This is one of the ways that the leadership, business relationships and curriculum innovation combine to provide IT students at the University of Arkansas with real-world education and experience.

“When we looked at the U.S. News rankings for our peer institutions, we found that, among the top 30 schools in the nation, the University of Arkansas was the only school that offered access to all three major types of enterprise computer systems — SAP, IBM and NCR,” said Fred Davis, chair of the Information Systems Department. “Quite a few offered SAP, one offered SAP and NCR and one offered SAP and IBM, but we were the only school to have all three systems available for our students.”

Addition of these major enterprise systems is a result of the Department’s commitment to keeping its curriculum aligned with the needs of industry. As IS Professor Paul Cronan put it, “We are always listening to our industry partners, and we are not afraid to help them with the edge of technology. We are not just followers.”

In 1999 the Department experienced a change in leadership when Douglas returned to the faculty and Fred Davis joined the department as chairman. After earning his PhD in information systems from MIT’s Sloan School of Management, Davis served on the business school faculties at the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota and the University of Maryland where he taught a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses.

Davis also holds the David D. Glass Chair in Information Systems. Widely known for his work on user acceptance of IT in the workplace, Davis also conducts research on IT training and skill acquisition, computer-assisted decision-making, and the motivation and retention of IT professionals.

**+ EXECUTIVES THAT ADVISE**

ROBERT ELLIS is credited with starting the department’s Advisory Council in the early 1980s. The Advisory Council is a group of IT executives that meets annually to provide the Department with input on the needs of industry.

“We go over the progress and performance of the Department and get feedback on things like curriculum,” explained Davis. “They meet with our students and develop recommendations that enable us to continuously adjust and refine our curriculum to meet evolving workplace needs. It is one of the many mechanisms we use to align our curriculum with the real world, and led to our emphasis on the ‘industrial strength’ focus on enterprise systems.”

Paul Cronan points to an instance when the Advisory Council’s recommendations led to a change in the curriculum — creation of the senior capstone project course. Council members pointed out the need in industry for IT professionals who could work with a team to integrate their knowledge and bring it to bear on a real problem. The team approach was so revolutionary at the time that Cronan won a teaching innovation award for it in 1983.

“As a result, we developed a course that used teams to solve real problems. Use of real problems was very uncommon and team projects were unheard of in the early 1980s,” Cronan explained. “We had to figure out how to evaluate the projects, how to guide the students so that they developed their own solutions, and not simply the problem.”

Another example of the impact of the Advisory Council is a change that arose from its policy of meeting with students. During the Advisory Council meeting, students are invited to speak without faculty present. The Council makes notes and gives any resulting recommendations to the department chairman. In one such meeting, students cited a need for greater access to equipment for IS majors. As a result, the department created a laboratory specifically for IS majors.

“Advisory Council meetings give us a chance to listen to and interact with some of the top industry leaders in the nation,” said Douglas. “We take many of their suggestions. There is no doubt that they impact curriculum decisions.”

**= CHANGING CURRICULUM**

AS BUSINESSES HAVE CHANGED, the tools that IT workers use have also changed. Big businesses rely on mainframes that run enormous data warehouses. Small businesses may rely on smaller server-class computers and databases, but they also network with the larger systems for ordering materials, credit card processing, insurance and dozens of other uses. IT professionals must be familiar with these systems and the business they support.

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“Because information technology is such a dynamic field, we focus on preparing our students for a lifetime of learning — how to manage continuous change,” said Davis. “Our students are well versed not only in technology and business, but also in soft skills such as teamwork and communication. Through close alliances with the IT organizations of some of the country’s top businesses, we continually align our curriculum with changing workplace needs.”

Like most IT organizations, the Information Systems curriculum might well be described as a work in progress. Paul Cronan describes curriculum revision as “almost a continual agenda item,” with major revisions coming about every four years. Currently, the curriculum is