COMMITTEE PROCESS

This Academic Program Review Committee (APRC) Report is based on the following source material:

1. Department of Psychology Self Study Report to APRC; March 2008
2. External Reviewer’s Report on Psychology Graduate Program; May 2008
3. The APRC Interview with Department Chair, Sacha Bunge; Former Department Chair Kathleen Mosier; Associate Dean Dawn Terrell; December, 2008
4. External Review of Graduate Programs in Psychology - Departmental Response to APRC; April 2009
5. Guidelines for the Sixth Cycle of Academic Program Review.
6. The APRC customary evaluative procedures.

These sources were employed to construct an integrated view of the Psychology Graduate Program’s present strengths, aspirations, and possibilities for future development.

REPORT

Introduction

The Department of Psychology has built a highly reputable program since its inception in the 1930s. Currently, it is a popular major among students (1600+) with huge undergraduate enrollments, and the department contributes significantly to the General Education (GE) cluster. The graduate program consistently delivers about 50 M.A. and M.S. students per year. What distinguishes the program from most others in the SFSU, if not comparable schools offering this major, is its complexity: it offers six concentrations — 3 in the M.A. (Developmental Psychology; Social Psychology; Mind, Brain, and Behavior), and 3 in the M.S. (Industrial/Organizational Psychology; Clinical Psychology; School Psychology). The number of concentrations reflects the growth and specialization within the field of Psychology where widely different disciplinary emphases exist. The self-study articulates the design and goals of each concentration.
The external review (External Review of Graduate Programs at the Department of Psychology conducted on April 21-22, 2008) commended the Department for providing a valuable service to the profession and community. They acknowledged that two master's degree programs and six concentrations have been performing well, despite the “shoestring levels of support” provided for the entire program. The external reviewers also commended the department for its effort in consolidating the courses across the different concentrations.

Even so, the most significant challenge to the department is the inadequate number of faculty to service the full slate of concentrations, and the work overload for faculty that has arisen as a consequence. The External Review Report commented that “all issues pale in comparison to the issue of overload.” Specifically, the student-faculty ratio is an excessively high 42:1, when the standard is about 25:1 (described in the External Review Report as “shocking”). The External Review Report concluded that “The Department serves its graduate and undergraduate students well, but at major personal and professional cost.” (External Review of Graduate Programs at the Department of Psychology, pg. 1). The APRC notes that the most recent graduate SFR is 8.8 (Spring 2008), which is remarkably lower than the undergraduate SFR. This reflects a significant imbalance between the allocation of faculty resources between the graduate and undergraduate programs.

Faculty workload, as reflected in an excessively high student faculty ratio, is the overarching challenge that affects every other aspect of this report’s evaluation: the curriculum, faculty and student experience, program-specific standards, the culminating student experience, and strategic planning. The problem is a confluence of many factors: the popularity of the undergraduate major, the demand of psychology courses in the GE cluster, the departure of key faculty members and the problem of replacing them, the inability of the department to secure compensating resources for faculty members assigned to other administrative positions, and the structure of six Masters’ concentrations. Because of the complexity of this problem, the department has noted that it will not be resolved with any one action.

The department has provided an updated report to the APRC based on its retreat held last January-February 2009. To address the problem of overload, the department has recommended four steps: (1) obtain impaction status; (2) implement the new undergraduate major starting in Fall 2009; (3) revise the graduate programs; and (4) develop a five-year hiring plan. The APRC commends the department for addressing this problem and looks forward to the resolution of the student–faculty ratio in the near future. Without adequate action, however, the APRC views
this problem with deep concern and suggests that the department, working with the College of BSS and the University, focus on this particular problem in its ongoing talks and strategic planning.

**University Standards**

The program has met all University standards for graduate programs.

As indicated earlier, the challenge in maintaining these standards resides in having an adequate number of faculty members and resources to meet the requirements of serving six Masters’ concentrations, the undergraduate program, and the popular psychology courses as part of the GE undergraduate cluster.

For example of this challenge, one concentration, School Psychology, had lost its NASP accreditation status in 2007, but this has since been addressed with a proposal by the department to hire a faculty member in this area.

**Program Specific Requirements**

The APRC has noted that the demand for the MS has outpaced the MA concentrations (see Self Study Report, Table 4, page 23). This can be explained partly by trends in the field, but also partly by the (uneven) number of faculty members who have been hired to support each concentration. The APRC recommends that such trends be continuously monitored, along with the benchmarking of comparable peer and aspirant programs, as input to any future faculty hiring plan.

Historically the Department was strongly involved with the Child Study Center. Currently the Department is closely involved in the new Children’s Campus, providing placement for students and learning opportunity for faculty research. The Department has done well to transition to this new facility.

**Curriculum**

The Department is taking steps to integrate the curriculum across the six concentrations. Specific proposals and ongoing activities include: (1) the implementation of a new major, and (2) the revision of existing graduate programs. The department has noted that the new major will “streamline the experience in the major, provide more advising, enable more effective sequencing of courses, allow for better enforcement of prerequisites, and insure both depth and breadth in the major.” The revision of the graduate programs aims at maintaining a Psychology Graduate Program consisting of six concentrations (three M.S. degrees,
and three M.A. degrees). While talks are still ongoing, the revised curriculum aims at creating more sharing of resources and courses, improved statistical offerings, a reduced number of faculty supervision of M.A. theses, and more flexibility on the part of each concentration in managing student demand, class size, and quality.

