Fitchburg State University
Psychological Science Program Review
Visit November 4, 2014
Department of Behavioral Sciences
Psychological Science Program

Psychological Science Program Visit Report

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On November 4, 2014 I visited Fitchburg State University to serve as an external reviewer of the Psychological Science Program (which is a part of the Behavioral Science Department). I have performed over a dozen program-reviews and been involved in self-studies for both NEASC and program review of his own department. My subsequent observations, reflections and suggestions have taken into account the unique position that Fitchburg State University holds in the domain of higher education, and more specifically the distinctive place that the Psychological science program holds in preparing their students for competitive graduate school work and key positions in Psychological Science and related fields.

Three days prior to my arrival at Fitchburg, I was provided with a Psychological Science Program Review, conducted by the Psychological Science faculty. This comprehensive report provided the mission, goals and objectives of the program; descriptive program information regarding the history, faculty profiles, student profiles, and resources; and a section of the effectiveness of the curriculum, teaching, advising, students scholarship, community involvement, learning outcomes and the professional development of post graduation. One problem I'd like to address prior to formative comments, however, is that I received the report only a few days prior to my arrival. This gave me little time to address issues I might have addressed before I arrived on campus. Thus, my comments might seem a bit out of order. This is a result of working with limited knowledge (as an aside, I only received the full report from the department AFTER I was on campus for the program review).

During my visit, I was able to meet individually with only a small number of full-time faculty members from the Psychological science program. Because the program is housed in a larger department, I had some initial difficulties ferreting out how the psychological science work was being done uniquely in the context of the larger department of Behavioral Sciences. However, my meetings with the interim Provost and Dean of Arts and Sciences helped me put this into context.

My first meeting was with Dr. Paul Weizer, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dr. Jane Fiske, Interim Dean of Arts and Sciences. In that meeting, we discussed several issues surrounding the structure of the Behavioral Science Department and the Psychological Science Major and Faculty. Through that meeting, I came away with an understanding that the Behavioral Science Department had three programs within in,

including Psychological Sciences, Human Services, and Criminal Justice and Sociology. The department was, thus, one of the largest on campus, with Psychological Sciences having a large share of the students who are served by that department. Drs. Weizer and Fiske both indicated to me that the program was well respected by faculty on campus but there had been some difficulties in the program due to differences of opinions among members of the program. I later learned how deeply these differences were impacting the program. However, the structure at Fitchburg State is changing dramatically, as the university, along with all the other State Universities in Massachusetts, has gone to a new administrative structure. With these growing pains comes new challenges, which I will elaborate on later in this document.

Following my meeting with the VPAA and Dean of A&S, I attended a meeting of the entire Behavioral Science Department. The meeting was one where I learned that there are issues about moving to a new location (see below), changes in advising, and the structure of some of the programs. However, the meeting was concerned with issues that didn't pertain that much to my review.

In addition to the individual meetings I had lunch with several students at the Fitchburg State student dining commons.

This was one of the most interesting and difficult program reviews I have done over the past several years. Below I list several reasons for why I say this.

Overview:

Clearly the Psychological Science Program at Fitchburg has a solid foundation upon which current revisions and future updates can be made. The program is strong in many ways. The faculty members are all interested in being effective teachers and researchers, and the students are interested in getting from the faculty all they can to be as successful as they can be once they leave Fitchburg. I was impressed with the response to the space concerns (more later) and am equally impressed with the potential for new space (especially given how grim the space situation is currently).

This discussion, however, is somewhat tempered by some issues in the department that are structural and cultural. I will expand on this in upcoming sections. I'll caution that I don't think that the department is in any trouble or is in any way going through some divisions within the ranks. However, I do think there are changes that could occur that would create an even more vibrant department which would better serve the students of Fitchburg State University.

Environment View:

I begin my discussion of the environment of the department by discussing the climate within the Psychological science program. By 'climate' I am referring to the unique combination of intellectual, behavioral, social, emotional, ethical and even physical characteristics within a setting that can positively or negatively impact outcomes.

