

Department of Psychological Science Academic Program Review External Review Team Report

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As members of the Psychology External Review Team, we reviewed Weber State University's Department of Psychological Science (DPS) Internal Self Study Report and supporting documentation. Then, during a campus site visit on February 27th 2024, we conducted open ended interviews with a broad range of stakeholders (administrators, faculty, staff, and students). We also relied on our experience at our own universities and our knowledge about similar programs and national trends. We situate our assessment in the context of undergraduate and graduate education in departments that are like the DPS in size and mission. We begin by noting that the self-study was well prepared and provided a thoughtful and comprehensive overview of the department's mission and programs. The visit itself was very well organized, and we are grateful to Alicia Guthrie whose amazing organizational skills ensured that our meetings were productive and that our travel was seamless. Our assessment and feedback provided in this report is situated within the context of helping any department improve regardless of its current level of quality and success. The following presents our observations of the strengths of the DPS, followed by various challenges faced and opportunities for moving forward.

For the remainder of our report, we follow the main sections provided by the self-report and the summary. We added *Strengths* and *Opportunities* sub-sections with the hopes to highlight the exemplary work that the department is doing and provide some opportunities for growth.

A. Mission Statement

Weber State University's DPS has created and adopted a mission statement that is in line with current best-practices, national standards and goals, and is committed to advancing the knowledge, skills, and well-being of their students. Specifically, the DPS's mission is consistent with the American Psychological Association (APA) Undergraduate Guidelines 3.0 (APA, 2023) by focusing on both student's knowledge and application of psychological science and the promoting of critical thinking, inclusion, and diversity. The mission also demonstrates a strong commitment to learner-centered instructional, curriculum, and advisory practices. The DPS's mission illustrates its commitment to using High Impact Educational Experiences (HIEEs) to achieve their goals. Finally, when investigating past program reviews (i.e., 2012, 2016) and mission statements, the DPS continues to be truly committed and dedicated to the success of their students.

B. Curriculum

Strengths. The DPS's curriculum has historically been a strong part of their program. First, as noted in previous reviews, the DPS's curriculum follows a standard format that occurs commonly in psychology departments. This includes an introductory psychology course, a sequence of research methodology (both statistics and methods), a required number of

courses in specific areas of psychology, an offering of elective psychology courses, and a required capstone experience. It should also be noted that for the AS and the BS, they have a strong, integrated, progression and sequence of courses. Additionally, there are few low enrollment “boutique” psychology courses that sometimes take faculty away from teaching the core courses. This also allows the core courses to fill quickly.

Second, they have designed their curriculum to align with APA Guidelines 3.0 (2023) by mapping APA Guidelines 3.0 onto their courses. For instance, the DPS PSY 3600 aligns well with content knowledge and applications and Scientific Inquiry and Critical Thinking, whereas, PSY 4760 aligns strongly with Communication, Psychological Literacy, and Technology, and Personal and Professional Development. We commend the department on quickly and effectively adopting the most current APA Guidelines for both the AS and BS curricula. Summarily, the high-quality curriculum this department has developed is even noticed by Dean Julie Rich, stating that the DPS has “robust courses”.

Opportunities. While the curriculum is one of the strongest core aspects of the DPS, there is one main gap that is unaligned with other similar departments. Specifically, there needs to be more focus on career and workforce readiness. As of 2019, only 17% of psychology students go onto graduate school in a psychology related field (APA, 2019). It is imperative that students are prepared to use their degree. There are several ways in which the DPS can resolve this issue. First, we suggest that PSY 2010 (Science & Profession of Psychology) be a required course for the major. This will, in part, demonstrate the DPS’s commitment to workforce readiness. In addition, the PSY 2010 course can also be used as a supplement to academic advising to help students plan their college course sequencing, and it can be an early source of learning assessment data collection for psychology majors. There are several resources available from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology and the journal, *Teaching of Psychology*, such as advice on careers (Irons & Miller, 2015), career activities (Beyer & Cerniak, 2023), and syllabi for careers courses (STP, 2023). In 2017, *Teaching of Psychology* published an entire issue dedicated to teaching psychology students about workforce readiness and career development.

