

External Review Narrative
Psychology Department, UT-Chattanooga
Undergraduate Program

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I. Learning Outcomes

The Psychology Department at UT Chattanooga (UTC) has a strong, creatively-designed and flexible Bachelor of Science program. Although there are no comprehensive program ranking for undergraduate programs in Psychology, UTC clearly has a strong program with a comprehensive curriculum and a rich student experience.

The department has the goal of “enhancing knowledge of psychological principles and practices through scholarship, rigorous research, and meaningful applications of our science”. At the undergraduate level, the department has appropriately instantiated this goal in the program’s learning outcomes.

The curriculum is consistent with the American Psychological Association’s (APA) recently revised guidelines for the undergraduate major. Undergraduate students are exposed to all of the foundational areas of discipline specific knowledge established by the APA. Student learning outcomes map onto those suggested by the APA.

The Psychology Area Concentration Achievement Test (ACAT) is used as an independent assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes. This test is widely used by Psychology departments around the country. As in many institutions, scores tend to be low because, from the students’ perspective, this is “no-stakes” testing. Nonetheless, scores can be used to compare student achievement of learning outcomes over time, and particularly before and after major program revisions. It is clear from the scores of students at UTC that program revisions made between 2012-13 and 2017-8 that thoughtful program revisions have positively impacted student achievement of learning outcomes.

Recommendation 1: *Greater specificity in student learning outcomes within the discipline-specific knowledge domains (e.g. social processes, learning and cognition) might allow program faculty to better evaluate the role of particular content courses in achieving student learning outcomes.*

Information from alumni would be informative. However, the costs of collecting of such information at the department level is likely to outweigh the benefits and should be part of a larger university effort.

Collection of information from prospective employers is typically quite difficult in psychology programs, even when universities have an organized effort to collect such data because psychology baccalaureate degree holders are likely to find employment in a very diverse array of occupational categories. Thus, a focus on development of employment-related skills is more fruitful. At UTC, internship experiences are central to the curriculum, and positive feedback from internship sites provides evidence that the program has been successful in fostering the development of these skills.

Recommendation 2: *The current practicum evaluation feedback provided by internship sites is appropriately brief; the program does not want to burden internship sites with providing feedback. But a refinement of the form to provide greater focus on employment-related skills might be helpful in assessing the program's achievement of fostering development of these skills.*

II. Curriculum

As noted above the undergraduate curriculum is based on the APA guidelines for the undergraduate major. Thus, it is appropriate to the level and the purpose of the program. Course offerings and sequencing enable students to achieve the outcomes typical for graduates of an undergraduate psychology program.

The program recently underwent thoughtful revision in order to achieve consistency with the APA's revised guidelines. As suggested by APA, critical thinking skills, research skills, statistical knowledge, and written and oral communication are central to the curriculum. Foundational courses are provided on a reasonable rotation to meet student needs, although there may be a relatively high number of specialized courses.

Recommendation 3: *The department may want to evaluate the number of offerings of specialized courses in the context of a high faculty teaching load.*

Students reported that they have difficulty getting into courses and that there is sometimes a lack of flexibility in scheduling. These concerns are common in large departments and are probably exacerbated by the high student to faculty ratio.

The department has recently begun to offer more online coursework. Support for online teaching appears to be strong although faculty may be burdened by the required criteria for

creating an online course. Reducing these burdens would allow more coursework to be taught in an online format which is likely to be attractive to students, especially non-traditional students.

One of the greatest strengths of the program is the provision of a unique set of applied experiences for undergraduate students with three distinct options: Internship, teaching or research. Each of these options have strong dedicated faculty support to help tie it to the core curriculum. Students reported a high level of satisfaction with these experiences and they see these experiences as important pathways to employment or post-baccalaureate study. Students report that the practicum experience is time-consuming, but the required hours are very consistent with workload demands in other courses.

Only the practicum experience is incorporated into faculty workload. Therefore, it is not surprising that a relatively small portion of students engage in independent study (research with a faculty member) compared with the other options. This is unfortunate because mentored undergraduate research with faculty members can be a very important component of application to post-baccalaureate programs as well as provide students with identifiable workforce skills. However, given the high faculty workload, it is difficult for faculty members to take on this responsibility “out of hide”, especially if they see students as needing additional preparation before being ready for mentored research activities.