While there are a number of ways to offer the popular psychology major, the department has decided to maintain its six concentrations. In an addendum sent to the APRC, the department noted:

“Each M.A. concentration would adhere to the same structure, number of requirements, and number of units, offer a common experience in methodology and research training, while providing area specific knowledge and expertise needed for preparing students for doctoral level education and/or careers in the field of psychology. This structure reduces the number of graduate students in the M.A. programs overall, maintains the same number of graduate sections, reduces the overload due to theses supervision, and shifts resources towards the methods and statistics courses where they are desperately needed. These changes will allow for a name change in the research psychology concentration to a concentration in Mind, Brain, and Behavior.

For our three M.S. programs (Clinical, School, and Industrial/Organizational Psychology) there is little flexibility to modify or change the curriculum. Each area has to address requirements and constraints dictated by external sources (i.e., licensing agencies and professional standards in the field). Each of our M.S. concentrations is in demand and has a high graduation rate with 95% or more of the students graduating in two years. We are not proposing major curricular changes for these concentrations."

The APRC is favorably disposed to these curricular changes. In addition to common courses and resources, the changes also provide a reasonable path to graduation despite the department-wide overload and reduced number of faculty members at present. In terms of assessing the department’s ability to sustain its offerings over time, the APRC recommends, as part of the department’s strategic planning, that the department constantly reviews the extent to which the current six-concentration structure allows for flexible or adaptive responses to changing student demand and/or faculty resources.

**Culminating Experience**

The six Masters concentrations have historically required different culminating experiences. The APRC has noted the department’s efforts that bring a common culminating experience across all concentrations.
Hopefully this will reduce some of the load on faculty, allowing them to focus on one central type of activity in guiding and evaluating culminating experiences.

**Assessment**

The Department has created a sub-committee to propose an assessment plan with data collection activities beginning in Fall 2007, but the plan has apparently not materialized. The APRC understands that the faculty members planned to develop an assessment plan during the January - February 2009 retreat. The APRC recommends the department implement this plan in Fall 2009.

**Student Experience**

Psychology graduates go on to Ph.D. programs or into the work place. Those who move on to the Ph.D. are accepted into top programs. Those who have entered the work place have gotten very good jobs. Recent School Psychology M.S. graduates have found positions in over twenty school districts.

Even so, support of graduate students is limited. Graduate students in Psychology may serve as Graduate Teaching Assistants (Psychology is the only department in the College of BSS that hires GTAs). Still, an inability to offer incoming students adequate support has caused many applicants to decline offers of acceptance. The APRC recommends that the department address this issue in its future strategic planning.

**Faculty Experience**

The faculty members in the department are quite active in research and professional engagement, obtaining and receiving extramural grant support, and actively involving their students in their research. It is a testament to the dedication of the faculty that they maintain this high level of activity despite the high faculty workload in the department.

The self-study report acknowledges this problem of balancing research productivity with workload, and reports that “we maintain excellence by taxing faculty” (page 11). The self-study report indicates that while new faculty members are attracted in large part by the quality of the program and the students, the need to maintain six concentrations, inclusive of high supervisory responsibilities, has also come at a high cost. Despite recent hires an inordinate number of losses have compounded the difficulties of maintaining a critical mass of faculty members. Moreover, the department is not compensated for faculty members who are on leave or in a different administrative position outside the department.
Providing a number of faculty members to serve as advisors and to mount an adequate curriculum seems to be a particular problem for some concentrations (e.g., School Psychology, where the problem resulted in a loss of accreditation).

As indicated earlier, the excessively high student-faculty ratio at the undergraduate level impacts the graduate program in compromising the time needed for faculty to supervise graduate students. Despite the willingness of the current faculty to maintain this ratio in order to keep intact its full set of concentrations, the APRC regards this situation as highly vulnerable to small changes in resource allocations and may be unsustainable in the future.

**Resources and Strategic Planning**

The Department hopes to hire additional faculty members in the near future. In the department’s addendum to this APRC, it provided more details of this hiring plan as excerpted below:

"We currently are working with a short-term hiring approach and are in the process of developing a new long-term five-year hiring plan. The main principle in our immediate hiring approach is to address our most pressing curricular needs in a way that serves the department as a whole. Our next position request will be a full-time tenure-track position in Psychology with a specialization in quantitative/qualitative methods. This position will help us offer both the undergraduate and graduate methods and statistics courses, while supporting department faculty professional development by offering opportunities for collegial consultation and collaboration in quantitative and qualitative analyses and methods."

The APRC strongly supports the hiring proposal. While addition of faculty through new and replacement hires is an obvious need, it may be unlikely that the optimal number of hires can be made in the near future. If so, it is unclear as to how the department intends to maintain all concentrations until this faculty need is settled. In this regard, the APRC recommends a contingency plan be formulated based on different scenarios. These scenarios should address the extent to which levels of impaction are implemented along with approved faculty hiring. Specifically, this contingency plan should specify the number of faculty that is needed to maintain each concentration, plus the projected space needs of more research-oriented faculty who would be hired.
Conclusion

Overall, APRC commends the department for producing a highly popular program, an impressive record of intellectual contributions, and productive masters’ students over many decades. The APRC hopes that this level of productivity across all concentrations will continue to prosper and be sustainable over time. The APRC commends the department’s efforts to manage with a reduced set of faculty and resources during these economically strenuous times. Moreover, the APRC supports the departmental petition for impaction status and related measures to reduce its excessively high student-faculty ratio at the undergraduate level.