

External Review Report for the Department of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton
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Reviewers

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Overview

This is the summary of a one day external review of the Department of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton. This report is based on meetings with Sheryl Fontaine, Dean of HSS, Jack Mearns, Chair, Department of Psychology, and other stakeholders including: Master's students, undergraduates, coordinators of the MA and MS programs, faculty for undergraduate advisement, tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty, lecturers, staff, alumni, and coordinators of the assessment and curriculum committees. This report was also based on the review of a number of documents including: Psychology Program Performance Review Self-Study (2014), Alumni Survey, a table of GRE scores and GPA information, among others. This document summarizes the meetings held with the stakeholders, and where relevant utilizes the documents supplied by the department.

Department Chair, Jack Mearns, Ph.D.

Dr. Mearns is serving in his sixth and final year of two three year terms as department chair.

Challenges:

According to Dr. Mearns, there is currently no direct compensation in the form of WTU credit for faculty that chair thesis committees for the MA or MS program or for faculty that have undergraduate students taking research units (Psychology 498). In lieu of direct WTU credit, Dr. Mearns has been able to give each faculty a course release per year. He also indicated that staffing at the level of the department administration needs to be increased. The department currently has 22 tenured faculty, 4 non-tenured faculty, and 53 lecturers. The department has 2143 undergraduate majors and more than 40 graduate students. Additional full or part-time staff is needed to help manage the department. Our interview with Dr. Mearns and faculty revealed that there was need for an administrative position outside of the department to help with post-award (external grant funding) fiscal management. Dr. Mearns also noted the faculty need to additional support to travel to professional conferences.

Department Highlights:

It was noted that students can currently take up to 50% of their required psychology classes online toward their psychology degree. He notes that the department has maintained an appropriate balance of online offerings in recognition that the online format is not a benefit for all students. He also notes that the online courses have helped alleviate space issues for on-ground classes. Importantly, Dr. Mearns states that the faculty are doing a good job as both teachers and scholars. He notes that the faculty are very collegial with each other and get along very well, and a do a good job of mentoring their students to present their work at conferences. As chair of the psychology department, Dr. Mearns currently receives 9 WTU of re-assign time for his work. He feels the re-assign time along with the 12-month appointment as chair is fair and adequate compensation that should be minimally maintained.

MA and MS graduate students

The review team met with approximately 20 students in the Master's of Arts Psychology and Master's of Science Clinical program.

Challenges:

The MA students noted the need for more classes. First, they wanted more core classes that are currently only offered on a rotated basis. They noted that depending on when they started the program,

they could miss out on taking a core class of their interest because it was not offered at the correct time. Second, they want a well defined core of stat courses that could potentially function as “minor” or program emphasis. The issue of a program emphasis for the MA also came up in our meeting with the alumni. The MA students noted that it would be helpful prior to starting the program to have an orientation to the program to review the requirements. The MS students noted that the structure of the substance abuse class was not conducive to learning the material. This class meets for two nine hour sessions on two Saturdays. The students note that there is too much material in a brief period of time to learn the material. The MA and MS students were concerned about the difficulty of finding faculty with interests similar to theirs to serve as chair for their thesis. The students noted that it was helpful to introduce faculty research interests to the students. However, the students mentioned frustration with faculty that introduced their research interests but were not currently taking students into their lab. The students noted that they wanted a brief seminar on how to apply to a Ph.D. program. However, it should be noted that some students mentioned getting mentoring on the Ph.D application process from their thesis chair. The students felt the structure of the classes should be clearly communicated

Highlights:

Both MA and MS students acknowledged it was easy to get courses needed to complete their programs. The students noted that the current joint classes were good and that overall the class size was reasonable. Although this section on student highlights is brief, overall the students were very positive about their experience in the program.

Undergraduate Students

The review team met with approximately 10 undergraduate students.

Challenges:

The students noted that there may be a lack of mentoring toward research for undergraduates. However, there seemed to be a difference between transfer and students admitted as freshmen. One student admitted as a freshman indicated mentoring toward research was good based on her experience with faculty in lower division courses. Transfer students felt they had very little time to prepare for a career in research because they were not made aware of the importance of research until their junior or senior year. The transfer students also noted that a research skills course might be needed to help them remedy skills they did not learn at the community college. The students wanted some sort of opportunity to hear from peers of similar backgrounds that have been successful in reaching their career goals.

