

Weber State University
Department of Psychology
Program Review Evaluation Team Narrative Report

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Review Team Members

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Overview

The Psychology Department at Weber State University is composed of an excellent faculty with a tradition of offering a productive undergraduate educational program. Given the level of resources provided, this department can be described as highly productive with respect to the quantity of instruction provided and the number of students served, with an exceptional number of majors. The faculty of the department are productive scholars with a strong commitment to working with students. Some individual faculty are exceptionally productive as scholars, particularly considering teaching load and available resources. A particularly noteworthy characteristic of this department is the sense of collegiality and commitment to the department's mission that was articulated in the self-study. The faculty appear to function as good academic citizens having taken on many committee and administrative functions in all aspects of the University. We are confident that the challenges that exist will be addressed with goodwill and enthusiasm.

The review team members met with Eric Amsel, department chair, on February 23, 2006, and several times on February 24, 2006. The team had been provided with the department self-study and other requested information in advance of their site visit, and with additional information and updates during that visit. The review team met with both tenure-track and adjunct faculty, the college dean, departmental staff, current students, alumni, and community members during our visit. The review team was also provided with a tour of departmental facilities, including laboratory facilities.

The review team reviewed past evaluations and found the department addressing the challenges that were described in those reports. For example, the department now has an equal gender balance in its professors. Based upon the foregoing review, the review team finds the following strengths and challenges and makes several recommendations as noted.

Program Strengths

Faculty (E. Faculty Standards). Psychology is an increasingly diverse field, members of the full time faculty in the department represent a reasonable distribution across the various specialities and areas of psychology, with plans in place to fill areas that are missing. In general, the faculty have doctorates awarded by respected programs across the country. The team finds that the faculty is the greatest

strength of the department. We were impressed with their collegiality, diversity in terms of their training, gender balance, commitment and accessibility to students. The department is commended for the number of faculty who have received major university recognitions. The faculty is highly productive in terms of both teaching and scholarship. The faculty demonstrate a desire to “move forward” and take on new challenges, they are not complacent. Furthermore, they have not neglected service. Faculty are involved in the community, and their profession, and the university. The present faculty size is less than ideal to meet the department’s presently prescribed mission and curriculum. In order to solve this problem it appears there would either need to be an increase in faculty FTE and/or reduction in breadth of the curriculum. It is recommended that the university examine the possibility of adding additional faculty. Furthermore, the department would be well served if they were able to hire faculty that can represent some of the growth areas in psychology such as health psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, or forensic psychology.

Research efforts. We commend the faculty on their commitment to the undergraduate research experience. The number of collaborative publications and presentations at professional conferences is impressive. Both the students and alumni to whom we spoke expressed great appreciation for these unique learning opportunities. Alumni confirm that these experiences provide an important advantage to students’ graduate admission and their success in graduate courses and opportunities.

Learning Opportunities. We commend the faculty on their integration of classroom and experiential learning opportunities. The success of these experiences was demonstrated by both the students’ verbal statements and the community representatives who provide service opportunities for students. It is clear from our conversation with community groups that the students make substantive contributions to their programs. We attribute this success, in large part, to the quality of the supervision provided by the faculty.

Curriculum (B. Curriculum Standards). The undergraduate curriculum is a solid, traditional one typical of undergraduate offerings of the better psychology departments across the country. It reflects many of the “Principles for Quality Undergraduate Psychology Programs” adopted by the American Psychological Association including a required introductory course, methodology courses, and advanced content courses. Missing from the list is a capstone experience and the team makes recommendation below about adding that to the curriculum. The required courses for the undergraduate degree are appropriate, and a student completing a major in psychology at the undergraduate degree are appropriate, and a student completing a major in psychology at WSU should have the preparation necessary for serious consideration by quality graduate programs across the country. The organization of the six areas provides students with a balanced exposure to the field of psychology. The program also allows students flexibility to develop individual interest and education in any given area. The interview with alumni supported the value of this approach.

The department is considering offering relatively unique foundational course that will provide students with an introduction to the discipline and the program offered at WSU. This freshman experience is intended to provide foundation skills needed for success in the program. The team considers this to be a commendable innovation in the curriculum.

The overall high quality of teaching was also reflected in discussions with students and alumni and is evident in the large number of students who chose to major in psychology. This department clearly takes its teaching mission seriously and takes a highly professional approach to the entire instructional process.

We highly commend the department for its strong emphasis on learning outside the classroom, as demonstrated in their commitment to undergraduate research and various forms of experiential learning,

e.g., practicum. Students and alumni appreciated these learning opportunities, and the community groups expressed how participation by psychology students enhanced their programs. In fact, community leaders indicated that many of the programs they administer rely upon the professional preparation of psychology students and that WSU students have made substantive and lasting contributions to their program.

Leadership (F. Program Support Standards). It was apparent in our conversations with all groups that Dr. Amsel provides dynamic leadership and has the confidence and support of the faculty, staff, students and administration. He is viewed as student friendly, detailed oriented and accessible. Working with the faculty, he is shaping a shared vision and direction for the department. With his leadership and the strength of the faculty, the review team sees the potential for additional growth in the future.

Mission Statement (A. Mission Statement Standard). The department has a clearly articulated mission statement, recently developed (2004) by the faculty. Our meetings with students, alumni and community members all strongly and independently indicate that the department is meeting the articulated goals of that mission statement.

