This my last message as director of the IRM Center at UHD; I am retiring on July 31. Thinking back over the past seven years, I am amused with the memory of how I came into this position and indebted to those who helped along the way. First, and foremost among them is Tom Braniff, my husband, best friend, law partner and mentor.

When Tom first suggested I consider the lead position for the undergraduate program he and his insurance colleagues had created, I was stunned. “Why me?” As a lawyer, my experience with insurance was limited to administrative law. He explained that my professional and personal experience in program management, charitable fundraising, lifelong mentorship, relationship building and stewardship were the skills needed to get their program up and running. “But,” I answered, “surely, there are others who would be better teachers than me.” “The industry can provide qualified teachers and we know the curriculum the students need to learn to be hired in the industry. We need someone we can depend upon to communicate with and listen to the industry. We need an individual who will facilitate the interaction of students with industry professionals and provide the industry with access to the new talent as it is being developed by UHD. We need a director who will show up at industry meetings and conferences with students looking for internships and career opportunities.”

As I spoke with some of the other founders, many of whom I had known for many years as Tom’s colleagues and clients, they repeated his sentiments again and again. So, trusting that I would have the knowledge and support of these industry professionals, I applied. Dean Donald Bates, a proven university leader, whom the founders entrusted with their plans and funding and who, with David de Roode, had raised the initial funding for the program, chose me to lead the program.

My first task was to develop a formal Advisory Council to assist with developing curricular, fundraising, and recruiting qualified faculty. Fortunately, nearly all of the original founders agreed to serve, including Bob Dean, David de Roode, Bob Holloway, Matt Sasso, Fred Steves, Doug Hotchkiss, Wayne Dauterive, Fred de Roode, Tom Fitzpatrick, John Knox, Ginny Penzell, Irving Pozmantier, Vikki Robinson, Scott Kilpatrick, Renee Stager, Marshall Leicht, Cindy Coleman, Mary Jane Fortin, Sharon Blake, and Allen Wilson. Others, including Russ Taylor, Paul Martin, Randy Doss and Susan Howie, were recruited to ensure a balanced representation of industry agencies, carriers, wholesalers, risk managers, consultants and associations among the thirty members.

The fall 2009-10 academic year started weeks after I was hired, and we needed to recruit students to fill the classes and faculty to teach them. With the advice and assistance of these individuals, a fundraising campaign was launched, and students were recruited to enroll in the first two classes, taught by Tom Braniff and Bob Holloway.

The first several years involved a whirlwind of challenging new learning curves. Fundraising was a primary objective – we needed scholarships to entice students into this previously-unknown major, and funds to take students to industry meetings and conferences. With a leadership succession of engaged and resourceful Council chairs, including David de Roode, Bob Dean, and Matt Sasso, we faced and overcame many challenges and I came to understand the wisdom of the industry’s curriculum recommendations and focus on continued relationship-building.
The UHD IRM Center Advisory Council has been very productive over the past seven years. One of the major contributions of the Council members, collectively, has been the creation of the Texas Insurance Education Foundation, a 501(c)(3) corporation, organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. The directors of the TIEF include Timothy J. Brady, Thomas M. Braniff, J. Kyle Dean and myself. Its mission is to raise funds to support undergraduate university degree programs in insurance and risk management, in order to ensure a relevant curriculum that will provide industry hiring managers access to new human resources.

Some of the Council Members made significant individual contributions, including Fred de Roode, Chairman and CEO of PPC Loan, Fred Steves, Chairman of Myron Steves & Associates and Bob Holloway, Senior Vice President at USI, all original contributors and founders of the program who have served on the Council since its inception.

The Steves family and their company, Myron Steves and Associates, represent another intergenerational family legacy of support for insurance education and the UHD IRM Center. Company chairman, Fred Steves, participated in the development of the UHD program and has served on the Advisory Council since 2009. He also served on the focus group that developed the course curriculum.

In 2012, Fred and siblings Myron “Buddy” Steves and Terry Skinner created the Myron Steves Directorship Endowment, honoring their father, Myron F. Steves, on his 100th birthday. The $250,000 endowment will generate funds in perpetuity, creating a sustainable source of revenues to support the program and its students. The Steves Company has hired UHD students as interns and graduates and also reimburses employees’ insurance training and helping students develop resumes for insurance careers. Several UHD graduates have also secured permanent employment at USI, some of whom were ultimately hired into permanent positions.

