

## **External Review**

**Undergraduate Program & MA in General Psychology Program  
Department of Psychology  
Western Carolina University**

**10 March, 2009**

## **Reviewers**

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## **I. Introduction**

### **a. Description of the visit length**

Drs. Suzanne Baker and Wallace Dixon arrived for the Psychology program review the evening of February 8, 2009. Dr. Baker is Assistant Head of the Department of Psychology at James Madison University and Dr. Dixon is the Head of the Department of Psychology at East Tennessee State University. Dr. Billy Ogletree, an internal review team member and the Department Head for Communication Sciences and Disorders, joined the others the morning of February 9<sup>th</sup>. The review concluded midday February 10<sup>th</sup>.

### **b. Summary and description of meetings conducted by the review team**

Drs. Baker and Dixon began their review by attending dinner with Drs. Bruce Henderson, Hal Herzog, and David McCord of WCU's Department of Psychology. The review continued the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> as Dr. Ogletree joined the team and meetings occurred with the WCU Department Head in Psychology (Dr. David McCord), the Provost (Dr. Kyle Carter), the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies (Dr. Scott Higgins), and the Dean of the College of Education and Allied Professions (Dr. Michael Dougherty). A facilities tour followed including potential clinical facilities in the McKee building and office, classroom, and research space in Killian. After the tour, Drs. Baker and Dixon had lunch with students and alumni, met with Psychology faculty members in the absence of the Department Head, and met with Melissa Wargo, WCU's Director of Assessment. The day ended with a working meeting for the review team and dinner with WCU Psychology faculty members Drs. Maleski, Bobadilla, and Gordon. During the final day of the review, the team had breakfast with Dr. McCord and participated in a working session dedicated to the assessment report.

## **II. Analysis of Programs**

### **a. Undergraduate Program**

The undergraduate major curriculum is built around a strong required core, including courses in General Psychology, Research Design and Analysis, History of Psychology, and a Senior Seminar. In addition, students must take electives from each of four areas of psychology (Developmental, Clinical, Social, and Experimental). The general design of the curriculum is sound. The required core courses are typical for psychology majors. Further, the required electives function to expose students to the breadth of the discipline of psychology. The program is designed to build student skills as they progress through the courses, and faculty indicated that most students complete the Research Design and Analysis courses early on in the major, so that later courses can build on skills learned in those courses. Many undergraduate students are actively engaged in research and other individual projects through the Department's PSY 280 and PSY 480 courses.

Despite the strengths of the curriculum, we noted that the current curriculum structure is not consistent with APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major. Although the *Guidelines* were not designed to be prescriptive, they were meant to at least serve as a stimulus for intradepartmental discussion regarding appropriate curricular structures. Hence, it is not clear why some foundational coursework is not included in the WCU curriculum. For example, it is possible for students to complete the psychology major and yet not complete coursework in

several of the key areas of the discipline (e.g. biopsychology). Within each of the content areas of the curriculum, students have a choice of courses to take, but it is sometimes unclear why these courses are grouped together. For example, it is not clear why I/O psychology is considered a social psychology course. The faculty indicated that it has been many years since they undertook a systematic examination of the curriculum's design and structure.

The Department was viewed very favorably by the students with whom we spoke. Class sizes are relatively small, and students praised the accessibility and helpfulness of the faculty. Students seem to be able to complete the program in a timely manner, although a few students expressed concern about inconvenient scheduling of some classes. The percentage of WCU students majoring in psychology is low in comparison with institutions of a similar focus and mission (a typical figure would be that about 5-10% of undergraduates major in psychology). The Department uses three assessment measures to evaluate the program. The current assessment plan may not be providing the type of data that would be most useful for program improvement. For example, a 50-item multiple choice test is used to assess content knowledge in the discipline. On average, students score fairly well on this test of content knowledge, but it is not clear what the test is assessing. Since the test does not have specific subscales designed to assess knowledge of different areas of psychology, it is unclear whether the test would be able to detect gaps in student knowledge. The focus group approach used to gather information on student satisfaction with the program can be a rich source of knowledge, but this type of information can be skewed by opinions from more vocal students, and individual students frequently express contradictory opinions. Quantitative measures of student satisfaction with various aspects of the program might provide more useful information.

