

Two-Year Progress Report of the Department of Psychology

(April 2015)

Introduction

The self-study prefatory to the review of the Department of Psychology was completed in August 2010. The site visit by the review team was conducted November 15-16, 2010. The review team submitted its report in February 2010. The Department's initial response to correct factual errors was submitted in April 2011; the final response was submitted in May 2011. The academic program review report was approved by Senate Undergraduate Council in March 2012 and was subsequently presented to Senate. The present report is being submitted in April 2015 and describes progress made in the undergraduate program since the review process was completed.

The Undergraduate Program

The Psychology undergraduate programs are large and successful. At present, 107 students are enrolled in the 3-year General Psychology program and 147 in the 4-year General Psychology program. There are 566 students enrolled in the Honours Psychology program, 57 of whom are in the B.Sc. stream. Thus, about 70% of our 820 students are in Honours, with some of those in the General program hoping to gain admission to Honours. In June 2014, among the degrees awarded in Psychology, there were 24 3-year General degrees, 27 4-year General degrees, and 132 Honours degrees. There are presently 350 students in the Psychology Minor, with 165 having graduated in June 2014. Our student : faculty ratio of 43:1 is one of our greatest challenges.

Responses to Recommendations

Recommendation 1. *That future self-study reports include assessment data regarding teaching activity relative to other academic units, and that CVs provide a brief indication of area of research interests and expertise.*

We would certainly be willing to provide more comparative information from the Faculty of Arts in future self-studies, assuming that the self-study guidelines were revised by the Provost's office. In future, we will add a brief description of each faculty member's research interest and expertise, likely as a single summary sheet rather than on individual CVs, so that all of the information is in one place.

Recommendation 2. *That members of the Department collectively develop a strategic plan that articulates and justifies future directions, particularly regarding faculty hiring.*

We have always had a strategic plan for hiring, and this is revisited every year by our elected Executive Committee. We function as a set of six Research Areas, with each responsible for

hiring when a position becomes available due to retirement or departure. Our six Areas are quite normative in comparison to other Psychology Departments around North America so this works well, particularly given the genuine cooperation within the Department. Were an incremental position to become available (a highly unlikely event in these fiscal times), our Executive Committee—with input from all of the Areas—would decide how best to allocate it. We have been fortunate indeed to have had the continuing active support of the university administration with respect to replacing positions in the Department.

Recommendation 3. *That the Department institute a formalized system of assigning senior-professor mentors for tenure-track faculty.*

We had long had an informal mentoring arrangement within the Six Areas; at the time of the review, we were already setting up a mentoring arrangement for all junior faculty members. This system has now been in place for several years and is working well. The Chair also holds periodic meetings with pre-tenure faculty members to acquaint them with key aspects of the operation of the Department and the university, especially on matters related to career progress. Note that we also mentor all new sessional instructors in the Department by assigning them an experienced faculty member as a resource.

Recommendation 4. *That the Department ensure measures are in place to continue its trajectory of research excellence, and to provide faculty (particularly young faculty) with the support they need to ensure their success in external grant competitions.*

Of the Departments of Psychology at major universities in Canada, we believe we have been among the best treated by their universities. Of our 41 tenure-stream faculty (there are also now two Lecturers), currently 9 are pre-tenure. This infusion of new young colleagues has been wonderful for the Department, and these new colleagues are very active researchers who we are confident will become leaders in the field. Start-up funds provided by the Faculty of Arts and the university are competitive (in Canada) and new faculty are given a one-course teaching reduction in their first year to assist in establishing their teaching and their research. Laboratory renovations are carried out with Department assistance. We note that in our two tenure-stream hires last year we were able to entice two faculty members from strong American programs to accept our offers and this year we hired a senior faculty member from a top Canadian university; the same success has characterized other recent hires.

