

Undergraduate Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Cover Sheet:

Degree: BA in Psychology **For Calendar Year:** 2009_____
(Date submitted to college committee: Feb. 26, 2010 __ By: Roger Webb _____)
(Date posted on college assessment website: _____)

Overall Rating: _____ Plan #22

During 2009, the Psychology Department has been developing a programmatic response to the assessment of the undergraduate major in which we have been engaged over the last two years. This report will describe the changes we are proposing and how these changes represent a response to the assessment data we have collected.

We affirm the educational objectives of an ideal undergraduate program developed by a task force of the American Psychological Association as appropriate for our Department and UALR. A more detailed set of specific learning goals for the objectives was appended to last year's report.

APA Objectives

UALR Core Competencies

1. Knowledge base in Psychology	not directly covered
2. Research Methods	Scientific thinking/mathematical competence
3. Critical thinking	Critical thinking
4. Applications of Psychology	not directly covered
5. Values in Psychology	Ethical and moral consciousness
6. Social, Cultural, International Awareness	Social and Cultural, International Awareness
7. Career Development	not directly covered
8. Communication skills	Verbal literacy
9. Information technology	Information technology
10. Personal development	not directly covered
not covered	Aesthetic experience
not covered	Historical awareness

The Department has agreed that these objectives are appropriate and important for our BA program. We have developed measures for some of these objectives, but have some for which we still need measures. This year, however, we are concentrating on more global measures. We are responding to two major concerns: 1) the poor quality of the writing for many of our students, and 2) evidence that we have a number of students who could profit from a more intensive program than we can realistically offer to the majority of our students. A third issue not being addressed this year is the number of poorly prepared students who have completed their academic core at a two year institution and of whom we can require no additional general education courses.

(2) Learning outcomes/objectives for those goals addressed this year:

In years past, the Department collected data on 1) the knowledge base in psychology with the ACAT test and essay questions, and on 2) research methods and 3) critical thinking with essay questions. We have also collected data with surveys on 7) career development and on 8) communication skills by evaluating essay answers to the questions mentioned above. In 2007, we collected new essay question data on 7) career development, 9) information technology, and 6) social and cultural awareness.

As we have worked on our undergraduate program, we have more recently collected data using the MAPP (Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress) that is published by ETS. (The test is being renamed, but I will use MAPP for this report.) The MAPP gives scores in the critical competences of Critical Thinking, Reading, Writing and Mathematics. It also generates context scores in Humanities, Social Science and Natural Science. The MAPP is designed, in effect, to take the academic body temperature of students as they walk out the door with a degree. This is a task which the University has delegated to departments, but which is often not done.

We also have been collecting writing samples of personal “stories” and more academic writing for several years. We have yet to systematically score or rate the writing samples, but there is agreement among readers that many are poorly written. Our students appear to write much better when they write about personal experience than when they write about an academic topic.

(3) Courses & activities where assessed:

Assessment data were collected in the context of Psychology 4100, Senior Synthesis which is a one hour course designed just to collect data for assessment purposes. All majors must take the course, so we have data from nearly 100% of our graduating seniors.

(4) Methods used:

We used survey and essay questions as we have done in the past and the MAPP test. The full scale test is a two hour affair, but we used an abbreviated version (roughly one hour) in an on-line administration. At some point, we need to sample with the longer version,

but the shorter, less reliable, version is adequate for our present purposes. ETS advises against making use of the subtest scores on the short form.

(5) What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

We now have MAPP test data on 144 graduating seniors. Our overall mean was 441.19 with a standard deviation of 21.67 scale points. ETS is cagey about norms, but the overall mean for all their bachelor and masters level schools appears to be about 444, so UALR psychology majors are scoring close to the appropriate national norms.

Our analyses of the data so far have focused on two issues: 1) the number of scores in various parts of the range, and 2) the academic backgrounds of low scoring students.

Scores of around 420 and 460 are one standard deviation above and below the mean respectively. Whether based on the statistical fact alone, or on actual performance data, ETS suggests that scores below 420 are below the level we would think of as acceptable, above 440 clearly acceptable, and above 460 very good.