Finally, there is a movement within the field of psychology nationally to lay greater claim to *psychology* as a "brand name." The department's course naming traditions are well in keeping with this movement. For other courses whose content may overlap with courses offered by other disciplines, the department may wish to consider name changes to emphasize the unique focus of their own course offerings. In this regard, some example name changes may include:

PSY320 Child and Adolescent Development -> Child and Adolescent Psychology

PSY322 Adolescent Development: Problems and Achievements -> The Psychology of Adolescent Problems and Achievements

PSY325 Development: Early Adulthood through Maturity -> The Psychology of Adulthood

PSY331 Human Sexuality -> The Psychology of Human Sexuality

PSY426 Death and Dying -> The Psychology of Death and Dying

## **b. Graduate Program**

Under the rubric of "M.A. in General Psychology," the department offers two masters degree tracks: clinical and general experimental. The curricula of both tracks are relatively traditional, and have recently undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, modification to accommodate changes in programmatic emphasis and mission. The expressed focus of both programs is preparation for doctoral study. Although the programs share core coursework, the clinical concentration is heavier because of its laudable scientist-practitioner ("Boulder-model") emphasis. By requiring a thesis to complete the masters degree, both programs remain rigorous, and intimately and appropriately linked to their scientific heritage.

Graduate recruitment is effective, despite rigorous admissions standards and minimal availability of tuition waivers. The \$7000 assistantship available to every student helps increase student interest in the program, but this benefit is offset by the costs of living and tuition. The

minimal availability of tuition waivers disadvantages WCU in recruiting students from diverse backgrounds. The high ratio of clinical to experimental applicants is typical of multi-purpose graduate programs. The level of student-coauthorships at professional conferences is good, and the department very much lives up to its promise of launching its graduate students into doctoral programs.

Several aspects of the programs' self-descriptions need clarification. For example, in their self-study materials, courses common to both programs are listed with different titles in different places and, in one case, different credit-hours. We also find the graduate mission somewhat confusing. The mission is to 1) prepare students for doctoral study (the main purpose), and 2) prepare students for masters practice (the secondary purpose). As reviewers, this made us think "Which one is it?" These are arguably antagonistic goals such that working toward one obviates working toward the other. The program clearly wants to provide for students who do not continue on in a doctoral program, but we are not convinced that the program needs to cover this possibility in a mission statement; especially since, as expressed in their self-study materials, the department views practice at the masters level (except for school psych) an untenable career option. By publically declaring masters level practice as a secondary goal of their mission, the department may unintentionally induce program applicants to believe there are masters level career options in psychology in North Carolina. We further wonder whether the department really wants to have as its *primary* mission the preparation of students for entry into doctoral programs. It seems to us that the *primary* mission is, or at least *should be*, to train students to think and behave like psychological scientists capable of matriculating into doctoral programs. Actually getting into doctoral programs would be the outcome measure of the goal.

Finally, we are unclear as to how the learning outcomes differ between the programs. Presumably there are different expected learning outcomes for students in the clinical program as compared with those in the experimental program, but these are not delineated in the *Learning Outcomes Assessment* section of the self-study. What appear to be listed instead are learning outcomes common to both programs. Additionally, it is not clear how the specified program of study within each degree track is linked to its corresponding set of learning outcomes (since the learning outcomes are not separated out by track). Why is Psy555 *History of Psychology*, required only in the experimental program of study? Why should students be allowed to take so many different guided electives within their programs, when such variety would minimize core content consistency? We encourage the program to identify learning outcomes separately by track, and to include all programmatic learning outcomes on all publically distributed materials describing the programs.

### **III. Analysis of Faculty**

#### **a. Qualifications**

The WCU Psychology Department currently includes 18 full-time faculty members who generate 18.0 FTE through undergraduate and graduate instruction. Of these individuals, 8 are tenured, 7 are non-tenured, and 3 are full-time fixed-term, and all but 1 hold the Ph.D. degree. Five additional adjunct instructors are employed per term generating an additional 2.0 FTE. Two of the 4 faculty members in Clinical Psychology hold North Carolina licenses in the discipline, while the remaining 2 individuals have applications for licenses in process.

The full-time faculty includes 6 Professors, 2 Associate Professors, and 9 Assistant Professors. This group is well-seasoned in the classroom and actively involved in professional development.

#### **b. Resources and Support**

The Department of Psychology is 1 of 5 academic departments in the College of Education and Allied Professions. It is housed on the third floor of the Killian building and occupies an 11,475 square foot area (instructional and non-instructional space). All full-time faculty have individual office spaces, while part-time faculty share offices. A limited number of small “testing rooms” are available for faculty and student use. The department’s space also includes 3 classrooms and a conference room area, all of which are shared by other academic units in the college. Clinical activities in the department are often scheduled in the WCU Speech and Hearing Center (SHC), a 5,398 square foot unit in the McKee building with individual (4) and group (2) treatment/diagnostic areas. However, psychology’s use of the SHC occurs during evenings, weekends, and other “down time” when the clinic is not in use by the Department of Communication Science and Disorders.

