University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Department of Psychology
Undergraduate Programs

Reviewer:
Perilou Goddard, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
Department of Psychology
Northern Kentucky University

Introduction

I visited UTC on January 16-18, 2008 for the purpose of reviewing the undergraduate psychology program. The visit was coordinated by Dr. Paul Watson, Psychology Department Head. I was provided with a variety of documents prior to my visit, including the self-study report and syllabi supplement and a recent copy of Modern Psychological Studies. I also reviewed the undergraduate catalog description for the psychology undergraduate programs and the department’s website (http://www.utc.edu/Academic/Psychology/). During the site visit, I met with the following individuals or groups:

• Phil Oldham, Provost
• Herbert Burhenn, Dean
• Meredith Perry, Office of Grants and Program Review
• Paul Watson, Psychology Department Head
• Psychology faculty members Mike Biderman, Lisa Cothran, Chris Cunningham, Ralph Hood, Richard Metzger, Brian O’Leary, Lynn Ourth, Nicky Ozbek, David Ross, Amye Warren, and Bart Weathington
• Psychology staff members Julie Bomar and Angelique Cook
• Several representatives of the Chattanooga community
• Seven undergraduate psychology majors including Shayla Thomas, president of the UTC chapter of Psi Chi, the national honor society in psychology.

This review addresses the issues raised in the Guidelines for External Reviewer’s Narrative Report: Undergraduate Programs (hence the rather choppy narrative flow).

Program Outcomes

The program’s mission statement is clearly published in the undergraduate catalog, and the program and learning outcomes are clearly stated in course syllabi. The distinct aims of the Bachelor of Science (B.S.) and Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degrees are clear in the letter from the department head (http://www.utc.edu/Academic/Psychology/LetterfromPaul.php) posted on the departmental website but could be made more explicit in the course catalog.
At present, UTC does not appear to offer widespread support or incentives for programs to conduct assessment of program outcomes. The College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) may be a reasonable way to assess general education outcomes, but it does not provide data that allow programs to see how their students compare with students at comparable institutions. Moreover, the student satisfaction survey is highly inadequate if a large program like Psychology, with over 400 majors, only gets valid responses from 23 students. The fault here is not with the Department of Psychology but with the institutional culture that does not adequately support program assessment. I will make specific recommendations for instilling a culture of assessment that would allow Psychology and other programs to adjust their practices to address specific needs.

Curriculum

The undergraduate psychology curriculum at UTC is in line with national trends and standards. The program self-study indicates that both the B.S. and B.A. degree requirements have been revised in recent years to account for university-wide changes in total hours and general education requirements. The required courses are offered frequently, and all of the students I talked to expressed satisfaction with the availability of psychology courses.

The faculty commitment to requiring writing assignments, even in large freshman-level courses, is laudable. The foundations for research skills in psychology are formed in the required (and standard) statistics and research methods courses. However, the department is particularly notable for publishing the undergraduate psychology journal *Modern Psychological Studies*. Serving on the editorial board of this journal provides an unparalleled opportunity for students to hone their critical research skills. Several of the students I met with raved about how much they had learned by serving on the *MPS* board.

The department also sponsors an increasing number of original research projects classified as Departmental Honors projects or recipients of Provost Student Research Awards. The success of student researchers was recently noted at the state level when UTC psychology majors won both first and third place student research awards at the annual meeting of the Tennessee Psychological Association. The department’s students would benefit enormously from more funding to support travel to present their research at state, regional, and national conferences.

One additional feature of the UTC psychology curriculum is particularly noteworthy. Many undergraduate psychology programs include options for student internships, practica, and similar community-based experiences. However, UTC has taken such options to a level I have never seen before. Due primarily to the commitment and skills of Drs. Lynn Ourth and Nicky Ozbek, large numbers of psychology majors get invaluable real-world experience that aids both the students and the Chattanooga region.

