

**External Review Report for
Master of Science in Human Resources
College of Education and Allied Professions
Western Carolina University**

I. Introduction

- a. On March 30 and March 31, 2015, Dr. Lawrence Cozzens, Dr. Kevin Rose, Dr. Lisa Bloom, and Dr. David Kinner reviewed the Masters of Science in Human Resources degree program. The review team met with program faculty, program students, the Dean of Graduate School, the Dean of the College of Education and Allied Professions, the Department Head of Human Services, and the Human Services Student Support specialist. These meetings were open ended meetings in which participants provided their feedback regarding the Human Resources program and review team members asked questions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the program, support for the program and its students, and other related issues.

We have organized our review report according to the recommended format provided by the Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness. Thus, our report is comprised of the following sections: analysis of the program, analysis of the faculty, analysis of facilities and budget, summary of strengths and weaknesses, and summary of recommendations.

II. Analysis of Program

- a. **Curriculum.**

The curriculum of the Human Resources program seems well aligned with the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) competency standards. These competency standards are highly appropriate for students pursuing professional careers in the fields of human resources, organization development, training and development, and other related areas. The program takes the approach of developing HR professionals as leaders and for HR to be a strategic

partner keeping with current trends in the HR field. Given the connections between the curriculum and SHRM standards, the program may want to consider putting more emphasis on SHRM certification for program graduates as both professional development and a way of assessing student learning. The current SHRM-CP and SHRM-SCP designations offer students and alumni with limited experience in the professional the opportunity to acquire a professional certification. A professional designation reflects positively on the HRD program and enhances the careers of alumni. An opportunity also exists to establish study groups with current students and connect them with alumni who have earned the designation or are also studying.

The Human Resources faculty has articulated a mission to have global focus and have incorporated curriculum from a global perspective reflective of the strengths of the faculty. Even so, student practice and projects are regional. The program should consider more global experiences for students by expanding the nonprofit consultation model internationally. Also, the program should consider national or international marketing to diversify the student population. While the costs of the online program are higher for students who are not North Carolina residents, we believe that the tuition rates may still be appealing for students in other states.

Program faculty and students discussed the issue of class wait lists. There seems to be a tough balance between holding class size to a reasonable limit and the decisions to hire adjunct faculty. The high impact practices employed by HR faculty, such as consultations with nonprofits and problem based learning, would require class size that would allow for ample faculty interaction with students and adequate feedback for students. We advocate keeping class size at no more than 20 students and timely hiring of adjunct for courses with a reasonable wait list. This would ensure that faculty are able to maintain a quality learning environment and students are able to complete their degree in a timely manner.

Previous research (e.g. Tomei, 2006) suggests that online instruction creates

additional demands of faculty time and effort relative to traditional in-class instruction. Additionally, pedagogy and instructional strategies that necessitate high levels of student-faculty interaction are not only relevant for this population of students, but a desired aspect of a quality graduate program in HR (Garrison & Anderson, 2011). Increased class sizes may either necessitate a shift in the faculty's pedagogical approach or will place excessive workload burdens on course instructors. We encourage all parties involved in course enrollment size decisions to be mindful of the impacts this may have on both faculty and students.

The review team discussed potential growth of the HR program including potential barriers and benefits to growth. As is, the program has adequate faculty for the number of students. Having more applicants to the program has the benefit of increasing the pool of students, so that the most qualified could be admitted. An increased talent pool could also increase the size of the program if growth could be supported through additional university resources or other funding recourses such as external grants.

b. Student Body.

Students identified many strengths of the program including the support and accessibility of faculty. They liked the balance of the faculty as both scholars and practitioners, and they also mentioned the work with nonprofits as a major strength of the program. Students suggested an entry-level orientation to the program for students to help them learn how to be a graduate student and navigate the online environment. They also suggested an “outboarding” process or exit assistance that would help students know how to access resources after graduation. For example, current students have access to and often use resources provided by the library (including access to peer-reviewed journals), but do not have access after graduation. With this in mind, the program should consider what resources are available in practice and consider incorporating more of those resources into coursework. Some students were interested in the option of doing more in-depth research (or even a thesis) and more in depth study of the technical

side of HR such as Family Medical Leave and the Affordable Care Act. This coursework could take the form of workshops, either for single credit leading to a post-master's certificate or as "competency building" continuing education. The workshops should be pre-approved for re-certification credits by HRCI or SHRM. Instructors can be recruited from alumni and other industry sources, as terminal degree qualifications may not be necessary for continuing education courses. The profit generated by the workshops would be allocated directly to the HRD program.