The self-study reports a departmental budget of “approximately \$20,000.” This money is dedicated to operational costs and faculty professional development. According to the self-study, recent annual professional development allocations have been between \$550 (tenured faculty) and \$650 (untenured, tenure-track faculty). These funds are available to support travel, pay for memberships in professional organizations, provide licensing fees, or purchase instructional materials. The self-study notes that the departmental budget does not allow for the purchase of academic equipment. Such purchases are funded through one-time allocations from the Provost.

Very little data regarding faculty salaries are provided in the self-study, although informal conversations suggest that starting salaries are in the “low 40s.” This is low and noncompetitive. According to salary survey data available from the American Psychological Association (<http://research.apa.org/>), a starting salary of \$42,500 would place WCU below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile for masters level psychology departments in the East South Central region of the US. It is surprising that the department has been able to hire new faculty at all, let alone those of the caliber it has been hiring. This is probably testament to the department’s collegiality and highly-respected leadership, and perhaps the beauty of the region, which together helps offset the minimal compensation.

The Psychology department faculty are supported by WCU’s Hunter library. The library is located within a 3 minute walk for the department and contains 149,000 square feet of storage capacity. Hunter library has 12 faculty and 8 graduate student study carrels. All library facilities are wheelchair accessible. Library holdings in Psychology are considered adequate.

#### **c. Teaching, Research/Creative Activity and Service**

Committed, highly accessible faculty are among the department’s most notable assets, including its highly respected and much lauded department head. Tenure-track faculty appear well-guided toward satisfying the requirements of promotion and tenure, and those we met with appeared confident in their understanding of the department’s performance expectations. Annual evaluations provided by both the department head and a departmental committee provide tenure-track faculty with timely, comprehensive indicators of their progress toward tenure and promotion.

The Fall, 2008 Collegial Review Document (CRD) provides faculty with reasonably clear standards of performance as they pertain to teaching and scholarship. However, the service performance standards send mixed messages. For example, “advising” is not considered “institutional” service, although both fall in the service domain, and both are mandatory. We recommend that advising be subsumed under the “departmental service” category; which would not only simplify the service domain, but also allow flexibility in managing the occasional faculty member who doesn’t advise well. Increasing service expectations in other areas for these faculty members may strategically improve the department’s overall efficiency. However, the existing CRD does not permit this strategic option. The expected percent commitment to service is also confusing. Faculty are expected to spend 20% of the work week on service (CRD II.C.3 & IV.A.3), yet service only counts for 15% of the tenure and promotion dossier (IV.C.3, IV.D.3, IV.E.3). This means that faculty are overcharged by 5%, which is unreasonable. The only way to accommodate this “cost” would be to undercharge faculty in the domains of teaching or scholarship, which is also unreasonable.

Having a post-tenure review process is highly desirable. However, the scholarship requirements for post-tenure review appear light in that only “Category B” units are required. To us, this implies that peer-reviewed publications are no longer needed at the most advanced levels of the professoriate. Perhaps an aspirational standard should be two “Category A” units for every 4 years of post-tenure service.

Classroom technology is a source of pride for the department. The most notable shortcoming in terms of physical facilities is the inadequate laboratory space, which impacts negatively on the department’s research mission as well as its undergraduate and graduate teaching missions (see below for the latter). In terms of research, faculty in the department have a relatively low level of peer-reviewed publications. Review of faculty CVs indicates that in the last 5 years, faculty have produced about 48 journal articles –about 3 publications per faculty member per five-year period. However, half of the 48 journal articles have come from only three individuals. It is testament to the faculty’s fortitude in impoverished space conditions that they can publish at all. It also appears that faculty have not engaged in extramurally funded research activity in the last 5 years; although at least 4 faculty have a history of securing extramurally funded research, service, or pedagogical grants. Of course, extramural funding agencies are not likely to sponsor research in departments with insufficient physical facilities, so future efforts at securing research and service grants are likely to be impeded based solely on the physical infrastructure.

#### **IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget**

##### **a. Adequate Facilities to meet educational mission**

As noted above, there is inadequate physical space for the department to effectively implement its research and teaching missions. The impact of inadequate space on the teaching mission manifests in at least two ways. First, undergraduate and graduate students are afforded little opportunity to become socialized into the culture of psychological science. Working side by side in laboratory settings provides some of the most formative personal experiences for students considering careers in the psychological sciences. Western students can benefit little from this age-old tradition, a fact which contributes to the relatively low level of undergraduate student engagement described elsewhere in this document. Second, the lack of lab space effectively limits student learning to paper-and-pencil forms of psychological research. Western

students can have little exposure to most experimental forms of research, including those in which human or animal subjects are brought into the lab and observed under controlled laboratory conditions. With insufficient training in experimental research, students run the risk of being overly exposed to correlational empirical models, and insufficiently exposed to cause and effect empirical models.

