

**Departmental Review Report
Department of Psychology
Weber State University
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This review was conducted on the campus of Weber State University on March 20, 2017, and involved the following activities:

1. Review of a self-study document completed during the fall semester, 2016, by the faculty of the Department of Psychology.
2. Meetings involving Dean Francis Harrold, Chair Aaron Ashley, psychology faculty and support staff, and students.
3. A tour of departmental facilities
4. Review of other departmental documents and policies and procedures

Pursuant to University procedures, we have organized this report to include discussion of: A. the relation of the Mission Statement to the departmental program, B. Curriculum and Outcome Assessment, C. Advising, D. Faculty, and E. Program Support.

A. Mission Statement

The departmental mission statement appropriately addresses the role of psychology as a science, the importance of student academic and career goals, the place of the program in the context of liberal arts, and the value of both teaching and research. A particular strength of the mission is its student-centric nature—making clear that students are the department’s priority. Further, the mission statement bears a clear relation to the program’s curriculum. Although adopted in 2008, the mission statement remains appropriate, and aligns well not only with the 2007 edition of the curricular guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA), but also with the revised edition published in 2013.

B. Curriculum and Assessment

The psychology curriculum offers a solid mainstream program that is consistent with a national consensus and with the undergraduate curricular guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). The key components of the curriculum, consistent with the APA guidelines, include:

- A standard comprehensive introductory course
- Appropriate courses in quantitative analysis (statistics) and in research methodology
- Required course groupings in core areas of the discipline

- A range of appropriate upper-division electives
- Required capstone experiences

These curricular requirements, in addition to being consistent with the APA guidelines, are similar to those found in competent contemporary programs around the country. We suggested that the faculty make efforts to integrate current cultural understanding and evidence into the various classes in the curriculum; discussion with the faculty suggests that this is not a major deficit, and the faculty are sensitive to it. This aim is also consistent with the APA (2013) guidelines.

It is clear that the faculty use student-learning outcomes in a way that allows the curriculum to always be a work in progress; in other words, there is an ongoing reciprocal connection between curriculum and outcomes, with student learning serving as feedback for curricular revision. For example, when it became clear that students taking the Learning & Conditioning course were not making the connection between theory and application, the decision was made to add a Behavior Modification component to the course. The faculty seem both competent and comfortable in working together to achieve such outcomes—Our perception is that everyone is on the same team. And, their efforts to develop a curriculum map in which they assess implementation of program goals (and their implementation in each course) are consistent with the notion of benchmarking (Dunn et al., 2007) as a way of assessing quality within a program.

The faculty are also willing to make labor-intensive curricular changes when evidence suggests they would benefit students. An example was the move from a traditional statistics-research methods course sequence to a two-semester integrated approach to teaching statistics and research design together. Although faculty in psychology departments at many universities believe this is a programmatically sound decision, relatively few have actually invested the effort necessary to make the change. The change also necessitates keeping the basic statistics course as a service to other departments seeking only the quantitative course, but not the research methods component. Despite the difficulty of this curricular innovation, the faculty were convinced it was the right thing to do, and will continue collecting data to evaluate the change. It is worth noting that this is not a superficial change, but a substantive curricular revision that will require sustained effort over time in order to integrate this innovation into the departmental program.

The faculty are both doing and using assessment—perhaps at times almost to a fault. They are attempting to achieve the aim of assessing each course in every year. Our view is that it would be adequate (and more cost-effective) to approach assessment from a sampling perspective—choosing a manageable number of courses and activities, or a manageable sample of students (Miller & Leskes, 2005; Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning, 2014) for assessment in each year. In this way, a rotating plan would allow for all courses to be assessed over perhaps a three- or four-year period. Faculty members are a bit reluctant to entertain this idea due to a feeling that the broader institutional plan for tracking assessment would consider

them to be deficient if they did not assess each course in every year—a situation we would find unfortunate.

