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INFORMATION SYSTEMS AS A MAJOR AREA OF INTEREST IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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Panelists: Larry Drake, Bureau of Labor Statistics
                 John Hammitt, The Pillsbury Company

The panel will discuss the demand for information systems (IS) courses in the business school curriculum. Is IS likely to expand or contract as a major area of interest for business school students? What are the factors that influence the strength of the programs in different schools?

This topic is a matter of great concern in many regions of the country where enrollments in the IS major, and in MIS courses generally, have begun to level off and even decline. In other parts of the country (mainly in the south), MIS programs are still growing strongly.

In the long run, the major determinant of demand for IS courses is the demand by industry for people with IS skills. However, information technology is changing rapidly and computer literacy is commonplace. It is not easy to determine the kinds of information skills that should be taught in undergraduate and MBA programs even five years in the future. Will the number of people dealing with large centralized systems decline? Will this become a technician's job that does not require the broad skills provided by an MBA program? Is there a long term demand for IS professionals to support end user computing? Or will end users be able to satisfy their own computing needs aided only by a small central staff that maintains transaction processing systems and provides database and communications services? What will the typical MBA need to know about IS beyond wordprocessing and spreadsheet skills?

In the short term, the demand for IS courses and the number of students interested in becoming IS majors varies with students' perceptions of the desirability of an education in IS. According to the annual UCLA study of undergraduates, the number of students interested in high technology careers has declined from 8.4 percent in 1984 to 3.7 percent in 1986. Relatively more students are interested in a liberal arts degree. Among business school students, particularly at schools near large financial centers, the high salaries given by the financial services industry are attracting an increasing number of students into the finance major.

Finally, IS curricula must be revised continually to remain attractive from the point of view of both industry and students. A discussion of curriculum issues is beyond the scope of this panel. However, we do hope to shed some light on some important questions. Are we in danger of simply becoming a service area for other disciplines as has happened to management science, for example? To maintain course credits, should IS faculties concentrate on end user computing? On DSS and especially artificial intelligence? Or should we offer courses that serve the needs of other academic areas (e.g., financial information systems, marketing information systems, etc.)?

In summary, the panel members will address the following questions:

1. What is the trend in the demand for information systems majors in industry? What kind of skills will be needed in the future?

2. What is the trend in the supply of students interested in careers in information systems?

3. What strategies should IS departments pursue to ensure their long-run viability?

The objective of the panel is to provide information as well as to stimulate discussion.