Fitchburg has undergone some big changes over the last several years. The department has grown, and the new hires have been moving the department towards brain/neuroscience. This is not a negative issue, as the field has moved in that direction as well. However, with the increase in interest in neuroscience and biological psychology, there is a need for two very important changes that will have to take place for this culture change to take root.

1. Use of lab space for more application of psychological science
2. Increase in faculty numbers to provide for smaller classes, and for a more evenly divided advising load
3. Separating the program out to become its own department, with a chair who is a member of the Psychological Science faculty (although not necessarily someone who is currently on the faculty)
4. Developing an identity. I believe the department is split right now, with half the faculty being interested in cognition/brain science and half the department being interested in clinical/applied. This is a match that can work. But the department needs to make some hard decisions about where the resources are going to be put and how they are going to shape the future of the program.

I believe that these issues are not ones that the University wouldn't support. Rather, in keeping with the goals of FSU, I believe increasing scholarship and student access to resources for scholarship is a goal of the University. However, there are several structural issues that I believe need to happen for this to take place.

First, I believe there are several factions within the program that cause issues for the overall functioning of psychological sciences. This was apparent to me as I went to lunch with students. My lunch was interesting in that normally, when I do a program review, I have several students who want to attend. In fact in some places, I have had to turn students away because the lunch meeting was too big to be functional. That was not the case here at all. The students who did eat lunch with me were asked to join me as I was heading to lunch, and only 3 were there. One student was a freshman, and she was not really aware of what was going on with the faculty. A second student, who later wrote me an extended email, was found in the dining hall, and he was a junior. The third student wasn't even a Psychological Science major, but he commented on the program from the perspective of his girlfriend, who was a major. The students had interesting comments about the program, including one from the junior who said that faculty members say things about other faculty members in class. This is a troubling, to say the least, as it represents some problems with the faculty that will be addressed below.

Program Goals:

The newest APA (2014) Principles for Quality Undergraduate Education in Undergraduate Education in Psychology are guidelines by which I look to review the program goals and overall curriculum of the Psychological Science offerings at Fitchburg State University.

The Psychological Science Program Goals at Fitchburg do seem to be reasonably well aligned with the APA Principles for Quality Undergraduate Education in Psychology. Areas that should be more strongly stressed include the suggestion that both ethics and diversity be integrated within most of the Psychological Science courses. It appears that diversity issues in particular (including cultural, gender and varying belief systems) could stand for a much stronger focus within the curriculum. There is no course offered on this topic as a stand-alone, and faculty readily admitted that they were weak in this one particular area. In fact, one way to really understand this is to see that the faculty themselves are not particularly diverse. This is an issue that will be discussed later.

Program Outcomes:

This is an area that the faculty are working on and realize that more work is needed. To fully measure the program objectives on an ongoing basis will require support from the administration for faculty time to assist students with documenting their accomplishments possibly in a portfolio type manner. Assessment is becoming one of the most important topics in higher education. Fitchburg State University is a member of NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) and, as such, needs to focus on assessment of learning outcomes.

Although I spoke about this with several faculty members, there was less of an emphasis on this topic than I believe there should be. I recommend that the faculty work towards developing a comprehensive assessment plan to help them ensure that they are serving their students well. Now, I believe completely that the faculty, are, in fact, providing for the students, exactly what they need to be well-rounded Psychological Science majors. However, without proper documentation, it is mere speculation.

In fact, in several conversations, I had heard about ways the department was trying to assess the success of the students and I don't believe a frank conversation about assessment has taken place yet. I think the students and the faculty deserve to know if what they are doing is working, and by having a COMPREHENSIVE assessment plan in place that is supported by all faculty , this can be accomplished.

The faculty would do well to read work by Halonen on assessment and implement that work in the future. It is a minor concern, but one that could be addressed with ease, and one that would go a long way towards helping the department make informed decisions about future hires as well as about any changes that might take place in the curriculum in the future.