Additional good ideas for assessment can be found in the APA Cyberguide for assessment (Pusateri et al., 2009).

C. Advising

The department has adopted the practice of having a single faculty member serve as the departmental advisor. Because this approach includes a risk that non-advising faculty members would lose important opportunities to connect individually with students sharing common interests or compatible personalities, we took special interest in this arrangement during our meetings with psychology personnel and students. After examining and discussing the procedure at length, we became convinced that the department is not susceptible to this risk as detailed in the following conclusions:

- The advising process is well organized.
- The advisor is easily accessed and serves as a highly visible, energetic, friendly, helpful, and efficient single point of contact for psychology majors.
- Use of central advising creates consistency of messaging to students.
- The central advisor does an excellent job of helping students connect with individual faculty who can serve as effective mentors for research, practica, graduate school and career planning, and other personal and individual interests.

A particular strength of advising in the department is development of an advising handbook providing a wealth of important information for students. The advisor updates this handbook each year. We also applaud the efforts of the department to encourage students to see the advisor at least once each year. However, we recognize (as do the faculty) that hypothetically a student could see an advisor only once during his/her university career—The Cattracks system requires an initial contact with an advisor, with no formal requirement thereafter. There is thus the possibility that a student could go from semester to semester without formal advising. The department works to ensure this does not happen—but we recommend more formal, mandatory advising be considered at the department level as well as university wide, consistent with the evidence that advising is most effective when it makes the student a partner in an ongoing teaching and learning process (e.g., Applebee, 2001).

The department has prepared graduation maps intended to provide students guidance as they progress toward completion of their program. These maps have entries labeled “Milestones & Notes,” including minimal expected grade requirements at a half dozen points along the way, which do not really represent true milestones—we suggest that the faculty look at the graduation map with an eye toward providing more useful milestone information; it might prove particularly helpful if the statements of milestones could be closely correlated with similar information in the advising handbook.

Overall, advising seems effective and students are effusive in their statements about the help, formal and informal, that they receive from faculty.

D. Faculty

Our overall impression is that this is a strong, productive faculty with shared, collective values and aims. They are generous with their time on behalf of students and they clearly value the time they spend with students. They are strong mentors, and are clearly valued by the students. There is a sense of community among the faculty—a sense that may be seen in the support and guidance provided adjunct faculty and new faculty. In particular, the faculty evidence gratitude to the Dean for the support (in such avenues as start-up funds and reduced teaching loads) afforded new faculty hires.

Among the faculty there is a feeling of camaraderie and collegiality and it is clear that some faculty have truly sacrificed their own research goals in order to provide meaningful research experiences for students. The 1:1 “face time” between faculty and students truly seems exceptional and the faculty have been progressive in their efforts to combine their research with student supervision and teaching—thus maximizing the effectiveness of limited resources and time. From the point of view of students, this is a department, in a university with an essentially open-enrollment admissions policy, that produces “value-added” student outcomes. One salient example of such outcomes is the large number of faculty-supervised and co-authored conference presentations and publications produced by students. These represent valuable high-impact learning experiences in which students develop and demonstrate useful skills in research and presentation.

E. Program Support

Our general perception is that this program does a lot with a little. The teaching load (4-4) is heavy, the facilities are modest, and the opportunities to change this situation are limited. In addition to the heavy teaching load, many faculty teach overload courses. Further, although there is a good mechanism for faculty to bank course-release time through their individual work with research and practicum students, in practice that benefit is rarely used because the staffing level and the demands of the program make it nearly impossible for faculty to take a release while still serving departmental needs and reaching their own personal goals. This situation, coupled with the overall workload, prompted us to raise several questions concerning the prospect of faculty burnout. For the most part, the members of the faculty are young and enthusiastic—but we wonder how they may feel about their jobs in 5 or 10 years if their current workloads persist with what appear to be limited efforts to fully recognize and reward this incredible work ethic or to progressively and meaningfully reduce demands and expectations set by the higher-level administrations.