Highlights:

The students felt very positive about the peer mentoring program. They noted that it helped them discover more about what a psychologist does. The transfer students felt very supported by the professors. That is, if they had difficulty with skills the professors were more than willing to work with them to improve. Overall, the students noted that professors were open and willing to help students.

Graduate Coordinators MA and MS Programs

Challenges:

Approximately 35-40 students need faculty mentors per year. As noted, in our meeting with the graduate students, there may be a problem for students to find mentors to work with. It was noted that one of the coordinators (Dr. Blackman) currently mentors students that do not have a mentor and appears to have a heavy mentoring load. It was noted that there was lack of 500 level classes in the MA program and that the faculty are looking into this issue.

Highlights:

The coordinators currently receive one course reassignment per term. The coordinator of the MS program felt this is adequate compensation. The MS coordinator notes that he is happy with the diversity of students and that approximate 2/3 of their students are recruited from other schools. He

also notes that they have not had a problem recruiting high-quality students for their program.

Undergraduate Advisement

The team met with the three faculty members assigned to advisement.

Challenges:

The faculty noted that it was difficult to advise students that transfer to Fullerton as juniors. The students also said this was a problem. The faculty claim that many students come to receive advising late. These student students miss out on key information that may have helped them with course selection or career preparation.

Non-tenured Faculty

The department currently has four tenure track faculty. All were present for the meeting.

Challenges:

The faculty noted a lack of clear communication for reassigned time during the tenure process. Some faculty noted that they were promised two course releases but only received one. Overall, the faculty indicated that a 3/3 load would be better given the expectations for research. This suggestion refers to the work load for pre and post tenure. They stated that the students are good but there is not always a match with the current mentors. The comment refers to the issue of a major that houses over 2000 students and only has 26 faculty. Thus, there is a higher demand for students to do research and seek mentors than the faculty can accommodate. Finally, the faculty noted that they needed more opportunity for intramural grant money that covers course release, summer research or travel funds.

Highlights:

Faculty stated they worked in a very collegial work environment and were genuinely happy with their co-workers. They are happy with the small class sizes and the quality of the students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Many of their students bring their life experiences into the classroom and make good use of their office hours. They suggested the RTP process is smooth and attainable. That is, they feel that they can meet the requirements to achieve tenure and feel supported in this process.

Tenured Faculty

Challenges: The faculty identified several challenges related to research. The faculty would like to see an increase in funds available for travel. They would like a minimum of \$1500 per year. Based on conference fees, hotel and travel, the current funding of \$600 to \$800 is not enough. They suggested that release time for writing grants would facilitate research productivity. They also noted that 2/2 work load with funds to support graduate students would increase research productivity. They wanted more pre award and post award fiscal management from administration. For example, they need to develop budgets for grants but do not have experience or adequate resources and guidance. Some faculty were frustrated that they received messages from the administration that grade inflation is not appropriate while at the same time being informed that students need to have better pass rates for classes that have been designated as “bottleneck” courses. They also felt there was more and more pressure to meet administrative requirements such as the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Assessment and Curriculum Committees

The team met with the coordinators of the assessment and curriculum committees (Dr. Marelich and Dr. Navarick, respectively).

Challenges:

The assessment committee faces the challenge of developing assessment procedures that maintain the academic freedom of the faculty. There is currently no capstone course for the department. A capstone course, if developed, could be used to assess student outcomes. The curriculum committee faced the

challenge of Psychology 101 being labeled as a bottleneck course. However, they have developed an intervention to help students who have trouble passing 101. One challenge is many students do not know that they are doing poorly and do not seek help.

Highlights:

The assessment and curriculum committee have been working together to identify courses that have student learning outcomes already embedded in the assignments. Although they have made good progress on this, they indicated that it might be helpful if the department worked on developing a capstone course to teach and reinforce the majority of the learning outcomes they have identified.

Lecturers

The team met with approximately 15 lecturers.

Challenges:

The lecturers mentioned a few serious challenges. They were concerned that, over time, their class sizes are getting larger. It is difficult for them when they receive short notice on the courses they are expected to teach during the semester. They would like more professional development courses. However, they shared that a recent class focused on their professional development was offered during a time when not all lecturers could attend due to their teaching schedules. They suggested the Department should hire a Senior Lecturer to organize professional development and build a more engaging and positive community for the lectures. They also want to see more part-time lecturer positions converted to full time lecturer. Some of the lecturers complained that the classrooms they were expected to teach in were very “dirty.”

