

**External Reviewer's Report on the Psychology Department
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
October, 2004**

Introduction

William Addison, Chair of the Psychology Department at Eastern Illinois University, visited the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) September 30-October 1, 2004 for the purpose of reviewing the undergraduate psychology program. The visit was coordinated by Dr. Betsy Morgan, Department Chair. Documentation provided to Dr. Addison prior to his visit included the Department's comprehensive self-study report; a copy of the Department's bylaws and policies, including hiring and evaluation procedures; and copies of faculty vitae.

During my visit, I met with Betsy Morgan, Department Chair; Charles Martin-Stanley, Associate Dean, College of Liberal Studies; and 16 faculty members from the Department, including Tracie Blumentritt, Lloyd Bogart, Melanie Cary, Lisa Caya, Betty DeBoer, Robert Dixon, Emily Johnson, Charles Moore, Carol Oyster, Beth Satory, Elizabeth Seebach, Sara Sullivan, Matthew Taylor, Bart VanVoorhis, Susan Wabaunsee, and Carmen Wilson. I also met with a group of undergraduate students, and the Department's Administrative Assistants: Lois Stuhr and Teresa Znidarsich.

Areas of Review

I. Curriculum/Advising

A. Curriculum

In my view, the main strengths of the curriculum are the diversity of course offerings, the inclusion of an experiential component (Category VII), and the opportunity for students to take an introduction to the major course (Psy 200: Orientation to the Psychology Major), as well as a capstone course (Psy 485: Appraising Psychology).

The inclusion of Psy 200 in the curriculum is particularly noteworthy. Due to the liberal arts nature of undergraduate psychology, students who graduate with a psychology degree tend to pursue a wide variety of careers and graduate training options. Psy 200, which is designed to introduce majors to the field of psychology and to help students identify their career goals, can serve to supplement the formal academic advising process, and to relieve the faculty from some of the more routine aspects of advising. Given the potential benefits for students and faculty, it is not surprising that this type of course is becoming a standard requirement in undergraduate psychology programs across the country.

In fact, I would encourage the Department to consider changing the status of this course from recommended to required. I would also suggest that the Department consider a similar change in status for Psy 485: Appraising Psychology.

The 42-hour requirement for the major (including the statistics course) is significantly greater than what is typically required in psychology programs. According to the results of a catalog survey of 400 colleges conducted by Perlman and McCann (1999) and published in *Teaching of Psychology*, the average number of credits required for a psychology major is 34, 8 fewer than what is required in the UWL program. Given the large number of psychology majors, as well as the Department's substantial contribution to other programs, the Department might want to consider revising the curriculum to require fewer hours for the major. A reduction in required hours would likely benefit the Department in a number of ways. They would be in a better position to meet student demand for psychology courses, they could offer a larger number of elective and specialty courses, and they would be able to increase their level of participation in appropriate extra-departmental programs (e.g., the University honors program).

While recognizing that the UWL faculty are the real experts on their students' specific interests and needs, I would suggest that the Department consider one or more of the following strategies for reducing the number of required hours in the major:

- 1) Change the status of Psy 451: Psychological Measurement from a required course to an elective. Although a course in psychological tests and measurement is valuable for students who plan to pursue graduate training in applied areas (e.g., clinical psychology, school psychology, counseling), it is unusual for such a course to be required for all majors. According to the Perlman and McCann study, only 9% of the 400 psychology programs surveyed required a course in this area. Those students who intend to seek graduate degrees in applied areas could be directed into the course through the academic advising process.
- 2) Reduce the number of required credits in Category III: Developmental Psychology from 6 to 3. Although it is not uncommon for psychology departments to require majors to take a developmental course, the two-course requirement is unusual. If the Department were to reduce this requirement, they might also consider deleting Psy 210: Developmental Psychology from this category, and have students take one course from the following: Psy 310: Child Development, Psy 311: Adolescent Development, and Psy 312: Adulthood and Aging. Additionally, given the relatively narrow focus of Psy 314: Infant Development, the Department might consider making this course an elective.
- 3) Combine Category IV and Category V, and require two courses from the new category. Additionally, consider making Psy 343: Group Dynamics

an elective. In my view, abnormal psychology, theories of personality, and social psychology are all “mainstream” areas in the discipline, and they should probably have equal status in the curriculum. In the Perlman and McCann study, the personality, abnormal, and social courses were required by 25%, 22%, and 17% of the programs, respectively. The group dynamics course was not included in their list of required courses.