Curriculum Domain:

Currently, the curriculum for the students at Fitchburg looks like this:

- Students take:
    - ✓ General Psychology OR Human Growth and Development
    - ✓ Applied Statistics
    - ✓ Research Design and Analysis I (4 credits)
    - ✓ Research Design and Analysis II (4 credits)
    - ✓ Experimental Psychology
    - ✓ History and Systems

- Breadth Requirement:
    - Abnormal OR Developmental Psychopathology
    - Cognition OR Psychology of Learning
    - Biological Psychology OR Cognitive Neuroscience
    - Psychology of Personality OR social Psychology

- Electives (5 selected)
    - Adult Development and Aging
    - Adolescent Psychology
    - Interpersonal Effectiveness
    - Psychological Testing
    - Organizational Psychology
    - Psychology of Human Resources
    - Psychology of Sport and Exercise
    - Health Psychology
    - Psychology in Action
    - Educational Psychology
    - Cognitive Development
    - Perceptual Development
    - Socio-emotional and Personality Development
    - Addictive Behaviors
    - Motivation
    - Contemporary Theories of Mind
    - Teaching Practicum
    - Practicum in Psychology
    - Independent Study
    - Advanced Seminar in Psychological Sciences
    - Internship in Psychology

- Listening and Speaking Requirements (select 1)
    - Interpersonal Effectiveness
    - Group Dynamics
    - Small Group Leadership
    - Interviewing Techniques

- o Introduction to Speech
- o Public Speaking

- ▪ A total of 41 Credits in Psychological Science are required for the major with General Psychology, Human Growth and Development and Applied Statistics do not count towards those credits.

These courses allow students to see the department views of the major as one that emphasizes the *scientific* study of behavior. Students gain a great deal of knowledge and experience over the sequence of these courses. From what I gathered in my interviews, most members of the department teach courses that are available to all students and have a good opportunity to interact with many of their majors.

The curriculum seems appropriate given the department's goals. The required courses within the program are quite typical and provide a broad foundation for the students. The students, indeed, get to see a wide angled view of the world of Psychological Science through this curriculum mapping, and the faculty have taken great care to tie the goals of the department (which are well articulated in the Self Study) to the curriculum itself. In fact, the connection of the mission statement to the different goals of the curriculum is a credit to the department and one that I think has done well to serve the students of Fitchburg.

In addition, the various experiential components of the program are impressive. Students can select from an internship, research, directed studies, peer assisted learning internships, etc., as a means of experiencing the program. That is a credit to the department for developing so many really interesting ways for students to meet the requirements for the major. And, they go a long way towards preparing students for work after they leave Fitchburg (and, the students really like this part of the program!).

I would like to add, that as a Program Reviewer, I was impressed that the department took from the last review, a list of suggestions and enacted those suggestions in a variety of ways (as documented in the self study). I believe the department is on its way, but I would like to add a few additional comments that I believe would help the department even more.

1. The curriculum is now 41 credits in the major. That is a large number of courses. It is imperative that students take a number of classes to see the breadth of the major, but the department might consider lowering the number of required courses.
2. I was frankly surprised at the number of unique course offerings. One of the major issues in the department has to do with staffing (to be discussed in the next section). To alleviate this, perhaps the number of courses that are offered could be lowered or offered less frequently. The department might, in fact, engage in some strategic planning (perhaps schedule a summer retreat to talk about this) as a means of working out the direction the department really wants to move in.
3. To deal with 1 and 2, I would recommend that the faculty combine the three course research sequence into two courses and cut the number of electives down both in

terms of how many the students take as well as the number offered. Given the resources available to the department, it seems to me that it would be best to have fewer courses taught that were "boutique" courses to allow full time faculty members to interact with students at the lower level, where students are developing the appropriate attitude towards psychological science.

4. Finally, the course numbering system should be reviewed. It's hard to understand what makes a course what number it is. By sitting down and having some frank strategic planning, this issue could be ameliorated.

