

# Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving Student Learning in Degree Programs

Unit: Psychology

Unit Head approval: David E. Irwin

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## SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

**Brief description of changes or improvements made in your unit as the result of assessment results since 2000.**

In 2001 we became aware that undergraduates were taking longer and longer to achieve the requirements for graduation, and that the time to graduation had increased to 8.5 semesters. The department created a teaching plan committee that investigated the problem and formulated a solution. The solution gave greater incentives for teaching large introductory courses and upper level laboratory courses, the two major bottlenecks identified by the committee. The new teaching plan was discussed in each of the divisions and in the departmental Advisory committee before being approved with some minor changes. The entire department was included or represented in the process. The plan had specific goals, e.g. to reduce the number of semesters to graduation, and specific measures for these goals. The successful result was that the number of instructional units increased from 45092 to 52094 and that the mean number of semesters to graduation decreased from 8.5 to 8.1. Our assessment activities have also led to an increase in teaching quality; 76.5% of our faculty had ICES ratings greater than or equal to 4 in 2000-2001, whereas 83.6% of our faculty had ICES ratings greater than or equal to 4 in 2007-2008. We now have a record number of undergraduate majors (1335, as compared to 1225 in 2000-2001).

## SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

(a) **PROCESS**: Brief description of the process followed to develop or revise this assessment plan.

The Associate Head for Undergraduate Affairs in the Psychology department has served as our outcomes assessment officer. The assessment plan has been developed and revised as a result of consultations between this Associate Head, the department Head, the department's advising office, and members of the department's Advisory Committee.

(b) **STUDENT OUTCOMES**: List Unit's student learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes).

The Psychology department at UIUC is highly ranked nationally because of its breadth and depth. The Department faculty conduct research in a broad range of areas that

include social and organizational psychology, human perception, biological, clinical, cognitive, developmental, and quantitative psychology. With approximately 60 full time faculty, our department is as large or larger than some of the colleges on campus. The breadth of the program and of the field of Psychology more generally also means that our students enter a wide variety of careers after leaving the department. Many of our undergraduates go on to graduate programs in Psychology, but many others go on in medically related fields, law, and business. The learning outcomes for someone pursuing a career in human resources are very different from those for a lawyer, clinical psychologist, or a biological psychology student headed for medical or dental school.

To fulfill these needs, the Department of Psychology has the following expectations and goals for undergraduate Psychology majors:

- i. To learn the fundamental principles of psychology, including cognition, perception, individual behavior, personality, group processes, development, abnormal behavior, and the biological basis of behavior;
- ii. To understand how to conduct psychological research, including experimental and quasi-experimental design;
- iii. To understand how to analyze data via application of statistical methods;
- iv. To be able to read and evaluate reports of psychological research;
- v. To be able to write clearly and communicate effectively.

In addition, the Department of Psychology has the expectation that many students will participate in significant research projects. Most will participate in on-going faculty research (Psychology 290); some will initiate their own independent study projects (Psychology 294), and about 20 of the most talented will complete a three semester Undergraduate Honors Thesis. Those students interested in clinical psychology have a variety of Psychology 340 (applied clinical experiences) courses from which to choose.

**(c) MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES:**

The requirements to graduate with a major in Psychology (which can be found at <http://stat.psych.uiuc.edu/undergrad/requirements.php>) help ensure that these outcomes are met. Put briefly, students must maintain an overall GPA of 2.0 in their Psychology courses while taking a range of courses that cover the learning outcomes listed in i-iv above (because of resource limitations we are unable to offer all of our majors (who number over 1300) much opportunity to learn how to write clearly and communicate effectively). Over the last 9 years 3712 undergraduates have received a B.S. in Psychology, so an average of 412 students each year have satisfied our learning outcomes. In addition, the Department of Psychology evaluates the success of the outcomes listed above in the following ways:

- i. Chancellor's Senior Survey on the Undergraduate Experience.
- ii. Annual Reports of Faculty Activities -- The Department of Psychology requires all faculty members to provide annual reports of their activities; these reports are carefully reviewed by the Department's Advisory Committee and each faculty

member will be rated for his/her performance in teaching, research, and service during the preceding three years. These ratings are very significant in that they determine salary increases. The teaching report includes sections on undergraduate teaching and graduate teaching. The undergraduate teaching section includes a table listing all undergraduate courses taught during the past three years and their enrollments. A narrative description of teaching activities is also included. Assistant and Associate Professors are asked to provide documentation that conforms to the Campus's promotion requirements: "Teaching evaluation requires presentation of descriptive data such as courses taught, grade distributions, and enrollment; self-review; ICES data; and peer evaluation."