In addition to the impact on student learning opportunities, faculty scholarship is obviously affected as well. Departmental faculty have been resourceful in dealing with their space limitations, and they are productive scholars, but the lack of usable space directly impacts the type of scholarship in which faculty can engage. Up-to-date, well-functioning research space will also be vitally important in attracting future faculty, as well as graduate and undergraduate students to the Department.

The team recommends that the department work with their college dean, with the support of the provost, to develop a research space acquisition and implementation plan. The plan should include a deployment timeline and the identification of relevant teaching and research outcome objectives. A ballpark estimate of the amount of laboratory space that would be appropriate for a department starting from scratch can be derived from recommendations provided by member departments of the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology (COGDOP). Based on these data, we recommend a target allocation in the 1200-1300 square feet / FTE range, or about 21,000 – 24,000 square feet for the WCU psychology department in its entirety.

The department makes some use of the McKee Building Speech and Hearing Center, both for psychological assessment and psychotherapy training, and in the process is able to generate small amounts of revenue based on its sliding-fee billing scale. Use of the clinic occurs at the courtesy of the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD), which the team understands is usually during evenings and other low-volume times. It is our understanding that the psychology department will eventually become the steward of this clinic space upon departure of the CSD faculty and staff (as the latter transition into new facilities). The availability of this space for extended use by the psychology department will increase not only the training opportunities for WCU psychology students, and entrepreneurial opportunities for enhanced revenue generation for the department more generally, but at approximately 5,000 square feet, its availability for some types of research will reduce some of the research space problems identified above.

#### **b. Adequacy of Budget in Relation to Educational Mission**

Preliminary review of the budget indicates inadequate support for travel to professional conferences. However, informal conversations suggest that faculty are supported well by competitive travel funds provided by the Dean's and Provost's offices, to attend and present at conferences. Funds also appear insufficient for purchasing basic testing and assessment equipment and materials.

## **V. Summary of Strengths and areas for Improvement**

### **a. General Impressions**

Our overall impression of the Undergraduate and MA Psychology programs was highly positive. The Department boasts a qualified, dedicated, and enthusiastic faculty who work collaboratively to provide a quality experience for students. The department is a very collegial group with a strong, effective leader in Dr. David McCord. The balance of teaching, scholarship, and service in the programs matches well with the mission and focus of WCU. Students in both the MA and undergraduate programs spoke highly of the faculty, their courses, and the educational experiences they received. In addition, the Department provides important service to the University through their involvement in the Liberal Studies program, and by offering required courses for education students.

### **b. Strengths**

We noted many strengths of the program. These include:

- Energetic, engaged, enthusiastic faculty who are very involved in teaching and in providing research opportunities for students.
- Strong, effective departmental leadership. The faculty were uniform in their praise for Dr. McCord's collegial and effective leadership style.
- Departmental collegiality. The faculty work together as a unit, and seem to genuinely like and respect one another. The more experienced faculty actively mentor newer faculty.
- Student-faculty interactions. Students find their instructors and faculty advisors to be accessible and helpful.
- High-quality teaching. Students with whom we spoke praised the faculty as being good teachers; several of them mentioned that they chose psychology as a major after a positive experience in an early psychology class.
- The Department makes a valued and important contribution to both the Liberal Studies program and to Teacher Education courses.
- The Department is a highly-regarded member of the College of Education and Allied Professions.
- Departmental faculty are well-regarded as colleagues by other units in the University including the University administration; they are good "team players." who make important service contributions across the University.
- Faculty are proactive at providing research opportunities for undergraduates, and many undergraduate students engage in research and present at conferences.
- Faculty are actively engaged in scholarship. A third of the faculty have exceptionally high levels of scholarly productivity.
- Strong focus on research training in the MA program.
- High level of success at placing MA program graduates into PhD programs.

### **c. Suggestions for Improvements:**

#### **Undergraduate Curriculum:**

The structure and goals of the undergraduate curriculum have not been examined in a systematic way in many years. We recommend that faculty embark on a focused discussion of the structure of the curriculum and refer to the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate*



*Psychology Major* when considering changes to the curriculum. Faculty should strongly consider requiring courses in each of the four domains specified by the *APA Guidelines* (learning and cognition; individual differences, personality, social processes; biological bases of behavior; and development). At present, the biological bases of behavior appears to be one area of the curriculum that needs increased focus. In addition, the Department might want to consider including a curriculum component on careers in psychology. This might be a one-credit course, or a unit within a core course (e.g. Research Design and Analysis). Faculty also expressed concern that many students seem to forget skills learned in their Research Design and Analysis courses, so that they are unprepared for the research demands of the Capstone experience. Discussions of curriculum structure should also include thinking about ways to systematically infuse more research experience into courses taken in the “gap” between the Research Design courses and the Capstone.