Recommendation 4: *Develop a staffing plan and a model for faculty workload that incorporates high impact practices, like mentored undergraduate research as part of the workload.*

Faculty members report receiving good professional development support for online teaching from the teaching center, but are simultaneously overburdened with requirements for creating online courses. This burden, in combination with the fact that the use of revenue generated by online teaching is highly constrained seems likely to limit the growth of online teaching in the future.

Recommendation 5: *Maintain support, but decrease administratively-imposed burdens and increase incentives for online teaching.*

III. Student Experience

Undergraduate students were enthusiastic about the advising support that they receive and reported that is excellent in quality. However, students also reported a need for mentorship from faculty members that is focused on professional development: application to graduate school, career options, etc. Currently, some students reported develop mentoring relationships

with faculty members, but it is not systematic and some students do not develop such relationships on their own.

Recommendation 5: *Although academic advising could still happen centrally, the department might consider assigning a faculty mentor to all students at some point (e.g., beginning of junior year) who could provide advice on graduate school and career options.*

As noted above, applied professional opportunities are rich. However, somewhat surprisingly, the department does not seem to have systematically considered the curricular and advising needs of pre-health students (e.g., pre-med, pre-physical therapy, pre-occupational therapy). The social and behavioral sciences have experienced increasing prominence in health profession admissions (e.g., items related to the social and behavioral sciences now comprise 25% of MCAT questions). Attention to the intersection of the social and behavioral sciences with health professions would benefit pre-health students. However, the current faculty-student ratio probably does not allow for the department to take on this responsibility without additional support.

The department acknowledges the important role of travel support in student professional development and has managed to provide adequate support.

IV. Faculty

Faculty credentials are appropriate and meet SACSCOC specifications. A wide range of sub-disciplinary expertise is present and helps to support the undergraduate teaching mission. Faculty members receive considerable support for professional growth in teaching through the center for excellence in teaching. Assessment of teaching through student evaluations is much like that used at other institutions, but could be supplemented with a systematic peer evaluation of teaching for formative use.

Faculty scholarly productivity--as measured by publications and acquisition of external funding is high for an institution at this level--especially considering the high teaching loads. Clearly, the faculty have the ability to engage in a high level of scholarship. Much of this scholarship is applied research that addresses the needs of the community and the region. However, the total number of faculty lines is inadequate for the number undergraduate majors and this inadequacy limits growth in scholarship. In addition to the limitations imposed by high faculty workload, the relatively small number of faculty lines limits sub-disciplinary overlap. Some overlap can be helpful for growth of collaborative research projects which can eventually pave the way for more successful funding opportunities as well as richer opportunities for student research.

Recommendation 6: *Even a small increase of one or two faculty lines, in addition to maintenance of existing lines with retirements would ease the heavy teaching workload responsibilities of the faculty and allow for growth in scholarly activities and the potential for an increase in externally funded projects.*

In addition to limitations imposed by teaching workload, faculty scholarly productivity is limited by the lack of startup funds for new faculty. The National Science Foundation and the American Psychological Association increasingly recognize psychology as a STEM discipline and as such, psychology faculty members should receive seed funds for research.

Recommendation 7: *Although infrastructure needs are typically less in the social and behavioral sciences, investment in startup funding for new faculty members is necessary to meet goals of eventually seeking additional external funding.*

Racial and ethnic diversity in the faculty is low. However, this is a common problem across academia. Increasing diversity will almost certainly require university-level attention to hiring practices, salaries, and resources.

V. Learning Resources

The Department recently acquired new space for offices and labs. This space is adequate for department needs and can accommodate potential growth. Technology and library support is also adequate for a department of this size.

VI. Support

Operating budget and staff support appear to be adequate. However, it is important to note that the department has experienced an increase in undergraduate enrollment and degree production. Current full time staffing (departmental administrative assistant and staff advisor) may not be adequate to meet the needs of continued growth without additional support.

VII. Summary Recommendations

In addition to the seven recommendations noted above, the department should consider growth areas for new programming. Several faculty members expressed interest in a program in Applied Behavior Analysis. Such a program would build on existing faculty expertise and would almost certainly be productive in terms of drawing new students. Of course, new enrollment growth would have to be met with additional faculty lines to avoid compromising the quality of existing programs.