Additionally, I would suggest that the Department consider a review and possible revision of Category VI. With the current configuration, students may have too much flexibility in choosing courses from this category. For example, students could meet the requirement by taking two courses in the area of sensation and perception (Psy 437: Human Senses and Psy 438: Processes and Perception), while avoiding exposure to such important areas as learning and memory, cognition, and biological psychology. A possible revision for the Department to consider is to combine Psy 437 and Psy 438 into a single course, and to make Psy 334: Health Psychology an elective. Students would then be required to select two courses from a list of four, increasing the likelihood that they would take courses in the cognitive/learning and biological psychology areas. Additionally, the Department might consider placing a single sensation and perception course into a category with Psy 430: Physiological Psychology, and then creating a separate category that would include Psy 335: Learning and Memory and Psy 435: Cognitive Processes. Students could be required to take at least one of the two courses in each category, ensuring that they would be exposed to course work in both the cognitive/learning and biological psychology domains.

The Department might also consider reviewing Category VIII: Elective Credit. The list of elective courses is extensive, and it includes a number of courses that reflect current trends in the discipline (e.g., Psy 318: Psychology of Women, Psy 376: Industrial Psychology, Psy 382: Cross Cultural Psychology). However, the list also includes relatively specialized courses that are generally not seen in an undergraduate curriculum (e.g., Psy 225: Sleep and Dreams, Psy 259: Girls and Women in Sports, Psy 301: Theory of Knowledge, Psy 347: Empathic Listening). The Department might consider offering a “Special Topics” course that could address, on a rotating basis, the topics covered in some of the more specialized courses.

B. Advising

Academic advising appears to be a real strength of the Psychology Department. Since 1993, the Department has initiated a number of innovative strategies for advising its students, including the establishment of the position of Psychology Advising Coordinator, and the use of online advising tutorials and group advising sessions. The success of these programs is evidenced by a significant increase in students’ ratings of satisfaction regarding the Department’s academic advising. According to the self-study report, in 1993 only 38% of student respondents rated the quality of advising as good or high; in 2003, this figure was an impressive

80%.

With the creation of the Advising Coordinator position, currently held by Emily Johnson, the Department formally established the initial contact person for students interested in majoring in psychology. And by requiring prospective majors to complete the online advising tutorials before they meet with the Coordinator, the Department has ensured that students will be well informed regarding the process of academic advising, course planning for the major, and relevant career information. When I met with the students and asked them to describe strengths of the psychology program, they specifically mentioned both the advising tutorials and the fact that they are advised by the Coordinator before they become majors.

The Department is also to be commended for instituting group advising sessions for its majors. Again, students I talked to indicated that this was an effective technique for addressing their questions about the psychology curriculum.

II. Assessment

In general, assessment is expected to be linked to the mission and goals of the department. Once a department identifies learning goals for their students, accreditation bodies such as the North Central Association expect institutions to document how well their students are achieving the goals. The Psychology Department at UWL has been actively engaged in systematic program assessment for more than 10 years, and overall, their program is a major strength of the Department. Particularly noteworthy is the use of multiple direct and indirect measures of student learning.

A. Undergraduate Major in Psychology

In its “Goals for the Psychology Major,” the Department lists a number of goals divided into three broad areas: a) knowledge, b) academic skills, and c) practice skills. The goals listed are fairly consistent with those identified in the *Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Goals and Outcomes* (APA, 2002), which includes specific goals for content knowledge of the discipline, as well as personal and career planning goals. In general, the latter two goals have not been widely adopted as primary goals by most undergraduate psychology programs, although content knowledge has been. According to the self-study report, the Department has begun working to incorporate the goals identified in the APA document into its assessment program. I think this is an excellent strategy, and I would encourage the Department to continue these efforts.