Bob Holloway and his wife, Cindy are also founders and sustaining contributors to the program. Bob was an original faculty member, and he is an active member of the Council. His industry teaching experience contributed greatly to the development of the curriculum, and his company, USI, has hired several students into internships. Providing training and helping students develop resumes for insurance careers. Several UHD graduates have also secured permanent employment at USI, some of whom were ultimately hired into permanent positions.

Fred deRoode also provided initial revenues to create the College of Business Career Development Center and funded research for Dr. Pamela Hurley, which recently earned a Shin Award. The deRoode family legacy continues with David deRoode, a partner at Lockton, and a graduate of UHD who, in 2009, worked closely with Dean Donald Bates to raise the funds to create the IRM Center. David has also served on the Council since its inception, and as its chair from 2009-2010. He has also become a significant individual contributor to the program, as well as raising matching funds for his contributions from his company, Lockton.

On July 11, 2016, the 104th anniversary of Myron Steves’ birth, Fred Steves and Terry Skinner presented Dr. Wendall Braniff the final donation to create the Myron Steves Directorship Endowment, a perpetual source of funding for the IRM Center, commencing in the 2016-2017 academic year.

Dean Mike Fields and Dr. Wendall Braniff, with faculty member and Advisory Council director, Robert Holloway and wife, Cindy, founders of the program and donors since 2009.

If you’re interested in partnering with UHD to support its program and students, you can make an online gift at https://giving.uh.edu/uhdowntown/dtn_onlinedonors.asp. Be sure to designate your gift to the Insurance and Risk Management Center.
The UHD IRM Center produced nine graduates for the 2015-16 academic year, including:

- Zoraida Alviso
- Julie Braun
- Ryan Cain
- Andrea Chapa
- Carla Torres
- Reem Mazooq
- Sheryl Peavy
- Jovana Rocha
- Han Yan

MEET THE INDUSTRY

The College of Business hosted its fifth annual Meet the Industry event in February, which featured a pre-event resume dash, which provided students the opportunity to review and revise their resumes, and post them on the College of Business jobsite. The plenary session featured “Mattress Max,” Houston business leader and philanthropist who gave students some ideas to think about in terms of giving back to the community. The program included niche sessions for the various business majors and a business career fair. Over 200 students participated in the event, and over 50 employers had booths at the career fair.

The insurance and risk management niche session panel included Pauline Gallieen, Human Resources Manager for Texas Mutual Insurance Company; Bernie Heinze, Executive Director of American Association of Managing General Agencies; Aldo Ochoa, Jr., Regional Manager for AXA Advisors; Dennis Baker, Principal for Capstone Consulting; and Brett Weprechth, Commercial Line Insurance Manager for TDECU Insurance Agency.

The group provided a robust discussion on the insurance industry and how students can prepare for and access insurance industry careers. Afterwards, the students and industry professionals enjoyed a lunch served by the College of Business faculty.

OUTSTANDING STUDENTS

Outstanding Student awards year were earned by graduates Cory Lacy and Isabel G. Carvajal. Cory Lacy had a distinguished career at UHD, earning several scholarships from the IRM Advisory Council and the Insurance Council of Texas. He served as an officer of UHD’s Gamma Iota Sigma chapter and was a familiar face at industry meetings and events. He secured a coveted internship with RPS-Gallagher and enjoyed a week in Itasca, Illinois where he learned and competed with interns from throughout the US on insurance projects and problem solving. Cory was hired as an underwriter associate by RPS Gallagher upon completion of his internship.

Isabel Carvajal was one of the original twelve students to register for IRM classes when the program was launched in fall 2009. She earned numerous IRM Center Advisory Council scholarships, as well as the CPCU President’s Scholarship. She is a member of Gamma Iota Sigma and has completed several CPCU courses and attended numerous industry meetings throughout her academic career. Despite having to sit out of college for several semesters so that she could put her financial resources toward her daughter’s education, Isabel earned the highest GPA of her graduating class and was chosen as the UHD commencement speaker. Isabel is the marketing director at Kroger Burns law firm, which handles insurance related and other litigation.
TAPPING INTO THE PIPELINE

If you’re interested in tapping into this new industry talent pipeline and to post either internships or permanent positions on UHD’s Career Services website, go to: www.uhd.edu/jobs4gators.
Our students also learned the value of showing up. We showed up at CPCU, RIMS, IIAH, GSHHRM and NAIFA meetings and conferences. We showed up at IIAT, ICT, Houston Marine Insurance, Texas Captive Insurance Companies, and Gamma Iota Sigma conferences. We showed up at UHD and College of Business resume writing, job interview, and business etiquette training and career fairs. Enrollment and contributions grew, students received scholarships, obtained internships, graduated and were hired in the industry.