About 20% of our students score below 420. That is more than one would expect if the scores were drawn from a true normal distribution (about 16% expected). Most of our low scoring students came to us with an associate's degree from a two year school, and thus took none of their core at UALR. So far none of these students scores above the 440 level. (These data were presented graphically in last year's report.) It is unlikely that such a clear break in the data will continue to be seen, but so far the results are remarkable. The differences in performance of those students who took their core at a two year institution and those who took at least some of it with us or at another four year institution suggests that we have a difficult problem of what to do for our low scoring students. We cannot require more general education courses of them, and dealing with fundamental academic shortcomings in upper level courses is problematic.

The good news is that about 20% of our students score above the 460 level, and that is a higher percentage of high scoring students than one would expect from a normally distributed population. Note: these two facts are possible only because the distribution is relatively "flat" in the middle of the range. We have a shrinking middle in our distribution of test scores. If this trend became more pronounced, our distribution of scores would be bimodal.

We must note that the MAPP data are much more encouraging than the ACAT data that we collected a few years ago. In a previous report, we reported ACAT and ACT data on 138 students. Only five (less than 4%!) of those were a standard deviation above the mean on both tests. We are planning to have this semester's cohort take both the MAPP and ACAT tests. This will allow us to see if the differences between the ACAT data collected in the past, and the MAPP data collected currently, will continue to be evident or whether performance on the two tests is now closer. If the differences continue to appear, it will suggest that the scores reflect different content on the tests; if the differences shrink, it will suggest that we are attracting better students.

The ACAT scores suggested that it would have been difficult to provide a more rigorous academic program for more than a few of our best students on a completely individual basis. We note with pride that we do, in fact, have individual former students who are doing very well in Ph.D. programs or in burgeoning academic careers, but not very many.

The other finding that is of critical importance is that well more than 20% of our students do not write very well, particularly about the subject matter of psychology.

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

The following is a summary of the programmatic changes that the Department has approved, and that we are working to implement through the curriculum process.

1) In response to the poor quality of writing: Every psychology major will be required to take at least two psychology courses designated as “writing intensive” as part of their major program. Writing intensive sections of courses will be determined at the time a semester schedule is constructed, and these sections will be designated on the schedule. The size of these sections will be limited. Writing intensive will be defined by the Department writing committee who will also be responsible for evaluating the results and suggesting changes. We have made preliminary contact with colleagues in the Rhetoric and Writing program concerning methods for evaluating writing in more systematic ways. Systematic scoring will be required in the future as we attempt to measure improvement in writing skills.

2) To deal with the 20% or so of our students who seem to capable of responding to a more rigorous academic program, the Department is designing two new courses in research methods. The first of these will be required of all majors and will bring the Department closer in line with national standards for Psychology BA programs. This course will also be part of the selection criteria for our new program track.

3) We are putting the final touches on a research intensive track within the BA program. The MAPP data, in contrast to the older ACAT data, suggest that we have a group of student who could profit from an academically intensive program, and we think that research methods are the skills from which better students could most profit. Since we do not know how many of our better students will be interested in such a program, we still intend to pursue the program initially on an individual basis.

Students accepted into the research intensive program will be required to have completed our two statistics courses and one research methods course with a grade of A, to have a 3.5 GPA, and to be nominated by a faculty member who will also agree to serve as the student’s mentor. We anticipate that the capstone of the program will be a two semester research project that the student will have to complete with an acceptable written report.

4) To assist students complete their projects, the Department has allocated funds from its endowment income to support research activities with up to the \$1000 per student. This figure may be revised based on our initial experiences.

With the exception of the writing requirements, the changes described above are designed to attract highly qualified students to the Department's programs. Our data suggest that a relatively small number of our graduates will go on to Ph.D. programs in psychology. (The national average is only four percent.) Our problem will be to market our research intensive program as teaching transportable skills beyond the narrow field of psychology. Students going to medical school, for example, will never get the level of statistical and research training that we intend to provide, even though physicians are required to be consumers of research based information on a daily basis. Most businesses reach points where someone must analyze data to support strategic decisions, and we think we can help train those people.

The MAPP data suggest that we have a number of able students, but we have little in our program today to push them to the highest levels of academic achievement. We believe that if our research intensive program is successful, we should see more highly capable students enrolling in our courses and more of these pursuing a research based curriculum.

As part of these changes, the Department is considering ways in which the program might be monitored so that the results of our efforts can be evaluated and the program further improved.