Discussions of curriculum revision should be linked to a discussion of goals and objectives for the major, with an eye to considering how each course or set of courses contribute to the overall program objectives. Course learning goals and objectives should be included all course syllabi, and these objectives should link back to objectives for the major. Curriculum changes should also be linked to specific assessment measures.

#### **Assessment:**

The current mechanisms for assessment of the Undergraduate program may not be providing useful data that the Department can use to inform program changes. (See above.) We suggest that the Department seek out (or design) a better instrument to assess student content knowledge in psychology, one that is capable of detecting whether graduating students have gaps in their breadth of knowledge of the discipline. A senior exit survey that provides quantitative measures of student satisfaction will give the department more fine-grained information about student “likes” and “dislikes” than the current system of using focus groups. A quantitative instrument has another advantage, in that changes in student satisfaction can be more easily examined over time by comparing data across years. In this way, the department can track the effect of program changes they institute.

Similarly, graduate program outcomes should be identified, assessed, and separated out by area.

#### **Space Planning:**

Requests for additional space should be linked to planned curriculum improvements and to plans for increasing faculty and student scholarship and learning opportunities (see above). That is, the program should consider new research foci they wish to develop and new learning opportunities they wish to provide for students, and should develop a systematic plan for how new space will be used to facilitate reaching these goals. Currently, appropriate space to carry out experimental research is extremely limited. In addition, space for research in some areas (e.g. biopsychology, animal behavior, animal learning) is nonexistent. Space in the Speech and Hearing Center in the McKee Building is well-configured to meet some of the needs of the Psychology Department. A plan for the use of these and other future available facilities should be linked to plans for curriculum improvements and increased opportunities for students and faculty.

**Engaging Undergraduate Students:**

The Department should explore ways of increasing engagement and sense of community among their undergraduate students. Possibilities include:

- A departmental e-mail newsletter or student listserv to inform psychology majors about upcoming events, research opportunities, job or internship opportunities, etc.
- Departmental events to promote and recognize student research, for example, a Psychology Student Research Symposium at which students present posters and talks. This could also include MA students. In addition to recognizing student work, a side benefit of such an event is the increased visibility it provides for the Department across the campus and to external constituents.
- Events to recognize and celebrate student achievements. These might include an annual spring department awards ceremony or a psychology department reception for graduating seniors and their parents. Once again, these events could include both undergraduates and graduate students.
- Events to promote community among students and faculty. Possibilities include a psychology themed movie night each semester; weekly coffee break for students and faculty at Java City or an off-campus coffee house; weekly brown bag lunches with individual faculty members (on a rotating basis)
- Speakers. In addition to invited speakers from outside the campus, current department faculty can discuss their ongoing research, possibly with an eye to increasing undergraduate research participation.
- Career Advising events.

A more coordinated program of outreach to undergraduates can have several benefits, including more engaged students; attracting more students to participate in research (a stated goal of the program); and attracting more majors to the program. Events that draw students in and provide them with opportunities to interact with faculty and learn more about their major field of study are especially important when large numbers of students work while attending school.

**Website:**

The Department's website needs to be redesigned so that it is a more useful source of information for both students and outside constituents. A well-designed website is an important communication tool that can keep students (and others) informed about research opportunities, job and internship opportunities, guest speakers, upcoming conferences, registration deadlines, and other important events. In addition, the website is the public face of the department and its programs. External constituents, including prospective students, typically will form their first impression of a program based on looking at its website.

**VI. Recommendations**

Our principle recommendations, summarized from above, include the following:

- Systematically examine the undergraduate curriculum, with an eye to making specific revisions to align its structure more closely to current guidelines.
- Identify program objectives that clearly distinguish between graduate programs.
- Develop a plan for using any newly-available space by specifying how additional space will provide significant new opportunities for faculty scholarship and student learning.
- Develop assessment procedures that will provide the department with useful data that can inform specific program changes.

- Initiate programs to engage undergraduate students in departmental activities, with an eye to increasing student engagement, attracting majors, and engaging larger numbers of students in research.

The faculty of the WCU Department of Psychology are a talented, enthusiastic, and dedicated group. They are in an excellent position to implement these recommendations in ways that will build on and improve their already high-quality programs.