Recommendation 5. *That the Department consider hiring one or more continuing lecturers.*

At the time of the review, there was one continuing Lecturer in the Department. With his reduction in course load and impending retirement, we hired a Lecturer to replace him (effective July 1, 2014). As well, with the pressures of the undergraduate program being particularly acute in our Clinical Area, where the graduate program places high demands on resources, we hired as of July 1, 2013 a Clinical Lecturer. We are optimistic that both of these appointments, currently 2-year limited contracts, will be made continuing appointments.

Recommendation 6. *That the Department hold regular faculty meetings.*

The Department is divided on this issue but it appears that the majority prefer not having faculty meetings. To move toward addressing this recommendation, we now have more regular meetings of our elected Executive Committee (with representatives from each of the six Areas of the Department). The agenda is provided in advance to the entire Department and extensive minutes are provided shortly after each meeting to the entire Department. Consideration is being given to beginning a once-a-term Town Hall meeting, possibly to start in the 2016-2017 academic year.

Recommendation 7. *That the Department ensure competitive offers can be made to PhD-track students in the master's program, and work to have more students transfer into the PhD program within one year.*

Graduate funding continues to be our most important challenge and we look forward eagerly to a time—hopefully in the very near future—when we can write letters of acceptance to applicants offering a competitive 5-year funding package for the PhD. This has been discussed in the university now for several years without resolution. Our competition (e.g., Western and Toronto) are making 5 and 6 year offers with better funding packages, and we certainly are losing top applicants to these programs. Note that only a very small number (about a half dozen) of our 115 graduate students are international students.

Recommendation 8. *That the Department abandon the requirement of gender balance in proctoring of midterm exams.*

This was an error explicitly noted in our “corrected factual errors” response. We had in fact not been requiring gender balance in this situation for a number of years.

Recommendation 9. *That the Department encourage faculty members to include a library orientation session as a component of their courses, and make more effective use of the library liaison program.*

Several of our courses, most notably our general methods course in second year (Psych 291), now include library orientation sessions and the liaison librarian is a weekly presence in the Department, announced by a departmental email each week. Our Faculty Teaching Handbook emphasizes the availability of these services.

Recommendation 10. *That the University rationalize its classroom resources and quickly construct, or make available, classroom spaces that reflect and support demand.*

We certainly agree with this recommendation but, of course, have no control over this resource. The ongoing implementation of the new scheduling software may assist with this problem, but what is really required is the addition of more classroom space of various

configurations. For Psychology, the dire shortage of classroom space for both large and smaller classes directly impedes our ability to maintain flexibility in our course offerings as per **Recommendation 18**, to meet the needs both of our Majors and of those in other Departments and Faculties who look to us for service teaching. Because of a shortage of suitable teaching space, we struggle to adhere to the directive of the Faculty of Arts that we not impose limits on the number of Majors admitted each year. At the senior levels, faculty often must hold classes in rooms that are too small and which contain substandard furnishings.

Recommendation 11. *That the Department be authorized to fill the position of research administrator.*

We did in fact fill this essential position in June 2013 upon retirement of the person who previously held the position. It is an essential position for our research.

Recommendation 12. *That the Department (a) develop norms for typical grade distributions at each level, and (b) institute the reporting and monitoring of grade distributions in undergraduate courses.*

We had at the time—and continue to have—overall norms for grades at each level of our program, although these are not publicized. Discussion about reporting grade distributions for each class to the Chair has occurred in our Executive Committee. The Chair currently is notified, either by the staff handling our undergraduate courses or by the Associate Dean, Undergraduate, in the Faculty of Arts when grades in a course appear to be out of line, and the Chair then meets with and discusses this with the instructor.

Recommendation 13. *That the Registrar's Office revise the format of student transcripts to include class size and class average grade.*

We, of course, have no control over this activity. Our understanding is that no such changes have occurred although we do agree with the sentiment behind this recommendation.

Recommendation 14. *That the Department phase out the 3-year General BA degree program in Psychology.*

We have not phased out the 3-year General BA degree program in Psychology, and do not at this time have a plan to do so; this would of course have to occur at the level of the Faculty and university, not at the level of the Department. We currently see this program as serving a significant subset of our students who wish to go on to college programs and the like.