Of more minor suggestions, several students interviewed suggested that there should be more summer courses offered for students to take to stay on track for graduation. Finally, we noticed that you have two different options for your statistics and research methods courses. To streamline your curriculum, and to be consistent with most departments, you may want to consider only having one statistics and research methods sequence.

C. Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Strengths. Again, historically, the DPS has developed excellent student learning outcomes (SLOs) and an assessment plan to understand if they are achieving those SLOs. First, they have developed an extremely comprehensive assessment plan, which includes the ETS Major Field Test, the Psychology as a Science Scale, student performance assessment on four papers, the tracking of research paper completion rates, CV completion rates, the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory, general psychology exam scores, the Ethnocultural Empathy scale, and graduate questionnaire. The assessment plan goes above and beyond the norm compared to other departments nationally. The DPS has above average ETS scores

and differences between introductory psychology and capstone courses in students' beliefs about psychology as a science and in ethnocentric empathy, indicating the possible impacts of the program.

As previously mentioned, their SLOs are specifically designed and aligned with APA Guidelines 3.0 (APA, 2023). In the DPS curricular map, they go so far as to indicate which courses are either introduced, highlighted, emphasized, or is a primary goal of the course with APA 3.0 goals. This is a testament to the DPS's commitment to assessment, current best-practices in student learning objectives and curriculum design.

Opportunities. As mentioned previously, the DPS has an excellent assessment plan and SLOs that are aligned with national standards. There are a few opportunities for growth. First, a commitment to APA 3.0 Goal 5 (personal and professional development), the DPS may want to consider integrating workforce readiness and career SLOs in multiple courses, not just PSY 2010. We have observed that, across the country, departments show commitment to this issue by creating workforce readiness SLOs for each of their core, if not all their psychology courses. Vespia (2020) provides a unique approach to infuse career in workforce readiness throughout the curriculum. Relatedly, the DPS may want to consider measuring career readiness comprehensively. Although CVs are typically associated with academic positions, a possibility would be to collect skills-based resumes, teach them about LinkedIn or Indeed, and incorporate the Skillful Psychology Student (Naufel et al., 2018) within this process.

D. Academic Advising

Strengths. First and foremost, the DPS recognizes that there are a few issues with the current advising model. These specific opportunities for change are described below. As such, they have already begun to propose a new model for advising (refer to Appendix K in the self-study). The team was impressed with the effectiveness of the "open advising week" and how it is supported by both students and faculty. The DPS has dedicated advisors that serve students well both in and outside the department. They have developed a very useful and comprehensive advising book that is maintained. The handbook serves as a great resource for both faculty and students. As measured in their assessment plan, 84% of graduating seniors met with an advisor, and students believed their advisors were helpful in *understanding major requirements, CatTracks, and answering questions.*

Opportunities. There are a few areas where the DPS may improve in advising. First, there can be a bottleneck or choke point for advising. It is unclear whether this is because there are not enough advisors or if it is a process issue. Students expressed concern over this saying that it was sometimes difficult to get an appointment with an advisor. This may also be exacerbated by the inefficient system to have the department administrator screen advising appointments (also, scheduling appts is a drain on her time), which can also blur the role between advising and administrative duties. This may also be compounded by the partially siloed advising between general advising and the DPS advising teams. Meaning, for the associate degree, they often meet with one advisor and for the major they meet with another advisor. While it is understandable that there is a general advisor for the college (this is a common practice), it is important for the DPS to be directly in contact with

students from the start. We have a couple suggestions to resolve these concerns. First, the DPS has already made a proactive step in solving these concerns with the new advising plan. Specifically, the 3-person advising committee with associated reassign-time for the duties performed. Second, the DPS may also consider opening advising hours during faculty's office hours. Not on the same scale as the advising team, but often all faculty in a department advise their students on both academic and career/graduate school plans. Another possibility is to have a dedicated staff advisor for the department. This too, is a common practice for similar sized departments. Finally, when meeting with students, they expressed that the advising is generally good for course work and graduate school, but that they would like to meet with a psychology advisor earlier and that there should be more advising on career-related issues. Some of the previous suggestions may help resolve this concern as well.