Highlights:

The lecturers were very pleased with the support they received from departmental staff and the department chair. There were also pleased with the help graduate assistants and teaching assistants provide for their classes.

Alumni

The team interviewed alumni primarily from the MA and MS program.

Challenges:

It was noted that there should be a substantive majors or concentration areas for the MA program. Industrial/organizational and quantitative psychology were suggested as two possible options. The students wanted more preparation for jobs as some students did not want to go on to a doctorate. One MS student noted wanting more support and a better transition to the field. This comment focused on gaining more practice as a therapist. Some students in the MS program would like an option other than a thesis. This would be especially helpful for those who want to continue in PsyD program.

Highlights:

The students felt that serving as a GA or a TA was a good “connection” for coming back and teaching part-time at CSUF.

Staff

The team interviewed the staff members of the Department of Psychology.

Challenges:

The staff expressed that they have an increased workload because external grants are now managed in the department and the number of students has also increased substantially. Similar to the faculty, they recognize the need for someone in administration to be responsible for the fiscal portion of grants. The staff noted that there is limited space and several TAs, GAs, and lecturers need to have office space to hold office hours. They noted that there is a need for an additional staff member. The staff size has not increased in comparison to the faculty, lecturers, and students since 2006. At a minimum, they suggested that a new receptionist be hired.

Highlights:

They indicated that it was important to keep an IT position specially focused on the Department of Psychology. The IT person within psychology serves different roles than an IT person working at the university or college level. The IT person is responsible for the upkeep of computer equipment and programs used specifically by psychology for research and classes. The IT person also checks out equipment for use by faculty and students. If this position was held outside of psychology the response to students and faculty would not be timely nor would the response be relevant to the unique demands of the department.

Summary of Key Observations

The review committee concludes this brief report by providing a summary of the strengths and possible areas for improvement they have identified throughout this process.

Notable Strengths:

The Psychology Department demonstrated numerous strengths. We have identified many in detail in the narrative and want to summarize the prominent strengths related to personnel, facilities, and students. In terms of personnel, the department has a very collegial atmosphere, which was reported by all groups and observed by us throughout the review process. There is strong leadership from the chair, who has been responsive to the needs of faculty, staff and students. The administrative staff is extremely experienced and capable. The in-house IT coordinator is invaluable and has the expertise to not only maintain the computer labs but understands the multitude lab needs specific to psychology. Faculty members are excellent teachers, mentors, and researchers. The facilities on the 6th floor are new, very functional, and state of the art as the university has funded and recently completed the renovation. There are offices and labs for each tenured, tenure-track faculty member, addressing a major problem of lack of lab space cited in the previous PPR. There are computer labs and student classroom labs, although we did learn that these are used to capacity. The department has a large number of students (2,143) and continues to grow. The students, both undergraduate and graduates are diverse and of high quality. In terms of support for the students, there is a well-functioning peer mentor system and the advisors are available at the times needed by the students. The department has endeavored to meet the needs of the students by offering Saturday classes and making online courses both available and high quality. The student learning outcomes are clear and there is an ongoing assessment process in place.

Suggestions for Improving the Department:

Because of the success of this department, there are some associated needs in terms of personnel and student support. We would suggest the addition of one administrative staff member, providing more support for faculty travel and professional growth, and creating a position of coordinator for lecturers to be held by a lecturer for the purpose of building a strong and supportive community. We would also suggest that the college may want to consider additional support for external grants by hiring a grant administrator to handle the pre and post-award management, which seems to be consistent with the University Strategic Plan. We would also suggest that the department consider a better ways of conveying the importance of doing research to students early in their career. The department may want to consider increasing the number of substantive classes available on a regular basis and increase the number of statistics courses offered each semester for the MA students. In the admission of MA students, it might be helpful to have faculty members more involved so that there is some kind of research interest matching process before the students enter the program. Finally in terms of assessment of student learning outcomes we concur with the faculty that a capstone class for undergraduates should be considered. We also note that student learning goals are in place for the MA and MS programs but more systematic presentation of evidence of assessment would be helpful.