

Department of Psychology, Northwestern State University
External Reviewer's Report
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Prelude

This report summarizes my findings from a campus visit to the Northwestern State University on December 1-3, 2008 and a study of documents provided to me by the Department of Psychology before my visit. The purpose of this visit was to provide an external evaluation for the Department of Psychology. The report follows a format that focuses on major issues of importance for the program.

Curriculum

The Northwestern State University (NSU) Department of Psychology offers a bachelor of science degree, which is in line with 10% of departments nationwide (Perlman & McCann, 1999b), compared to a BA/BS option (46%) or BA only (45%). The psychology course selections are quite constrained within the degree, ensuring that students complete courses with both experimental/research and applied backgrounds.

The structure of the degree programs is fairly consistent with national trends. According to Perlman and McCann (1999b), the typical psychology program requires 34 credits, including an introductory course, statistics, and a capstone course. The NSU degree requires 45 hours of psychology courses, which is on the high end of requirements for general programs, but on target for degrees that offer specializations (44.2 hours). Given that NSU offers some specializations within the BS degree, the hour requirement seems justified. As far as requirements, the NSU program corresponds closely to Perlman and McCann's (1999b) description, as it requires an introductory, statistics, and capstone course. Common capstone experiences in psychology include a seminar or colloquium, history of psychology course, or a research/internship experience (Messer, Griggs, & Jackson, 1999). Interestingly, the NSU psychology program appears to incorporate all three types of capstone experiences within its curriculum, although only PSYC 4030 (Advanced General Psychology) is actually labeled as the capstone course for the department.

The courses in the psychology department are also relatively consistent with national trends. Perlman and McCann (1999a) conducted a wide-scale curriculum survey (400 departments) and listed the 30 most frequently offered psychology courses. The NSU psychology offerings include most of these top 30 courses, missing only Cognitive (#8), Human Sexuality (#21), Counseling (#22), Sensation and Perception (#29), and Comparative/Animal Behavior (#30). It is possible that other courses in the NSU curriculum relate to or cover some of these topics, such as Psychology of Gender (2250) for sexuality (plus, I noticed a Human Sexuality course listed in the Social Work courses), Physiological Psychology (3010) for comparative, and Applied Skills and Behavior Modification (4020) for counseling. In addition, NSU's curriculum includes some courses that are not listed in the top 30: Experimental Psychology: Motivation (3080), Positive Psychology (3200), and Ethics in Psychology (4510). Two of these three topics are either new (positive psychology) or emerging areas of emphasis (ethics) within the discipline. Motivation is an older topic, having dropped from 22nd to 31st in the frequency listings from 1975 to 1997.

I view the omission of Cognitive Psychology as a shortcoming of the NSU curriculum. The area of cognition is perhaps the “hottest” area within psychology today, rivaled only by neuroscience. Thus, I would recommend the department consider adding that course. If there are no current faculty who can teach such a course, it might be possible to hire a faculty member who could teach both cognition and sensation/perception, which would allow the department to add two courses missing from the top 30. If that possibility became a reality, I would recommend creating a 4-course menu (Experimental Psychology: Learning, Experimental Psychology: Motivation, Experimental Psychology: Cognition, Experimental Psychology: Sensation and Perception) from which students would choose one course (or more, if the department chooses). This change would allow the curriculum to be more up-to-date, plus it would give students another choice point in their curriculum. Currently, students have exceptionally few choices in their major, and they have some scheduling difficulties with some courses (e.g., PSYC 3020). This change would remove the significant omissions in NSU’s psychology coursework.

A positive aspect of the curriculum is that there is a wide variety of courses offered, which gives students ample opportunities to sample advanced topics in the discipline other than merely the standard areas. However, the low number of choices makes it difficult for students to take courses beyond those that are required. I would be curious about whether enrollment numbers in optional courses are high enough to justify offering them. Has the department considered the possibility of loosening the major requirements so that students might have the flexibility to choose a courses or courses? If the faculty do consider allowing some choice, they must be careful not to make outcomes assessment become a problem. The menu I mentioned in the previous paragraph, for example, would have different content, but could have some common outcomes dealing with, for example, the use of research approaches for gathering information.

Finally, I commend the department for offering (and requiring) PSY 2040 (Psychology as a Profession) to help majors with important issues relating to the unique features of a psychology major. This type of course is becoming increasingly popular in departments across the country, with over a third of departments offering a similar course (Landrum, Shoemaker, & Davis, 2003).

Administration of the Program

The strength that I see in the current administration is the fact that one person is not charged with leading the department *and* the undergraduate program—each has a separate person in a leadership position. This type of separation is good for both the chair and the undergraduate program. It is not clear whether there is a coordinator for the clinical master’s program; that is an option that the department may wish to consider. Although I saw no sign of it at NSU, a weakness that I have seen in other departments is the undergraduate program not being treated equivalently with the graduate programs. It is sometimes the case that undergraduates get lost in the shuffle of a department with graduate programs—having an undergraduate coordinator and graduate director who are equals lessens the possibility of this problem.