It is notable that the program has a high percentage (approximately 18%) of African American Students, although it is not clear from this review why this might be. Nevertheless, we commend this program for making strides towards having a more diverse student body. With a strong emphasis on globalization, however, recruiting international students might help the program become truly more global. As part of outreach, the program might consider opportunities for students to do nonprofit work with international companies.

Suggestions for marketing of the program discussed by the reviewers included specific market targets for recruitment of students such as military. Also, the program should consider gathering information about where students are coming from for further recruitment efforts in those areas.

HR graduate students would benefit from the opportunity to apply for graduate assistantships to gain valuable experience working with faculty on HR related research and consultation projects. For example, a graduate assistant would benefit from the experience of working with the clinical practice (consultation with nonprofits) component. The lack of allocation of graduate assistantships was mentioned in the last program review. We would like to call attention to this point again. We recognize that the HR faculty do have graduate assistants, but these are students from other programs. Although faculty remarked that they appreciated having GA support, the review committee noted that GA

opportunities for HR students with HR faculty are not available. The HR program is a large program and these students are deserving of assistantship opportunities, in harmony with building a campus climate that is accepting and supportive of all students. Graduate assistant position(s) could be funded directly from revenues generated by fund raising activities mentioned under Alumni (following) and additional workshops (above).

One strength mentioned by students was internal networking among students. An alumni database would enhance networking opportunities for students and a virtual student SHRM chapter. The longevity of the HRD program has generated a large number of alumni that are employed by well-recognized companies and hold significant positions. Only the past five years of alumni have remained in contact with the program. The alumni base can be a strength of the program and benefit in multiple ways:

- i. Alumni advisory board - the purpose of this board would be to advise the program director in specific areas of focus, such as remaining relevant in the profession, establishing a network of alumni support and increased recruitment. The board should establish its own leadership team and be self-sustaining.
- ii. Referrals of future students by alumni in addition to the marketing efforts of new Director of Marketing.
- iii. Host an annual alumni networking fund raising event to support a graduate assistant scholarship.
- iv. The alumni can also lead to Regional SHRM chapter connections that provide on-going networking opportunities, potentially at lower cost than once a year conference.
- v. Mentoring program for current students.
- vi. Potential research opportunities for faculty and students that could produce published articles or presentations.
- vii. The Alumni database development can begin by researching through LinkedIn using a student worker and an Access database like the one

established by the Student Services Specialist in Human Services department.

c. Planning and assessment strategies

The collegiality of the HR faculty is a strength of the program. It is evident that all faculty participate in planning and assessment activities. Faculty discussed productive faculty meetings and collaboration in courses. Their blackboard courses are open to each other allowing for continual peer review and sharing of teaching resources. The review team commends HR for the use of Quality Matters to assess quality of online courses. Students did mention the similarity of all of the courses and articulated a desire for more variation in course design and course requirements. The program is urged to balance ease of use related to having similar structures in all classes with making each class distinct.

Required courses are appropriate to the curriculum. While it is apparent that students are practicing research and developing analytical skills, there is a disconnect between course syllabi and program goals. The review team suggests that the program align program goals with syllabi and documented student outcomes such as passing the SHRM exam and outcomes for analytical thinking and research methods (higher level learning outcomes). The program is encouraged to find meaningful assessment strategies that document student learning outcomes such as using rubrics to assess student outcomes.

III. Analysis of Faculty

a. Qualifications

Faculty are well qualified and have excellent credentials appropriate to the program. Each faculty brings a unique area of expertise and HR experience. We commend the program for recruiting faculty with international experience to broaden student learning and connection to practice. All of the stakeholders involved in this review were very complementary of the faculty and the great work that they are doing both in the classroom and in the community.

We commend the faculty for seeking adjuncts with critical experience in the HR field but recognize the SACS requirement for adjuncts to have a terminal degree (PhD in this context). We encourage faculty to seek creative solutions such as trying to identify potential alumni or others with allegiance to WCU that do have terminal degree that might be interested in teaching a limited number of courses. Students mentioned the value of having highly experienced HR people as faculty. Hence the HR program might also consider having an HR faculty instructor of record so that a highly experienced HR person can offer their experience and expertise to HR students.

b. Resources and Support

HR faculty indicated appropriate support for the rank, tenure, and promotion decisions. The Adjunct pay is below market standard and may impact the program's ability to get credentialed external adjuncts. The library holdings worked well for students and the library support is strong. Technology support is also strong.