Overall, the curriculum is in line with modern Psychological science programs. The faculty have taken great care to ensure that the objectives, mission, and coursework lines up. I commend them for caring so deeply about curricular issues, and for doing the work to ensure that the students are getting the best possible education given the constraints that are placed on the department.

Faculty:

As described in the beginning of this document, the Psychological Science Program sits within the Behavioral Science Department. Because of the odd structure, the Chair of the BSD is Dr. Christine Shane, who is not a psychologist. Dr. Shane has the difficult job of trying to wrangle four programs within one single department. The Psychological Science program is the largest in terms of faculty of the four departments.

Currently there are 12 full time Psychological Science faculty members, each teaching a 4-course/semester load. For some of the faculty, this course load may be reasonable, while others it really is so demanding that their research programs may not be as productive. Clearly, teaching excellence is a priority at Fitchburg. However, Fitchburg is also an institution that is looking to increase its visibility as a University that values research. Thus, I think that release time should be in line with the amount of research a faculty member is producing.

There are several issues with Faculty that I think could be easily solved with the above mentioned strategic planning; and there are some issues that I think are out of the control of the department.

Controllable issues:

Faculty need to seriously consider course numbering and delivery of the material commensurate with the level of student. That is not something that is a huge issue, but if faculty members could agree on what level a course could be taught at, this issue would be dealt with quickly.

Faculty need to sit down and talk about what direction they would like to see the department going in over the next several years. That means, discuss new hires, what areas they would like to see represented, and how they want that to compliment what is already there. This, too, is not a huge issue, but it is one that would go a long way towards providing structure to the major and help students determine how to navigate the curriculum. In

addition, this means working on the number of electives and consider how they deliver theses courses. There are some concerns from above that the number of electives hurt the delivery of other courses. While this may or may not be completely true, undoubtedly, there are more electives than typical. The faculty could work towards streamlining those courses.

In addition, the number of required credits is quite high. Faculty could, and should, consider trimming that number. One way to do it is to eliminate or combine one of the research based courses with another. That would help faculty spend their time on some other things that might support student success, such as research with students.

Finally, faculty need to determine how they choose to spend their time at Fitchburg. If the faculty are interested in working with students and doing research under those conditions, they have the new lab space and should use it. If faculty want to work on curriculum development, research, clinical work, etc., they should clearly work that into their plans so there is no lack of clarity of how the department is running. And, faculty need to discuss and determine the role and purpose of the graduate program at Fitchburg. How much department time and money is spent on this? How do they see it shaping their future?

Issues beyond control of the department – These are issues that would help the faculty, but they don't have control over:

1. There need to be more faculty. I believe they could hire 3 additional faculty members. There are way too many Psychological Science majors and the department needs the faculty to support them
2. Diversification of faculty: hiring is always an issue, but this would help the department to be more representative of the student population
3. Higher incoming salaries: Fitchburg is expensive and faculty need to be able to support themselves.
4. Increased time on professional development. Perhaps money for summer work

I'd also like to comment on what appeared to be factions among the faculty. I am not completely certain where those factions came from or why they exist, but they do no one in the department any good at all. Faculty need to support each other, act professionally and provide an environment for students that suggest collegiality and functionality. I don't think the issue of faculty factions is a kiss of death for the department, but it needs to be addressed. By hiring an outside faculty member as chair (with tenure and rank), the University could help deal with longstanding issues with an unbiased person leading the department into the next phase of its development. And, further, I believe by having someone from the outside come in, they could: 1. Handle the number of electives by eliminating those that are not taught often or by focusing on the ones most relevant to the department. 2. Work with faculty to develop a COHERENT message and theme 3. Shape the future of the department 4. Work through the issues of contention among faculty 5. Advocate for the department and not individual faculty needs 6. Shape relationships with students to advance the program and the curriculum. All of these steps would go a long way towards developing an outstanding department.

Time needs:

As I think you can see a theme of lack of time is riddled throughout this report; as it was echoed by all the faculty members. It is important for all faculty to share in the responsibilities of the department equally and for those faculty members heavily involved in research and writing it would be typical practice for these individuals to receive time through course reduction(s). The research, publication, community work and the supervision of student interns all help to raise the profile of the university and provide outstanding opportunities for student involvement...but it does take time.