I have been fortunate to have had two extremely personable and supportive College of Business deans during my time at UHD. Dean Donald Bates originated the program and supported and guided me for the first four years. His successor, Dean Mike Fields, paid the IRM academic program its greatest compliment by using the program’s industry professional input as a template to craft the faculty/industry-developed curriculum of all the other business majors within the College. With the financial support of Fred de Roode, he created the College of Business Career Services Office to facilitate the mutual goal of students and employers to fill business career positions. He is a strong and important advocate and supporter of the program’s career-relevant curriculum and placement success.

Over the years, the program has changed and grown as directors retired from the Council and were replaced with new directors including Tim Brady, Pam Humphrey, Amanda Mount, Laura S. Hill, Lorie Cardoni-Haymes, Jared Moore, Mike Geeslin and Gerald Ladner. Kyle Dean, Ken Hotchkiss, and Amy Leicht each filled their father’s positions on the Council. Scott Long, a 2012 graduate of the program, joined the Council in 2013.

Teaching in a bachelor’s program typically requires having earned a master’s degree, and although Houston has an abundance of individuals in the industry who can effectively teach, finding those with the academic and professional credentials to meet the College of Business’s strong AACSB-accredited academic standards was a challenge. We were fortunate to have professors committed to teaching UHD’s unusually ethnically, age and experience-diverse student population, including founder Dennis A. Baker, Latrisa Goodwin, Tiffany Barnes, Stephanie Gaffron, Steve Halterman, Steve Shuchart, Erik Konicki, Irwin Hanks, Naomi Hall, Kelly Bluhm, Robert Snyder, Jai Sharma, David Jackson and Jeffry O’Dea. In 2011, Christopher Ketcham, who had earned an MBA in risk management and a PhD in curriculum design and instruction, and a former senior director of knowledge resources for The Institutes for CPCU and the Insurance Institute of American, was hired to teach our first online course, and proved so effective he was subsequently contracted to build out all of the IRM curriculum in an online format. In 2013, Pamela Hurley, another PhD, was added to the faculty, strengthening its academic credentials.

The uniqueness of UHD’s academic program is that it is meticulously coordinated with professional designations from The Institutes for CPCU, The National Alliance for Insurance Education and Research and The American College to provide maximum benefit to students. I can say with confidence, no other program in the world offers a larger or more diverse, relevant and industry-vetted curriculum in insurance and risk management that UHD. Our faculty have the requisite knowledge, experience, resources and, most importantly, the will to help students gain the education necessary to succeed in industry careers. UHD’s career placement of its IRM students and graduates in internships and career positions is unsurpassed. This is our legacy.

Stepping aside in my role as director is bittersweet. In my heart, I know it is time for someone else to take the reins. New challenges have arisen; different talents are needed. The critical challenge for the future is growing our enrollment. Valuable resources are in place to support my successor in this initiative: a committed and tenured Advisory Council with proven leadership, counsel and resources; the Myron Steves Directorship Endowment which will generate funds in perpetuity for scholarships and student participation in industry events; sustaining donors, a strong academic curriculum that has resulted in a successful career placement record; and a network of relationships with industry to ensure continued career opportunities for students and graduates.

I had no premonition of the passion that would develop in my heart for providing ways for students to gain the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to secure life-changing footholds in a dynamic industry with an abundance of opportunities for growth and career success. Fueled by the overwhelming academic and career success of our students and graduates, my passion has grown and grown. The experiences and relationships that Tom and I have developed along the way have filled our lives with joy and happiness.

Although I am retiring from my role as director of the IRM undergraduate program, I continue to be interested and committed to the success of its students, and the important role it plays as a developer of new talent for the industry, and will be looking for ways to continue to contribute to that success and to support my successor. Tom and I will continue our role in fundraising to support insurance and risk management education, our work in insurance and other legal and political issues, and our valued friendships within the insurance industry and the UHD and academic community.

Thank you all for your support and friendship throughout this unusual and interesting journey!

Wendy Braniff

CONTACT INFORMATION

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