The first goal is to promote students' knowledge of the content of the discipline including relevant theories and research. The second goal is to promote students' skills to think in a disciplinary manner that includes the scientific attitudes and skills to analyze and understand human behavior like a psychologist.

The department has also attempted to measure these goals through objective assessment, and report two research projects that were recently completed. One measured students' understanding of scientific psychology. The other assessed students' methodological and ethical reasoning. We commend them for implementing objective measures. We found the outcome information to be somewhat unclear and recommend further data analysis would be helpful to determine if the changes in student learning can be attributed directly to the psychology curriculum.

Challenges

Program Support (F. Program Support Standards). A major challenge that faces the department is sufficient resources to maintain the interest and efforts of the faculty for doing student research and experiential learning. It is apparent that student research and experiential learning take a great deal of faculty time, yet faculty do not appear to receive reasonable compensation in teaching load for their efforts. Additionally, these efforts do not seem to be adequately recognized in the promotion and tenure process by the college and university. It is the opinion of the review team that the lack of adequate teaching load adjustment and recognition in the tenure and promotion process will negatively impact what we have identified as a primary asset of this department. We strongly recommend that the department create a mechanism whereby faculty who participate in these learning activities can receive just compensation and recognition for their extraordinary efforts. One model that can be used to do this provides students with advanced lab experiences in a variety of cognate areas within which they conduct their research. In this manner both the student and the faculty member can receive "credit" for engaging in the scholarly activity. It is the concern of the review team if there is not a change in the current procedures it will create problems for those seeking tenure and promotion, and will result in faculty losing interest in continuing these programs.

Funding (F. Program Support Standards). With the lack of adequate state funding, colleges and departments need to look for other sources. It is recommended that the psychology department search for funds outside the university in order to help support their research efforts and facility enhancements. It is

suggested that the department is encouraged to do this by being able to keep part of the 10% administrative costs that are typically charged to grants and contracts. Additionally, they should be encouraged to obtain private donations and endowments through recognition for tenure and promotion.

Physical Facilities (F. Program Support Standards). The current physical facilities are not adequate to support instruction in the breadth and depth of the science of psychology. For example, good teaching in Area 2, Biological Basis, requires an animal colony and laboratory facilities for neuroscience experimentation by both students and faculty. In addition, laboratory facilities are required to support the undergraduate research experience, such as small cubicles and group interaction rooms. Furthermore, the computer facility that is being used to teach statistics and conduct student research needs to be expanded to serve the number of students enrolled in these courses. The review team recognizes that laboratories require space and financial resources. Therefore, it is recommended that the department develop relationships with other departments who may have similar laboratories and equipment. Additionally, we understand that the Social Science building is scheduled for renovation and recommend that space be allocated for these purposes.

Academic Advising (D. Academic Advising Standards). We recognize that student advising on all campuses is a challenge, and that advising takes many forms. These include career exploration, preparation for graduate school, choice of courses, and opportunities for involvement in the academic program both in and outside of the classroom. While accessible to those who seek it out, both alumni and students report that the advising is uneven, and not as available as some wish. Students who have not been advised lack the understanding of what an advisor could help them accomplish. They don't have enough information to know what they are missing. It is recommended that students be provided with advisement opportunities and education early on in their academic career, shortly after declaring their major.

We recommend that all faculty become more proactive in the advising process so that it is more evenly distributed among faculty members as well as among students. One way to do this may be e-mailing students to inform them of opportunities for advisement and counseling. Further, the present change to the Banner system has provided substantial challenges for advisement and administrative efforts must be made to address those problems for faculty and students.

Curriculum (B. Curriculum Standards). One measure of a quality undergraduate program in psychology is an integrated capstone experience. Many of the department's students currently have this in terms of the undergraduate research experience or practicum. This is highly effective for those who participate, however, it appears to be available to only a very selected, highly motivated group. We recommend that the department develop a formal method to provide a capstone experience to all of its majors. In light of limited resources, the intense research and/or practicum experience will likely not be available to all students. Incorporation of a class or other learning experience that could provide this integrated capstone should be explored.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This review concluded that the Psychology department is meeting the needs of the students, the university, and the community in an appropriate and effective manner. The faculty in the department are engaged in meritorious teaching, significant scholarly activity that involves a diverse array of topics within psychology, and laudable service..

The first and highest priority of the department is excellence in teaching. It seems quite reasonable to expect that the department will maintain this excellence and will be able to avoid stagnation that would

occur if it decided, collectively, to rest on its laurels. The curriculum for psychology majors provides a degree of choice in fulfillment of requirements. As such, the department has planned a course rotation that serves student needs (both majors and non-majors) while allowing faculty to develop new courses in their areas of interest and expertise.

The review team believes that it is important for the College of Social Science to revisit its tenure and promotion document relative to the college's priority of undergraduate research. Presently, it appears that faculty who engage in this important scholarly process do not obtain reasonable credit. Given the limited time and resources that faculty have in their pursuit of scholarly work, it is important that the college identify its true expectations for the faculty's undergraduate research.

The review team was impressed with the department and has high expectations for its continued development in the future. The highly motivated and balanced faculty have the capacity to move the department forward in some exciting and innovative ways. We have also provided embedded recommendations in the Challenges section and invite the faculty, along with administrative support, to seek out ways to meet these challenges.

Respectively submitted,

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