Students Perceptions:

Considering student perspectives is very important; after all they are they ones that the program is serving. It really is all about building a better program for the students, which involves not only the curriculum, dynamics of the faculty, the research and internship opportunities, but the coming of age experience as well. Although this is an important part of the entire college experience, the major students choose and faculty that they work closely with are key to helping students with this process.

My scheduled time with the students was lunch in the student dining commons. It was an interesting lunch, to say the least. I met with only three students (as described above). Here are their concerns:

1. Lack of availability of faculty. The students really enjoyed the faculty at Fitchburg and felt as though they were supported. But, they also felt as though the faculty could be more available if there were more of them, and if there were more opportunities for student engagement in research, etc.
2. Students spoke of favoritism shown towards others who work closely with certain faculty
3. Students were concerned about registration for courses that were required. Students said that courses closed quickly and that they were not able to get into the courses that they really wanted.
4. Students were concerned about collegiality among faculty.

However, overall, the students were supportive of the faculty and seemed happy to be at Fitchburg State.

Resources:

There is a need for increased funds for attendance at professional conferences, specific lab requirements, software and summer grant stipends. Faculty need this time to increase the quality of research and teaching. I also believe that with proper resources, faculty will be less likely to compete internally for funding or resources to shape the program.

Facilities

Offices & Lab Space:

Simply put, the space allocated to the Psychological Science Program is the worst I have seen in all the reviews I have done. The office space is atrocious and there is little research space that is dedicated to the department (although this is better than the office space!).

However, the good news is that the department has been promised new space in McKay down the street. I STRONGLY encourage the department to take advantage of the new space being offered to them and MOVE, as a group, down to McKay. The faculty would have more privacy in their offices, have proper walls and access to close and well designed lab spaces. This would go a long way towards giving the department the space and opportunities that they should have available to them.

There were some concerns about moving, as expressed by several members in the Behavioral Science department meeting. However, psychological science seemed interested and I believe it would go a long way towards helping the department on a number of levels.

Classrooms:

The classrooms need updating of technology including placing fixed computer stations, document cameras and projectors in all the classrooms. The faculty need the space, the technology and the resources to be effective in the classroom. Each faculty member could utilize the technology to his or her needs and the students would benefit from having access to cutting edge technology.

Final recommendations:

1. Separate the program into its own Department
2. Hire a chair, with tenure and full professor rank, from the outside to deal with some of the issues indicated in the document. (or find someone from inside the department who is able to unite the faculty)
3. Have a retreat for the purposes of
    i. Dealing with departmental stress
   ii. Strategic planning
  iii. Course development and perhaps, reduction of electives
4. Develop a robust group advising model to deal with all the students
5. Develop strategies for including students in meetings, etc so they understand what is happening
6. MOVE TO MCAY
7. Spent time on a retreat for thoughtful, strategic planning, and for developing ways to deliver an excellent undergraduate experience for students, including diversity of

coursework, research opportunities, mentoring and advising, and communication with a larger audience of psychological science folks

8. Clearly delineate research expectations for new faculty; perhaps develop a new faculty mentoring program within the department
9. Support grant activity

It is my hope that this report reflects the department well. I was actually quite troubled by my visit to FSU. There were many things that I think you could do as an institution to improve the quality of the Psychological Science Program. This is not a knock on the faculty at all. In fact, the faculty are quite good. Rather, the comment is directed towards structure that is in place and the dynamics that seem to exist within and outside the department. The university would do well to have someone from the outside come in and run a faculty retreat to help ameliorate some of the concerns and problems that exist. I think the structures are in place to distinguish the department (and it should be a department) form other similar departments in a very positive way. There are just steps that need to be taken, and I hope I have helped you identify some of those steps. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me at Christopher.Hakala@quinnipiac.edu.

Sincerely,
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