Psychology Department
Sonoma State University
External Review 2013-2014
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On November 13, 2014, I conducted interviews with a number of stakeholders invested in the Psychology Department at Sonoma State University. This document summarizes my impressions of strengths and areas of challenge for the department, and lists specific suggestions for those serving at the department, school, and university level. These comments come after meeting with undergraduate students, lecturers, full professors, assistant and associate professors, the former and current chair of the department, department staff, Dean John Wingard, and Associate Vice President for Faculty Affairs Melinda Barnard, and after careful consideration of the Program Review document produced by Laurel McCabe, professor, Psychology Department.

Overall description of the Psychology department, and concurrent changes in the field of Psychology:

The Psychology Department is one of the largest majors at Sonoma State University: approximately 8% of students the university are Psychology majors. Within the School of Social Sciences, of the 12 programs offering a B.A. or B.S., 21% of students belong to Psychology. One of the original departments when the university began in 1960, the Psychology Department has a proud historical focus on humanistic and existential psychology.

The department is still recovering from a significant number of retirements (7 in the past 7 years), and from demoralizing departures (2 in 7 years). Since the 2007-2008 academic year, the number of full-time tenure-track faculty has decreased from 13 to 9, while the number of undergraduate majors plus minors has increased from 593 to 713.

The department is changing in the context of changes within the academic discipline of psychology. As the discipline moves into the 21st century, the focus is increasingly empirical and interdisciplinary. A major new focus in the discipline is "positive psychology," designed to understand individuals' unique strengths and positive values, and the experiences and processes of "flourishing" (in contrast to the previous more common historical focus on disease and pathology).

Psychology Department strengths:

The Psychology Department faculty and staff are clearly *deeply committed to students* and to providing high quality student instruction and experiences. Their passion and energy are commendable, and are a reflection of the best a California State University campus can offer students. The faculty are also strong contributors at the school and university level, as well as within the local community. The students themselves are clearly aware of the faculty members' dedication and efforts, and are appreciative and enthusiastic about their experiences on campus.

The Psychology Department is ***unique in its historical and current focus on humanistic, existential psychology***. This focus makes the department distinctive across the California State University system, and is a draw for a number of students. This distinction should be cherished and promoted.

The department should be commended for ***modifying and modernizing the curriculum*** to reflect current changes in the practice and science of psychology. Making changes in curriculum can be a profoundly political, disruptive process for a department – a fact the faculty were no doubt aware – but they proceeded, making changes to enhance students' academic instruction and later career success. As of Fall 2014, two new classes are required of all psychology majors: Psychology of Self-Discovery and Introduction to Research Design. These two courses nicely mirror the historical strength of this department (Psychology of Self-Discovery) and modern practices in psychology (Introduction to Research Design). The department also reconfigured the major to reduce the number of elective units, and to require students to focus more coursework in four of five areas: holistic, clinical / counseling, development, social / personality, and cognitive / physiological psychology. Revisions appear to clarify focus for faculty and students alike.

The department is clearly ***committed to the assessment of student learning,*** including use of both indirect (e.g., senior exit survey, alumni survey) and direct measures (e.g., examinations in Social Psychology (Psychology 325), papers in Psychology of Religions (Psychology 471)). Students appear to be performing at adequate–exceptional levels and appear satisfied with their degree choice overall.

The fact that the current chair is an Hispanic woman is also a point of pride for a number of individuals on campus. ***Showing diversity in leadership*** is to be commended, and again reflects the best of what a California State University campus can provide.

Overall, the Psychology Department is to be commended for its deep, involved, evolving commitment to students, and to the university overall. This appears to be a strong and engaged department.

Psychology Department challenges:

One theme that emerged from discussions with students, lecturers, faculty, and administrators, fairly consistently, was the ***need for more clear communication*** within the department and between the department and other units across the university. Within the department, students noted that messages announcing student activities did not appear to be received or passed on to the faculty or other students. The lecturers were dismayed and disheartened by the extent to which they felt excluded, uninformed, and "not part of the team." There were hints that communications between various faculty members are somewhat strained. Additionally, the department's strengths did not appear to be well communicated or understood at the school level. And leadership messages from the school and the Provost's office to the department appear to be muted, at best.

A second theme that emerged from discussions and examination of review material is that the department is clearly seeing ***signs of "growing pains"*** as it moves to a different curricular structure and focus. A pitting of humanistic psychology versus "research" was alluded to by some. Such a view is overly simplistic and creates a dangerous dichotimization. In fact, the *combination* of strong research and statistical techniques with conceptual elements of humanistic, existential psychology is cutting edge work in the field of psychology (e.g., research on the psychological and biological benefits of meditation / spirituality; idiographic research design and statistics now available designed to uncover

unique aspects of single individuals' lives, positive psychology, mixed methods research designs). With a careful move to include more instruction in research design and statistics and addition of faculty with expertise in that area, *while at the same time* continuing to protect and promote the focus on humanistic thinking and instruction, the department can become exponentially stronger. It will take open minds and very clear communication to continue the transition smoothly, and the department should be explicitly supported and rewarded for its efforts to move forward. The "growing edge" of this transition appears most obvious in conversation with the assistant and associate professors. Those in these positions are typically more stressed than their full professor counterparts, but special efforts should be made to ensure that these faculty, along with the new hires, are protected as they take leadership in moving the department forward.

A third theme that is clearly a challenge area for this department is the ***unfavorable faculty / student ratio***. With 9 faculty and 600 majors, along with 113 minors, the department is running over capacity at present. Students are having difficulties obtaining classes, faculty members are overworked, and resources are running thin. Additional hires will ease the tension somewhat, but other efforts need to be taken before the department will be most functional, with both student and faculty more at ease.

