' memorization skills in an online environment for online language acquisition courses. (One assumes this inability had something to do with the difficulty with secure testing in an online environment, but this was not stated.). Another department, Jewish Studies, reported the opposite, that there was a noticeable improvement in student language proficiency. Intriguingly, the reason stated for this was the ability for students to use the CourseShare program and take online language courses at other Big Ten Academic Alliance schools, which was not possible before the pandemic. Some of the minor changes noted by other departments were attributed to lack of engagement of one sort or another; lack of access to library resources including the assistance and guidance of librarians. These and other reported results provide a fertile ground for continued research on improving teaching and learning. It is also worth noting that the Computer Science department press ahead with major curricular modifications during the pandemic period, and found positive results in the reduction of DFW grades. (One assumes the Pass/No Credit option was not relevant here.)

Conclusion: SAS continues its excellence in learning outcome assessment across all programs and departments and its leadership in the University in learning outcome assessment. The SAS report is concise, complete and full of interesting and worthwhile information. Most notable, and laudable, is the fact that SAS reports no significant impact on the assessment structure and process, no significant changes in learning goals in response to the pandemic disruptions, and no significant changes in student performance. This is a great success and we feel is too often taken for granted; the move to and adjustment to remote and online learning required a myriad of adjustments and modifications. These were done so effectively and seamlessly, it is easy to forget the challenge they presented, and easy to understate the hard work, innovation and creativity that programs and departments deployed to keep teaching and learning on track. On top of all this successful adjustment to change, SAS departments and the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education are prepared to monitor changes and developments that improved learning in this period, and to use the opportunity these efforts created as a springboard for future improvements in teaching and learning. The University should be proud that our largest academic unit could move so quickly and effectively in these circumstances to support and improve teaching and learning.