Every 5-7 years, the Department administers the Educational Testing Service Major Field Test (MFT) to assess content knowledge in the discipline. Scores on the MFT constitute a useful direct measure of student learning, and it is notable that UWL’s psychology majors have performed fairly well. The Department’s use of the MFT is commendable, although I would suggest that they consider administering the test more frequently (e.g., in the senior seminar). Additionally,

I would encourage the Department to consider a more formal mechanism for reviewing the curriculum in reference to students' performance on the subsections of the MFT.

As indicated in the self-study report, the senior seminar is an excellent vehicle for implementing various aspects of the assessment program. For example, students in the course take a content-based multiple choice exam, write an essay on the nature-nurture issue, and conduct interviews with other seniors in which they discuss strategies for improving the psychology program. The fact that an article written by faculty members Betsy Morgan and Emily Johnson describing the seminar was published in *Teaching of Psychology*, a preeminent pedagogical journal, is a testimony not only to the innovative nature of the course, but also to the potential usefulness of the course in improving the educational quality of the program. The only suggestion I have in this area is for the Department to consider instituting a formal procedure for reviewing and using the information collected from students in this course.

Indirect measures of student learning used by the Department include the "Learning Environment Survey," administered in alternate years to senior psychology majors; an alumni survey that was last administered in 2001; and a 2002 survey of graduating seniors designed to provide information about career and/or graduate school plans. In combination, these instruments should provide a solid appraisal of students' (and former students') attitudes regarding their satisfaction with the program. The Department could use this information in conjunction with the direct measures of student learning as part of a formal review of the program's relative strengths and weaknesses.

My main recommendation concerning the assessment program is that the Department consider formalizing the program by developing an assessment plan that could be updated on an annual basis. In addition to a departmental mission statement, the plan could include summaries of the extensive assessment data already collected, long-term objectives for assessment, and a schedule for administering the various instruments currently in use. In developing this plan, the Department should consider how they can use the assessment measures currently in place to determine whether program goals are being met, and, if appropriate, how the information gathered can be used to modify the curriculum to meet the Department's mission and goals.

B. General Education/Service Courses

According to the 2003-2005 UWL Undergraduate Catalog, "the primary purpose of General Education is to cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for independent learning and thinking. As a result of General Education, students will be more knowledgeable in a wide variety of subject matter areas, and also better able and more willing to ask significant questions, seek appropriate solutions to complex problems, make sound judgments and formulate rational beliefs."

Moreover, the catalog indicates that through course work in general education, students will develop the following: skills in communication and critical thinking; knowledge of the development and interaction of human cultures; understanding of the thought processes that underlie human activity; understanding of and sensitivity to cultural diversity; understanding on a global level of the social, political, and economic frameworks of societies; understanding and appreciation of the arts; understanding of nature, including the role of science and technology in environmental and social change; and knowledge and skills essential to physical well-being and a healthy lifestyle.

Clearly, the Psychology Department has a major role to play in the general education mission of the institution, particularly regarding the development of such skills and abilities as critical thinking, understanding thought processes underlying human activity, and the role of science in social change. Additionally, psychology courses are required or recommended by a number of other majors at UWL, and the Department has a responsibility to ensure that these students are given the opportunity to develop fundamental skills and abilities. Although the self-study report did not address the assessment of the Department's service mission, it may be that this process is the responsibility of some extra-departmental group (e.g., a general education committee). Regardless of who is responsible for assessing the goals of the service courses, the Department might want to begin discussions regarding the basic goals and learning outcomes for these courses.

III. Resources

A. Financial Resources

1. Faculty Salaries

It appears that entry-level salaries for tenure track faculty positions are fairly competitive for this area of the country and for this type of institution. However, the fact that there has been no meaningful salary increases for several years is a major concern for the faculty, and a number of the individuals I interviewed indicated that this situation has had a significant negative impact on their morale. Additionally, some senior faculty expressed concern about salary compression; that is, salaries of faculty members who have been in the Department for some years have not kept pace with the rate of increase for entry-level positions.