- iii. Outcomes Assessment Survey – The Office of Graduate Student Affairs surveys all graduating masters and doctoral degree candidates shortly before graduation. The survey inquires about the job that will be started after graduation and the student's experience in the graduate program using both rating scale items and open ended questions.

### **SECTION 3 : PLANS FOR USING RESULTS**

#### **(a) PLANS: Brief description of plans to use assessment results for program improvement.**

The assessment plan must provide a process for outcomes assessment that is ongoing, developed by a cross-section of faculty that not only represents the breadth of the department but gives the faculty a sense of investment in the assessment plan. The process must generate specific outcomes and develop accurate means to assess them. We must also include recent alumni to provide an independent perspective on the value of their education. Finally, these outcomes must be developed and assessed within the context of the strategic plan for the Psychology Department. Our goal is to provide an ongoing assessment of our teaching, undergraduate curriculum and graduate curriculum in a participatory manner that provides the faculty a sense of ownership of the assessment plan. The goal is to have a bottom-up development process, rather than a top-down one. To do this we plan:

- (1) to have the Undergraduate Advising Office distribute surveys to all graduating seniors a few weeks before graduation. This survey will ask about the students' experiences as Psychology majors, using rating scale items that will provide metric information.

- (2) to evaluate successively the teaching plan, undergraduate curriculum and graduate curriculum over the course of three years by committees with representatives from each of the different divisions of the Psychology Department. The reason for evaluating only one area each year is to allow for a detailed analysis and discussion of that topic both within divisions and department-wide. This will also serve to keep the issue of outcomes assessment before the faculty so that it is not forgotten. The evaluation will include developing specific outcomes or goals as well as determining the appropriate methods or

tools to measure the outcomes. Each of these three areas would then be re-evaluated every five years

(3) to make the position of outcomes assessment officer a permanent component of the Office of the Associate Department Heads. At least one Associate Head would be a member of each evaluation committee, and would insure that the committee includes outcomes assessment in their evaluation. The Associate Head would also provide direction and training on outcomes assessment to the committee. This would be done in consultation with the Center for Teaching Excellence and follow the training that was received during the past year by the departmental outcomes assessment officer.

(4) to obtain an independent assessment of our undergraduate and graduate programs by soliciting opinions from relatively recent alumni. Alumni that are within 5 years of graduation and just beginning establish themselves in careers will be targeted. Their input will be obtained using focus groups that are a part of the department's advancement effort. We began this process in 2007 when we held our first annual Career Night in which several alumni came back to campus to meet with current Psychology majors, and we held our second annual Career Night in April of 2008.

**(b) TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION:**

Fall 2007 – Spring 2008 Evaluate teaching plan, determine outcomes and assessments

Fall 2008 – Spring 2009 Evaluate undergraduate curriculum, determine outcomes and assessments

Fall 2009 – Spring 2010 Evaluate graduate curriculum, determine outcomes and assessments

The timeline is based on the outcomes assessment training provided during 2007-2008 and our experience with the re-evaluation of the teaching plan. With a department as large as Psychology, disseminating the information provided during the assessment training, getting the faculty to seriously consider what the outcomes in these three areas should be and deciding how should we assess them is a tremendously complex task. The evaluation of the teaching plan has taken more than a full academic year both to obtain the data to evaluate the current plan, suggest solutions to the problems and issues that have been raised concerning the current, and then to submit a report to the Head and the Advisory committee for approval. Further, selecting just one area to be examined each year allow the faculty to concentrate their effort fully on that area, analyze it in depth, and provide for adequate discussion of both the issues and proposed solutions.

Each of the three areas (teaching plan, undergraduate curriculum, graduate curriculum) would be re-evaluated every five years. This will allow sufficient time to determine whether the current plan or curriculum is successful, while reinforcing the message that outcomes assessment is an ongoing process and creating a self-sustaining process.