The department makes the requirements for the major clear to students and courses are offered regularly, permitting timely completion of degrees. The students I met had no complaints about course availability. I am also impressed with the department’s commitment to offering all its required courses at night on a regular and predictable basis. In my experience, this commitment is increasingly rare as departments shift their...
night teaching resources to web-based teaching. While one might argue that offering courses online serves both traditional and nontraditional students, I do not necessarily agree. Many nontraditional students do not have adequate access to or familiarity with computers and the internet to take full advantage of online courses. This situation is undoubtedly changing as computer technology becomes more accessible to all strata of society, but we’re not there yet. Thus, the UTC Psychology Department’s commitment to night courses is admirable.

Teaching and Learning Environment

Although there is no external accrediting body for undergraduate psychology programs, the UTC Psychology Department utilizes the guidelines of our discipline’s main professional organization, the American Psychological Association (APA).

The department does an especially admirable job of advising its majors. In this age of online course registration, many departments have chosen to abandon advising majors every semester. However, UTC commits considerable resources to advising every major every semester.

Enrichment opportunities for students (beyond the extensive internship/practica options) include a chapter of Psi Chi (the national honor society in psychology). The impact of such student organizations depends largely on the student officers in place at any given time. At the moment, the chapter president, Shayla Thomas, is making a concerted effort with Dr. Watson to reinvigorate the chapter. Other enrichment activities include a student chapter of the Society for Human Resource Professionals and an ongoing lecture series coordinated by Dr. Lisa Cothran.

Library holdings are very good for a university of its size, and the access to electronic databases in psychology and related fields is excellent. In addition, virtually every course syllabus includes a clause asking students to recommend useful books to the department head, who will then recommend these books for library purchase. This is a creative and systematic way to encourage student input about library holdings.

Compared to national samples, undergraduate psychology majors at UTC include more women and more members of minority groups. The collaborative projects incorporated into many psychology courses and the range of diversity-oriented coursework provide many opportunities for all students to experience diversity. The faculty of the Psychology Department are also more diverse than the faculties of most departments at similar institutions.

Students evaluate every course taught in the Psychology Department regularly, using the university’s standard rating form. The evaluations are used in annual performance reviews and the tenure and promotion process.

Faculty

The faculty appears to be adequate in number to meet the program’s needs. Indeed, the UTC psychology faculty members generate a large number of credit hours compared to UTC college and university averages while achieving a high level of research productivity. The ratios of regular to adjunct faculty also appear to be appropriate for the program. As mentioned in the previous section, the diversity of the
UTC psychology faculty is greater than that of many similar programs at similar institutions, although the department should continue to attempt to attract and retain minority and women faculty.

The faculty members meet or exceed SACS qualifications and represent a range of specialties appropriate to the program. The only specialty that is not clearly represented is biopsychology, but Dr. Watson has shown impressive creativity in securing a shared faculty position with another department to teach a physiological psychology course.

The psychology faculty members are engaging in an impressive array of scholarly, professional, and service activities that enhance their teaching and contribute to the university’s community engagement mission. The department uses an evaluation system that includes student and peer surveys to assure quality performance across the breadth of the program’s mission.

Support

The UTC Department of Psychology regularly evaluates its equipment and facility needs and works very hard to secure necessary resources, and although the situation has improved in some ways, there is still a great deal of room for improvement. Since the last program review (in 2003), the department has added a conference/training room and the university has purchased new computers for faculty and classrooms. The operating budget is increasing and, when measured in dollars per full-time faculty member, is slightly higher than it has ever been. However, when measured in dollars per student credit hour produced or per student major, the operating budget is less than it was in 2002-03.

For comparison, consider the Department of Psychology at Northern Kentucky University, which is about the same size as UTC’s department. We have slightly more faculty and slightly fewer psychology majors, but in other respects, we are very similar (i.e., a regional state university with an undergraduate focus and a few master’s level programs). Our operating budget is about 2.5 times the size of UTC’s.