Recommendation 15. *That the Department encourage increased emphasis on, and assessment of, written and oral communication skills in 1st- and 2nd-year courses and in 3rd-year content courses.*

We wholeheartedly agree that there is a need for us to increase emphasis on literacy and communication skills in the undergraduate curriculum, including in Psychology. With the scale of our first-year and second-year courses (and indeed even a significant number of our third-year courses), and with the pressures from many courses on TA assignments among our graduate students, this recommendation is very difficult to implement, and is a source of frustration for us. We have focused our limited TA resources primarily on our second-year methods course (Psychology 291), our second-year statistics course (Psychology 292), and our suite of third-year laboratory courses, making it harder to find ways to increment written and spoken projects elsewhere in the program. We see these second-year and third-year courses as meeting the goal expressed in the review of “designated specific required courses at each level as writing/communication intensive.” The Faculty of Arts currently is discussing how to provide a richer first-year experience for students, including implementation of writing courses; the intention is to bring these on line as soon as is feasible, optimistically by the 2016-2017 academic year. In response to Plan Standardization in the Faculty of Arts, we in Psychology are presently engaged in a significant redesigning of our undergraduate program and we hope to be able to extend the writing experience to the later years as well, possibly by introducing a scientific writing course at the third year level, although we have only begun this particular discussion. In fourth year, students who do the capstone senior honours thesis already have an extensive writing experience, but we are also introducing a new capstone course for students who do not do a thesis; this course, intended to be introduced in 2017-2018, also will involve more extensive writing. Our biggest hurdle, of course, is the high student : faculty ratio.

Recommendation 16. *That the Department either (a) drop the research apprenticeship programs or (b) revise the course requirements of the research apprenticeship program to include an intellectual product that would be graded on a percent basis and ensure a valuable research learning experience for the students (this is the preferred direction).*

We agree that our apprenticeship courses require some scrutiny to ensure that students in these courses are able to produce worthwhile intellectual projects and that comparable work is required of all students taking these courses. We are compiling data so that we can understand how the apprenticeship courses are being used at present, and we plan to revise the intent and the descriptions of these offerings so that not only will they be of greater benefit to our students but they will also help to address communication and literacy issues, as per **Recommendation 15**. Again, optimistically, changes would be in place for the 2017-2018 academic year.

Recommendation 17. *That the Department consider ways to better publicize thesis supervision opportunities and to match faculty and student interests, and to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to find optimal supervisor matches.*

Over the past two years, we completely revised our departmental website to conform to the new university-mandated structure. There now is much more “active” content, and a much flatter and clearer structure that will assist students in finding opportunities in laboratories in the Department. In so doing, we have also updated our Undergraduate Student Handbook to

make this process clearer. During the regular school year, there are over a hundred students working as RAs in our labs, plus there are about 75 students working on their senior honours theses. We assign one faculty member full time to the thesis course, assisting with all aspects of the thesis, including finding a supervisor for each qualified student who wishes to do a thesis. We raised the minimum grade average for doing a thesis from 80 to 82 and no longer permit any exceptions; this increase in the quality of the applicants to the thesis program has made finding faculty-student matches much easier.

Recommendation 18. *That the Department consider ways to enhance flexibility in curriculum sequencing to better accommodate the needs of co-op and other students in Psychology.*

Several changes will help to accomplish this goal. With the advent of Plan Standardization in the Faculty of Arts, a concerted effort is under way to simplify programs, which should be in place in Fall 2018. Reducing required courses for Honours from 18 to 16—the essence of Plan Standardization—should increase flexibility. We are also increasing the availability of on-line (distance education) versions of some of our larger courses. This began over the past 5 years or so, but is slow because of very limited funding for the development of on-line courses. As well, we are optimistic that the new scheduling software will assist students in creating timetables that provide better sequencing of their courses. We are concerned, though, with the plan to admit unlimited students to Co-op in Honours Arts because we are certain that our current limit of 25 students in Psychology Co-op will rise, possibly dramatically, and we worry about the availability of relevant co-op jobs as well as about the implications for additional Spring course offerings.