Assessment of Student Learning

From the Program Review document that I received, it appears that assessment of student learning may be in its infancy for the department. The department has developed six Expected Learning Outcomes and has linked those ELOs to specific sections on a locally developed test or to specific course-embedded assessments. However, other than overall scores on the locally developed test relating to a broad general knowledge ELO, no data were available in the report with which to assess student learning. This lack of data is why I believe that assessment may be a fairly new process for the department. The ELOs seem appropriate for students who will complete a major in psychology at NSU. However, there is one ELO that is not well-aligned with its potential outcome data. The third ELO states that students should “Gain understanding of human behavior, cognition, and emotion.” I found this ELO interesting given the lack of a cognition course in the department. Also, the potential outcome data for this ELO are listed as sections on learning, motivation, and abnormal psychology on the local exam. Thus, I see a mismatch among the ELO, the coursework available in the department, and the sections of the exam used to measure this ELO.

The department has done a good job of linking 10 goals and outcomes developed by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Undergraduate Psychology Major Competencies (2002; <http://www.apa.org/ed/pcue/taskforcereport2.pdf>) to its courses (pp. 11-12 of the program review document). A couple of the goals (4, 9) have a significant percentage of their linked courses as electives, so I wonder if those goals are being met well by the department. There is an aspect of this section of the report that I found odd—although the department seems to place emphasis on the APA learning goals and outcomes, there does not seem to be much correspondence between the ELOs and the learning goals and outcomes. It seems logical to me that there would be a closer matching of the two. Further, it is not clear to me how (or if) the program’s ELOs, mission, and Continuous Improvement Plan (Appendix E) interact or are related. Again, I believe that ideally all of these documents would be closely linked and coordinated.

One aspect of the curriculum is a strength as far as assessment is concerned. Given the small amount of flexibility students have in choosing courses within their major, I have no concerns about whether all majors will take curriculum paths that include all of the outcomes valued by the department. If students could take a set of courses that did not include all outcomes, then the department would have to rethink its assessment plans, as I mentioned previously.

Based on the program review report, it is premature to draw any conclusions about the achievement of program goals and outcomes. When the department analyzes the remaining data from the local test and course assessments, it will get a better idea about the student outcomes relative to the program’s ELOs.

Given the relative youth of the department’s assessment program, I will suggest a resource that the department may wish to consider in the dual processes of setting department outcomes and assessing them. I have already mentioned the American Psychological Association taskforce’s (2002) learning goals and outcomes for undergraduate psychology programs. The taskforce also developed an assessment guide to assist departments in this process (American Psychological

Association, 2003). This guide covers the activities of setting goals, determining outcomes, and assessing those outcomes, and it should give a background from which the department can build and further develop.

Faculty/Staff

As is the case with most psychology departments, the credit hour production is quite high for NSU. This production, of course, is a two-edged sword. It has the benefit of producing a large number of majors and high demand for courses. On the other hand, the high demand for courses can be a drain on faculty resources and the ability to offer specialized courses. This situation is clearly true at NSU and is complicated by the full set of online offerings by the department. The combination of a popular major that is offered in both on campus and online venues creates an exceedingly high student demand, which raises the need for more faculty to offer courses. As reported in the program review report, the department used 26 adjuncts (most for multiple sections) in 2007-08. This figure means that the department's staffing is as heavy with adjuncts as it is with full-time faculty. Also, the number of part-time FTEs has grown appreciably since 2004 (going from 9.25 to 14.5 and 14). These numbers are likely a response to the 54% increase in psychology majors from 2002 to 2007. Although a good deal of this increase might be due to online students, adequate faculty staffing is still needed to deal with those students. Thus, the department definitely needs additional faculty lines to help deal with this demand and to provide the faculty resources that are necessary for the department to offer both on-campus and Internet courses. It seems rather pointless to suggest a specific final number of faculty that would be needed to get a better balance between full-time and adjunct faculty because of the realities of budgeting in these times. However, I would urge an increase of two faculty for the department as soon as is possible, with other additions as they become possible. Of the six doctoral-level faculty, only one is an experimental psychologist. Of course, the department does have a clinical master's program, which partly explains the large number of clinical psychologists. Still, this ratio is highly unbalanced compared to most departments, which would likely have a minority of clinical psychologists. This ratio would seem to me to cause problems in the ability to offer the statistics and research-oriented courses that are some of the discipline's basic building blocks. This problem will become acute when the long-serving experimental psychologist retires in the not-too-distant future.

From my perusal of faculty credentials and productivity reports, the faculty have adequate teaching credentials. Because of difficulty attracting faculty, however, some faculty are teaching somewhat out of field. The scholarly production of the faculty is not high in terms of publications—there is more of a focus on conference presentations, but that is probably a function of heavy teaching loads, Internet teaching, lack of lab space, and the fact that several faculty do not have research/terminal degrees. However, I find it unrealistic to have substantial research expectations with 12-15 hour teaching loads. Also, according to the department's report, the institutional support for research is not particularly strong. One additional factor that likely reduces research and publication is the strong service orientation of the department. As noted in the review document, the NSU psychology faculty are particularly dedicated to both teaching and service.