Overall, the Psychology Department has challenges similar to many others on campus, and many others across the California State University system. Its "growing pains" are a consequence of important and needed changes in the department. With careful attention to faculty and staff concerns, these pains should subside with time, and a stronger, more effective department will have been created.

Specific suggestions

Given the strengths and challenges identified above, below are specific suggestions for further strengthening the Psychology Department, separated by proposed action at the department, school, and university level. These suggestions should be taken in the context of the overall impression, garnered from interviews at all levels, that the department is a vibrant, contributing, important department, nevertheless deserving of additional support and attention to change.

Specific suggestions for the Psychology Department:

■ *Immediately move to restrict any new minors*. Impaction, implemented in 2008, with a required GPA of 3.0 for admittance, does not appear to be significantly maintaining or reducing the number of students admitted to the major. Further increasing the cut-off for GPA would most likely reduce student diversity, creating unacceptable exclusions during a time when diversity is increasingly valued and promoted. Given that it is unlikely a large infusion of new faculty will be hired in the next several years, the department should no longer accept minors. Reducing those served from 713 to 600, using current numbers, for example, should serve to ease workload for faculty and staff alike. It is unfortunate to have to block access to any student who expresses an intellectual interest in a particular academic area, but in times of limited resources, difficult choices must be made.

■ *Hire two new faculty members*, if the current search for a cognitive / physiological psychologist identifies numerous strong candidates. This possibility should be discussed with much thoughtfulness with Dean Wingard and Provost Rogerson. Particularly for a department experiencing growing pains, the hiring and subsequent mentoring of two faculty members simultaneously, rather than staggering hiring across a number of years, may ease transitions and promote departmental stability. Given the unfortunate limited laboratory space, careful consideration of research equipment

needs for candidates will need to be part of the hiring decision.

■ ***Work to further support the holistic area***. The department suggests a plan of future hires to be 1) a cognitive / physiological psychologist 2014-2015 (search currently underway), then 2) another cognitive / physiological psychologist, then 3) a development psychologist, then 4) a clinical / counseling psychologist. An alternative possibility would be hiring two cognitive / physiological psychologists in 2014-2015, then for 2015-2016, adding a faculty member adept at combining a holistic focus with innovative empirical techniques. Such an addition might more solidly support both the newer and the older historically important elements of the department.

■ ***Combine the developmental and social / personality cores***. The department might consider further revising the defined core elements of curriculum. Rather than five areas (holistic, clinical / counseling, developmental, social / personality, cognitive / physiological), if developmental were combined with social / personality (commonly done in other departments), four rather than five primary options could simplify choices for students, and make coverage of each area more dense.

■ ***Assign freshman and sophomore students to faculty advisors***. The current system of allowing students to select their own advisor appears to create an inequitable workload for faculty and confusion for students who don't know individual faculty members' interests or styles. Additional reliance on peer advising and group advising would also help ease the advising workload.

■ ***Create a Human Subjects pool for the Introduction to Psychology course***. Newly hired faculty and others with active research programs will find readily available research participants enormously helpful, speeding progress from data collection to publication. If insufficient studies are available for students to complete their required number of research hours, the resource could be offered to others outside the department (Sociology? Counseling?), for departmental or school or university student learning assessments, or the like.

■ ***Create an undergraduate Honors Program***. The hybrid Psychology Department / School of Extended Education graduate program may need to be discontinued or reduced, given the strains on faculty time and effort already in existence. An undergraduate Honors Program would give faculty the opportunity to work more closely with particularly strong and motivated students, giving satisfaction similar to that found working with more advanced graduate students.

■ ***Create a Capstone course***, once the department reaches equilibrium. As part of that course a required practicum – either research, teaching, or community service – might be of great benefit to graduating students.

Specific suggestions for the School of Social Sciences:

■ ***Revise the probationary RTP policy for psychology faculty.*** A plan with greater rigor and specificity would be a more well-crafted plan. A strong probationary RTP policy may be the single best recruitment and retention tool for new faculty.

■ ***Obtain and maintain additional resources for the new Introduction to Research Design course***. The addition of the newly mandatory Introduction to Research Design course should be completely embraced and supported at the school and university level. Without this course, the Psychology Department's curriculum was in peril of being dangerously out of step with the current

practice and instruction of academic psychology, putting all students, particularly those intending to pursue advanced degrees, at significant disadvantage. Computer laboratory space, as well as data-analytic and data-collection software (e.g., SPSS, SAS, Qualtrics), are absolutely essential for the proper instruction of this material.

■ *Support and promote the Psychology Department*. This is clearly a unit working hard to serve students, educating a substantial minority of all students on campus. Of course budgets are tight, but financial and other forms of support commensurate with the size of the department seem to be an important obligation of a well-functioning school and university.

Specific suggestions for the Provost's Office:

■ *Revise procedures for external review*. Other California State University campuses require a review team of three: one external reviewer, and two internal reviewers, one from outside the school and one from the same school as the department of focus. Comments from a committee of three might provide a more balanced, nuanced review, more in tune with the specific culture of Sonoma State University. Inclusion of internal reviewers would also increase accountability on campus, promote leadership opportunities, and increase knowledge of campus-wide strengths and best practices.

■ *Support and promote the Psychology Department.* Along with the school, the Provost's Office should continue to support and promote the Psychology Department. The university is only as strong as its departments, and a department nurturing a substantial minority of students on campus should be proportionately supported and enriched.