One particular concern is the budget for faculty and student travel. Because they have a high teaching load, it is a real challenge for faculty to remain current in their specialties. The opportunity to attend regional or national conferences is a very important aspect of faculty development, but the current allocation of $500 per faculty member per year is grossly inadequate. The low operating budget is especially distressing given the department’s impressive research productivity, generation of student credit hours, and admirable retention and graduation rates. Provost Oldham is aware of the problem and stated that his goal is to bring the department’s operating budget up to a level equal to 10% of faculty salaries.

The department would also benefit from additional operating funds to support student research and travel. UTC psychology majors won both first and third place research awards at this year’s Tennessee Psychological Association annual meeting, but the department head struggled to fund their attendance at the conference. One of the senior students I met worked with a faculty member and graduate students on a research project presented at the highly competitive biannual conference of the Society for Research in Child Development. The faculty member and graduate students received
partial university support for their travel but the undergraduate did not. The impact on undergraduates of presenting their research at conferences cannot be overstated.

The lack of a university-wide technology replacement program is also a serious problem. Technology typically becomes outdated in about three years and obsolete in four. Without a replacement program, departments across the university will be left floundering, being forced to spend their meager operating budgets on items that should be covered by the university.

Summary Recommendations

The major strength of the program is clearly its faculty. Despite years of low operating budgets and relatively low salaries, the faculty members are absolutely dedicated to their jobs and the students are the beneficiaries. The department is also very fortunate to have Paul Watson as the head; he provides an exceptionally effective level of leadership and protects the faculty from many of the unit’s most tedious tasks. The major weaknesses are out of the department’s control: low operating budget, relatively low salaries, and lack of a technology replacement plan.

During the next five years, the department may benefit from the new provost’s awareness of the unit’s strengths and the fact that the budget hamstrings the department’s ability to advance. The department will undoubtedly continue to take resourceful advantage of opportunities for collaboration with organizations outside the university. Examples include Dr. Warren’s statewide work with primary school teachers, Dr. Metzger’s collaborations with physicians, and Dr. Ross’s joint efforts with members of the judiciary.

My main recommendation to the department is to do a better job of promoting itself. The unit’s activities are fully aligned with the university’s strategic plan, but there is no systematic effort to alert the upper administration and Chattanooga community to these activities. The low operating budget and high credit hour generation may be signs that the department is being taken for granted.

Another recommendation, predicated on financial support from the college or university, is to begin employing routine assessment to help shape the undergraduate program. I recommend, for example, that the department administer the Area Concentration Achievement Test (ACAT) or similar nationally normed test to every graduating senior, rather than giving the test only every five years. The test currently costs $16 per student, and the department operating budget cannot support the expense. However, Provost Oldham mentioned that he may provide the necessary funds so that the Psychology Department could serve as a UTC flagship program with regard to using assessment to shape the curriculum.

With regard to assessment, the entire university should reconsider its practice of surveying its students. For the psychology program, the current student satisfaction survey is worthless, given that only 23 valid responses were obtained from more than 400 majors. The university should not expect departments to use surveys with such low response rates. At Northern Kentucky University, we instituted a required senior survey over a decade ago. Students are notified when they have earned 90 hours that they must complete the online survey. Students receive repeated notification, but if necessary their diplomas are withheld until they comply. Such drastic measures are rarely needed since
NKU has clearly established a culture of assessment and evidence-based decision making over the years. UTC could implement a similar procedure and should do so if it expects departments to use survey data in their program planning.

One final assessment strategy that would benefit the entire university is the establishment of benchmark universities. NKU established benchmarks about a decade ago and uses them as an external metric against which to measure our achievements (see http://access.nku.edu/oca/ and click on “NKU Benchmark Institutions” under the Institutional Effectiveness heading). Establishment of such benchmarks can be useful, for example, in helping units determine on an ongoing basis whether their curricula are consistent with national trends, rather than waiting for five years for the next external program review.