2. Travel

Although faculty are expected to contribute some of their own funds to support their professional travel, the consensus among the faculty was that travel support is "reasonable." Several faculty members indicated that, in general, one professional meeting per year is mostly paid for, with partial reimbursement available for a second meeting.

B. Facilities

1. Teaching Facilities

In general, I would characterize the teaching facilities as inadequate. There seems to be an insufficient number of available classrooms large enough to meet student demand for psychology courses, and there are not enough “smart” classrooms (i.e., those equipped with current technology) to meet the needs of faculty who depend on technology to teach their courses. Several faculty suggested that there has been some recent progress in alleviating these problems (e.g., the acquisition of a “smart cart” with necessary technology). Additionally, the self-study report indicates that the University plans to install necessary equipment in one of the Department’s main classrooms in the spring of 2005. But even with these improvements, the quality of the teaching facilities is still a legitimate concern for the Department.

2. Research Facilities

The Department’s research space includes a teaching laboratory for the experimental psychology course, two computer labs, an observation suite for developmental and clinical research, four office areas devoted to research, and several rooms dedicated to psychological assessment. Considering its size and scope, the Department is doing well in this area.

C. Equipment

The primary equipment resource for faculty and student researchers in psychology is computers, and support for the Department in this area seems deficient. The computers housed in the Department’s research and computer labs tend to be hand-me-downs from the University’s general access labs, which means that they are already outdated at the time they are placed in the Department’s labs. This situation is problematic because older computers may be unable to accommodate the current version of SPSS, which is essential for faculty and student research in psychology.

IV. Personnel

A. Faculty

The faculty are well qualified in their areas of expertise, and by all accounts they are effective teachers who are committed to the teaching and learning enterprise. Virtually to a person, the individuals I interviewed indicated that the psychology faculty are energetic, hard-working, and focused on meeting students’ educational needs. Among the faculty’s many strengths, the diversity in their backgrounds and teaching styles, as well as their dedication to undergraduate research are particularly noteworthy. Despite what I would characterize as an inordinately heavy teaching load, many of the faculty have active research programs, and they generally express a solid commitment to their jobs. It is worth noting that the

strengths of the faculty seem to be recognized not only by the faculty members themselves, but also by administrators and students. In my meeting with the students, a number of them indicated that the faculty are generally accessible, personable, open to questions in class, and that as a group they are excellent teachers. Overall, the expertise of the faculty, and their dedication to quality teaching constitute one of the major strengths of the Department.

In her position as Department Chair, Betsy Morgan is generally recognized by her colleagues as an effective leader who is well-organized, committed to the Department, and supportive of the faculty. A number of the faculty I interviewed pointed to her leadership as one of the principal strengths of the Department. The junior faculty in particular indicated that they appreciate her support and encouragement. The faculty classified as “academic staff” also seem to feel supported in the Department, which I think is noteworthy. In these times of fiscal austerity in higher education, many institutions have purposefully hired an increasing number of non-tenure track faculty as part of a strategy to address cost issues. For a variety of reasons, it is not uncommon for these faculty to feel like second-class citizens, or alienated from the tenure track faculty. The fact that this is not the case in the Psychology Department at UWL is a testimony not only to Dr. Morgan’s leadership, but also to the efforts of all the faculty to foster a collegial spirit in the Department.

Although several faculty suggested that communication between the chair and the faculty, as well as among faculty members themselves, could be more frequent and open, the consensus among the faculty was that overall, communication in the Department is very good. Apparently, some longstanding interpersonal conflicts have at times strained relationships in the Department; however, it is clear that the interpersonal climate in the Department has improved significantly under Dr. Morgan’s leadership.