The faculty are a clear strength of the department—this was evident to me both from talking to faculty and to students. The faculty are clearly dedicated to teaching and to students; interestingly, the students actually recognize this fact, which is somewhat unusual. I have conducted close to a dozen department reviews, and students invariably complain about advising (much like they complain about cafeteria food, no matter what they are served). At NSU, the students complimented the faculty on their advising, which is unheard of. Thus, I believe the faculty are doing a good job with students, which is their main responsibility. However, the strong commitments to students, teaching, and service do cause some problems in the research area; faculty are stretched so thin that it is difficult to work their research in, particularly given the lack of facilities and lack of support that they perceive for research. I should point out that this problem is only a problem to the extent that research becomes an important emphasis at NSU.

Another strength of the department is its fully online degree program. This is no small feat to accomplish and maintain, particularly with heavy teaching loads. It does appear to me that the online teaching load is factored into the faculty's workload. However, the administration should consider some form of workload credit or compensation for faculty who are stewards for a course. The workload involved in monitoring other faculty's teaching, many of whom are not even in the geographical area, is substantial.

From what I saw during my visit, the staffing situation appeared marginally adequate at best: The number of faculty for one administrative assistant is fairly heavy. This situation should be monitored closely because any growth in faculty would make this situation less than adequate.

Resources and Support Services

The department's physical space is far from adequate. Faculty members' office space varies considerably, with some housed in spaces approximating large closets. The notion of having research space appears to be a luxury. The classroom situation is also less than desirable, as the department has only two dedicated classrooms it can schedule as it needs. Given the size of the department (in terms of both faculty and majors), this situation creates great difficulty in scheduling. Many classes have to be scheduled away from the department in other departments' classrooms. Finally, if scholarly productivity is truly going to be emphasized in the promotion and tenure processes, the department needs some dedicated research space. The administration should work with the department to alleviate these situations.

The department appears to be "living on the edge" when it comes to teaching resources. The department has difficulty accessing PowerPoint equipment for classrooms outside their building. This situation comes about because of the lack of dedicated classrooms in Bienvenu Hall. Other departments are much more likely to share classrooms that are not set up with technology. Some of the department's technology equipment is not in good repair (e.g., SmartBoard in Bienvenu 330); much of the other equipment is nearing the end of its life cycle. I view this situation as quite ironic, given the department's pioneering status in offering a fully online degree program. The problems with technology should be addressed as soon as possible so that on-campus students can have access to technology-based teaching as the online students do.

Conclusion

NSU's Department of Psychology is somewhat like rubber band or watch spring that is being wound tightly. For some time, the rubber band and spring continue functioning just fine—the department does a lot of good things despite some of the shortcomings that surround it. However, over time and with continued winding tighter and tighter, the rubber band and spring will break and cease to function. That is overly dramatic for an entire department—it will not cease to function. However, it may cease to function as effectively as it has with repeated and continued stressing. The department is balancing on an extremely thin fulcrum at the moment, with its lack of resources, high student and teaching load, its dedication to teaching and service, and so on. With this delicate balance, a small change can create a tipping point—perhaps another faculty member leaves and cannot be replaced, someone retires and is difficult to hire another faculty member with the same expertise and dedication, someone leaves the department for an administrative position and the budget does not cover the cost of a replacement. Providing the department some of the resources that I have mentioned in the report could provide some insulation against one particular event (such as I have mentioned) creating a “state of emergency” for the department.

Specific Recommendations/Issues to Consider

This list is a compilation of recommendations made throughout this report.

1. Consider adding Cognition or Cognitive Psychology to the curriculum.
2. Consider adding Sensation and Perception to the curriculum.
3. If the department accomplishes #1 and/or #2, consider developing a menu of Experimental Psychology content courses (Learning, Motivation, Cognition, Sensation and Perception) and giving students an option within that menu.
4. Consider whether virtually all courses must be specified (required) within the major requirements. Can the department figure out a way to allow some choice for students? At the same time, the department needs to ensure that students will still derive the same outcomes from the program (for assessment purposes).
5. Should there be a program coordinator for the clinical master's program?
6. Ensure that ELOs are aligned with outcome data.
7. Examine the APA goals and outcomes to ensure that students get adequate coursework to develop the desired outcomes (elective courses may not be sampled by enough students to achieve those outcomes).
8. Consider an alignment of the departments' ELOs, the APA goals and outcomes, and the department's Continuous Improvement Plan. Having too many different plans with too many different goals can result in less momentum for planning and assessment.
9. Consider using APA taskforce's assessment cyberguide to help with assessment.
10. Add 2 faculty members as soon as possible. To achieve more balance in departmental faculty, these additions should have experimental/research specialties.
11. Ensure that faculty receive credit of some sort for serving as stewards for online courses.
12. Address deficiencies in departmental facilities.
 - a. Faculty need standard office space.
 - b. Department needs more dedicated classroom space.

- c. Department needs dedicated research space, if scholarship is a major factor in tenure and promotion.
13. Address department deficiencies in technological teaching resources.

References

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