In the context of this review, we heard discussion about where the Human Resources should be administratively in the College of Business rather than its current home the College of Education and Allied Professions. HR programs are found in both types of colleges throughout the United States, so we would argue that the comfort, support, and program identity would favor the program remaining in the College of Education and Allied Professions. With that said, the program may look to see if some students might benefit from shared coursework or synergies with the College of Business.

c. Teaching, Research/Creative Activity, and Service

Faculty are engaged and well-respected members of the academic community, particularly the Academy of Human Resource Development. Reviewers noted that it was impressive to see faculty members at primarily teaching institution to

be so engaged in research. The service of program faculty is also stellar. Students were very complimentary of the faculty noting their support, caring and accessibility. While we encourage seeking external funding especially to fund the clinical experience, we recognize it may be difficult to get grant funding in this field. It is noted that Dr. Germain received support through a course release to apply for external funding that would help facilitate HR clinical practice opportunities with non-profits. We encourage faculty to seek funding that helps provide outstanding engaged learning experiences for students.

The clinical practice experience clearly takes a lot of work but it is unique and valuable opportunity for students. The program is commended for this endeavor. Additionally, the service for the nonprofits that the clinical practice offers is highly important to the Steward's of Place elements of WCU's mission.

IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget

- a. Facilities are adequate. HR faculty mentioned the need for support in managing the clinical practice component of the program. Some administrative support and/or graduate assistant allocation to this component of the program is warranted. It is a strength of the program that provides critical experience to students and service to the region that could be enhanced and expanded through allocation of resources. With that said, the program should not only consider external funding, but also consider having an event that would bring students and alumni to campus to connect to WCU and possibly generate funds for the program.
- b. State regulations prohibit the university from charging for the pro bono consulting services provided to non-profit organizations. However, two options could be explored. Consulting services could be expanded to include for-profit organizations (possibly the employers of alumni), which might show their gratitude by making special donations to the program scholarship funds. In addition, the University has established a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) for the purposes of providing other services to the external marketplace. HRD

consulting services might be considered to be in competition and therefore prohibited but this could be another possibility to raise additional revenue to support a coordinator for the consulting practice.

V. Summary of program strengths and areas for improvement

a. Strengths

- i.** Outstanding faculty, excellent qualifications and records of research, teaching and service. They are very collegial and students had nothing but positive things to say. The size of faculty is appropriate given the current size of the program. They have added two full time faculty since the last program review where it was recommended. If the University wanted to significantly grow the program, more faculty would be required.
- ii.** The HR program has a very strong regional reputation. It is hidden gem of a program in this region.
- iii.** The Clinical Practice is a great model and strength of the program.
- iv.** The goal of globalizing the program is unique and an asset of the program.
- v.** Students are high quality, very professional and are very connected to practice.
- vi.** There is a great leadership of the program from Dr. Sherlock as program director as well as the department head of Human Services and Dean of the College of Education and Allied professions.
- vii.** The paradigm of the program in developing HR leaders through a strategic approach is commended.

b. Areas for Improvement

- i.** The program should work on better assessments for program goals.
- ii.** The program should also work to continue to build relationships with alumni to help with student placement after graduation, identifying potential adjunct faculty, doing fundraising, helping set up clinical practice opportunities, and advising the program on current trends and

directions in Human Resources.

VI. Summary of Recommendations

- a.** Keep the global focus and expand global experiences for students; recruit international students.
- b.** Continue discussion with all parties about the appropriate size of the program so that program size does not exceed faculty resources and capacity. In conjunction with this, maintain healthy class sizes (we recommend 20) so that students' learning is not impacted and the faculty maintain capacity to deliver excellent experiences.
- c.** Consider the overall experience of the students in the program and perhaps include an orientation and exiting experience for them.
- d.** Consider putting an emphasis on recruiting international students and developing student experiences in international contexts by expanding the current non-profit service model.
- e.** Allow students of this program to apply for GA positions.
- f.** Work on an alumni database and alumni contacts, alumni advisory board.
- g.** Explore ways to generate visibility of the program.
- h.** Balance variety of program offerings and pedagogy with consistency in delivery.
- i.** Consider incorporating SHRM certification into the program design. Some programs have successfully used the SHRM exam as the "comprehensive examination" for their students to graduate.
- j.** Develop meaningful ways to measure student learning outcomes. Consider linking this to SHRM certification.
- k.** Seek ways to increase the number of adjuncts with PhD credentials teaching in the program. Alternatively, develop a model whereby adjuncts without PhDs are partnered with full-time faculty to co-instruct courses.
- l.** Keep the program in the School of Education and Allied Professions but be aware of potential synergies with the School of Business and other entities on campus to provide students with learning opportunities or specific coursework.

- m.** Provide administrative support for the non-profit, clinical practice program. As the student body grows and as the clinical practice program expands internationally, additional support will be necessary to ensure its viability and sustainability.

References

- Garrison, D. R., & Anderson, T. (2011) *E-learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Tomei, L. (2006). The impact of online teaching on faculty load: Computing the ideal class size for online courses. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 14(3), 531-541.