In my view, the primary issue regarding personnel is the level of staffing in the Department. Given the demands on the Department in terms of service to their majors, the graduate students, and those students in other programs who take psychology courses, the Department seems considerably understaffed. The approximate major-to-faculty ratio of 27:1 is substantially higher than that for departments of similar scope and mission (typically, about 21:1). Given the relatively heavy teaching load combined with student advising, expectations for scholarly activity, and demands for university service, it is not surprising that virtually all of the faculty I interviewed characterized themselves as hard-working. An additional faculty position would allow the Department to serve the students and the University more effectively, and would likely improve the morale of the faculty.

B. Support Staff

The Department has two full-time Administrative Assistants, Lois Stuhr and Teresa Znidarsich, who both have extensive service to the Department and the University. Additionally, the Department employs a number of student office workers. My impression is that the Department is well-served in this area.

Strengths of the Department

In my view, the main strengths of the Department are the faculty, the leadership, the student advising program, and the level of assessment activity. The clear consensus among the people I interviewed, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students, was that as a group, the faculty are excellent teachers who take the education of their students very seriously. Given their diverse expertise and their dedication to student learning, it is understandable that the Psychology Department has a reputation on campus as a strong, student-centered unit. Given the high quality of the faculty and Betsy Morgan's proficiency as chair, the Department is well positioned to build on its considerable success as a unit.

One of the distinguishing features of the Department is the excellent quality of its academic advising program. Due in part to the broad nature of the discipline, and the fact that psychology majors as a group tend to be interested in a large variety of potential occupations and graduate training programs, maintaining a sound and consistent academic advising program is a major challenge for psychology departments. Based on data from student satisfaction surveys and anecdotal accounts from current students, the Department's innovations in this area (e.g., online advising tutorials, group advising sessions) have created what I would consider a model for "best practices" in this area.

The Department has established a strong assessment program, incorporating multiple direct and indirect measures of student learning. The Department's success in this area is particularly noteworthy given the apparent paucity of resources to support the program.

Recommendations

- The Department is to be commended for its dedicated, hard-working faculty. From all accounts, they are excellent teachers who are committed to meeting students' academic needs. The Department should continue to support and reward them in their efforts. However, the Department is in serious need of at least one additional faculty position, probably in support of the school psychology graduate program. Ideally, this person would be able to contribute to the undergraduate program as well.
- The Department should consider initiating a review and possible revision of the undergraduate curriculum, with one of the goals being a reduction in the total number of credit hours required for the major (see specific suggestions on pages 2-3). A reduction in required hours would likely place the Department in a better position to meet the great demand for psychology courses.

- The Department might consider initiating discussions regarding strategies for enhancing intra-departmental communication. For example, the Department Chair could provide the faculty with weekly or bi-weekly information updates via email. Additionally, it is possible that more frequent department meetings would have a positive impact on communication.
- The Department is doing an excellent job of assessing student learning. In order to take full advantage of their efforts in this area, the Department should consider developing a formal assessment plan that would include a departmental mission statement (see Appendix 1 for examples), as well as details regarding systematic data collection (e.g., a timetable for administering specific instruments). I would encourage the Department to continue to refer to the goals identified in the *Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Goals and Outcomes* (APA, 2002) as they formalize their assessment program. Additionally, I would recommend that they maintain their efforts to “close the loop” in the assessment process by using the data they collect to make appropriate changes in the program.
- The Department might consider organizing a department retreat, which would give the faculty an opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this report, and any other matters they deem appropriate, in a more informal atmosphere than is typically achieved in a department meeting. Generally, department retreats are held away from campus on a day that allows for maximum participation. For example, the Department could reserve a room at a local restaurant for a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Following a luncheon, the faculty could spend 3-4 hours discussing key issues facing the Department (see Appendix 2 for a sample agenda). The relatively large amount of time allocated for a retreat allows faculty to discuss issues in a more systematic and focused manner than is generally possible in regular department meetings. Including brief “ice-breaking” or similar activities in the retreat may have the effect of enhancing the cohesiveness of the unit.

Conclusions

In my view, the Psychology Department at UWL is doing an excellent job overall. The combination of a strong faculty and superior leadership should serve the Department well. From my interviews with the students, it is clear that they value the faculty’s support of their efforts to learn, and that they appreciate the individual attention they receive from the faculty. Although there are some reasonable differences of opinion among the faculty on some relatively minor issues, it is clear that they share a sincere interest in meeting the academic needs of the students. This student-centered orientation provides a strong foundation for the continued success of the Department.