The faculty give the departmental administrative specialist high marks for competence and helpfulness and they are pleased to have the help of teaching assistants and supplemental instructors. More of the latter, they say, would be a relatively inexpensive way to help them a bit with the workload. The faculty are very happy with the investment the department made in the Qualtrix system to manage the departmental research pool and, at the moment, are in a way victim of their own success; the number of students and faculty conducting research has produced a need for more research participants than the on-campus research pool can provide. We suggested the possibility of looking to the Ogden community for additional research participants—a prospect that might help not only with numbers, but also the diversity of the pool. But of course, off-campus recruitment presents some additional challenges in terms of additional time commitments for faculty members, different challenges in recruitment of participants, and so forth.

Within the university, funding for research and travel is limited, with some preference for supporting younger faculty who are still working their way toward promotion and tenure. Although the support of young faculty is certainly appropriate, ideally it should not occur at the expense of opportunities for support of veteran faculty. Opportunities for substantially improved support of scholarly work and professional travel would certainly be one way to help combat the prospect of disenchantment or burnout for hardworking faculty.

Within the current office setting, the department has made notable use of available spaces that were until recently lying dormant and unused, but are now populated with work stations and computers for use in research activities. This innovative and pragmatic approach has undoubtedly increased the capacity for faculty members to provide and direct research with students. Thus, the faculty are understandably enthusiastic about the ensuing upgrade of their offices, classrooms, and laboratories as the Social Science Building is renovated over the next year or two. We hope that their resourcefulness and productivity has not gone unnoticed and that space in the renovated building will be adequate to at least maintain, but ideally increase, the existing level of student-faculty research. Notably, the building renovation will allow for expansion into animal research that is currently not feasible. Opportunities to observe animal behavior, to enhance understanding of neuroscience and neuropsychology, and to gain firsthand experience in the ethics of animal research are key advantages offered by access to modern animal laboratories (e.g., Bedwell, 2016).

In concluding this section we simply want to reinforce our initial observation that this is a faculty doing a lot with a little. They would benefit not only from additional staffing, but also from space, equipment, and additional resources for research and travel.

F. Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

This is a productive department with a well-conceived curriculum. The faculty seem to realize that undergraduate teaching is what they do distinctively well and they are committed to it. Consistent with the Weber State University value of access and opportunity for all, we do not sense that non-teaching research interests or other professional pursuits are more important than students. At the same time, the faculty need more support for their own research and travel and will of course benefit in time from the planned new facilities. In some ways the faculty invest more than should be reasonably expected (witness their continued exceptional effort in activities that ostensibly earn release time, even though few have real opportunity to actually use the release). The students whom we met were enthusiastic about their experiences in the department and have a high regard for the faculty.

We see this as a strong department that will be enhanced if the faculty can be provided additional support and administrative encouragement. It was a pleasure to see the sense of community and shared purpose evidenced in the interaction and enthusiasm of the department members. We hope they will continue to develop efficient ways to maintain and improve their high level of student involvement in all aspects of the undergraduate experience. In review, we provide the following recommendations (in no particular order):

- Continue to integrate current cultural understanding and evidence into the various classes in the curriculum; perhaps with more dedicated efforts to elevate visibility of this important topic.
- Continue with the highly successful approach of dedicated advising in conjunction with abundant and diffuse student-faculty research programs, but work toward additional, formal means of ensuring needed advising occurs for all students, such as required meetings at critical junctures during progress toward graduation.
- Continue with development of the advising handbook with more focused integration of graduation maps that highlight important milestones, such as when foundational English and Math courses should be completed and when advising meetings should occur.
- Continue to carefully protect and conserve the notable faculty work ethic with increased sensitivity for providing meaningful rewards and recognition whenever possible and promoting such efforts in collaboration with the higher-level administrations when feasible.

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