In planning for the future, a strong, faculty-driven assessment plan should help the Department continue to meet its goals. By building on its existing strengths and taking advantage of its significant potential, the Department should be able to establish a strong foundation for continued growth. For the Department to succeed in these efforts, it is

important that the University in general and the College of Liberal Studies in particular provide a level of support that is commensurate with the Department's contribution to the mission of the University.

Appendix 1: Sample Psychology Department Mission Statements

Eastern Illinois University:

The Department of Psychology is concerned with the application of psychological theory, methodology, and empirical findings to the study of behavior and mental processes. The Department provides instruction to undergraduate and graduate students who are either Psychology majors or enrolled in Psychology courses. The Department will provide an appropriate number and variety of courses for students majoring in psychology leading to the bachelor's degree, master's degree, or specialist's degree as well as service courses for students in other disciplines.

The Department provides opportunities for students to explore careers in psychology by encouraging undergraduate student research and field placements. In order to enhance these student opportunities, the Department will support faculty research and service in the diverse areas of psychology.

The Department of Psychology uses its human, fiscal, and physical resources to provide a quality learning environment for its undergraduate and graduate students. Qualified faculty challenge and inspire students in modern, well-equipped classrooms and laboratories. Department faculty strengthen their understanding of their areas of study through research and scholarly activity, and they provide services consistent with the mission of the University to students and others in the University's service region.

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne:

It is the mission of the Department of Psychology to offer a high quality education to the students of northeast Indiana who seek an Associate's or Bachelor's degree in psychology. The department also serves the needs of IPFW students majoring in other disciplines who seek a minor in psychology, or coursework in psychology to meet other educational goals. We also seek to advance psychological knowledge through the research of our faculty and students, and to share our expertise with the community.

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point:

The purpose of the Psychology Department is to:

- # Function as a component of the liberal arts foundation of the university.
- # Provide a quality undergraduate program.
- # Provide students with baccalaureate level career training, as well as preparation for graduate school.
- # Provide service courses for other university programs that require a foundation in behavioral science.

Western Kentucky University:

The primary mission of the Department of Psychology at Western Kentucky University is to provide our students with a strong education in the theoretical, scientific, and applied study of psychology. To this end we seek to:

- # Provide our undergraduate majors with knowledge of psychology as an art, a science, and a profession.
- # Provide our graduate students with high quality programs that prepare them for careers in business, industry, government, mental health settings, educational settings, or for further postgraduate study.
- # Provide students enrolled in programs throughout the university with a basic understanding of psychology and its importance in all human endeavors.

A second component of our mission is to contribute to the advancement of psychology and psychological knowledge. To this end we seek to:

- # Conduct and publish basic and applied research.
- # Develop and apply theoretical models and practical analyses.
- # Present papers and workshops at professional meetings.

Participate in the scholarly activities of professional associations.

A final component of our mission is to improve the lives of others through the application of knowledge and expertise in psychology. To this end we seek to:

Practice the profession of psychology.

Provide to others our professional and scholarly expertise.

Consult with individuals, groups, schools, businesses, and public and private organizations.

Provide leadership within the university, professional organizations, and the community.

In all of our endeavors we are committed to the values we share as psychologists, especially our respect for the welfare and dignity of all people. We value and appreciate the diversity of the students we teach, the public we serve, and the colleagues with whom we work (and the technology with which we do all things).

Appendix 2: Sample Agenda for Department Retreat

12:00-1:00	Lunch Ice-Breaking Activity Overview
1:00-1:30	Session I Small Group Discussions
1:30-1:45	Groups Report
1:45-2:30	Large Group Discussion
2:30-2:45	Break
2:45-3:15	Session II Small Group Discussions
3:15-3:30	Groups Report

3:30-4:15 Large Group Discussion

4:15-4:30+ Summary and Wrap-Up