E. Faculty

Strengths. The DPS consists of a range of faculty at different rankings and tenure statuses with varied psychological subdiscipline expertise. In both the written materials and the in-person site visit, the commitment of the faculty to the departmental needs was apparent and consistent. Both the DPS Chair and faculty expressed and demonstrated a commitment to both the program and to the students to do almost anything to help these entities succeed. This dedication was evident by faculty providing outside the classroom research opportunities for students, covering in-demand courses either as an overload or in lieu of a preferred course, and providing an open-door environment to increase accessibility and communication effectiveness for both students and colleagues. This supportive environment seems to have played a key role in helping the department face challenges of the past and present, and the importance of this environment should not be understated as it can be difficult to achieve without a commitment from all those involved.

Upon interviewing students in the DPS, it was evident that they feel supported by and are the primary focus of faculty. Many students commented on the strong rapport (i.e., comfortable working relationship) they had with all the faculty, which reflects best practices in current research (Richmond et al., 2022) demonstrating that rapport is one of the most predictive elements of effective teaching and HIEEs. Additionally, several students commented on how it was obvious that their faculty were “teaching-focused and have students’ interest in mind.” In so much, they commented that faculty are both professional and yet, personable. Finally, we found it intriguing that while students felt that faculty had *high expectations* of them, students also felt faculty provided *high support* to help them succeed.

Opportunities. The workload of the faculty within the DPS seemed to be a pressure point as reported by all faculty. However, differing opinions existed on some of the more subtle elements of this workload challenge, such as faculty overloads, and there were somewhat mixed opinions as to how to address this challenge. To elaborate, first a portion of faculty within the DPS were teaching one or more course overloads every semester with some faculty seeking out several overloads per semester with others teaching overloads more out of a commitment or obligation to the DPS and the students. Second, some of the more specialized classes are not commonly taught as faculty needed to cover more of the required

courses demanded by the undergraduate degree program. Third, it appeared that faculty frequently engaged in activities (e.g., independent study, undergraduate research) that were either not counted in the Student Credit Hours (SCHs) workload or were counted only as fractional credits that could be stored or “banked” for release time in a later semester. However, the ability to use this release time to reduce workload SCHs seemed difficult to do as the DPS frequently needed faculty to cover in-demand courses. Although the DPS managed to navigate these challenges up to this point, persisting in this manner risks faculty fatigue and only allows for a small margin of error if course demand increases or changes. Faculty within the department also expressed a similar concern.

A multi-prong approach may be needed to resolve these issues. The review team recommends that a new faculty line be added to the DPS to address a portion of the overload demands and to potentially allow a bit more flexibility in the types of courses offered to the students. It should be noted that the Dean also acknowledges the need for more faculty within the department. Moreover, in the 2016 program review, a recommendation was made to add two (2) tenure-track lines to the department. In further support of this recommendation, it appears that the DPS has been very efficient in maximizing the number of students enrolled in its courses, and it also seems as though a new line for the DPS has not been added for a couple of years. The review team does want to acknowledge that a recent failed search may indicate that this recommendation may be a challenge. Reviewing the reasons for the failed search, specifically any feedback given by candidates who declined the offer over the past academic year, should be used as a starting point to make hiring adjustments.

To address the fractional SCHs that are difficult to use for release time, it is recommended that the possibility of paying these hours as overloads be considered. Although this recommendation may be a less than optimal solution as it fails to directly address the overload issues entirely, it would at least allow faculty to be compensated for work completed rather than banking hours for an undetermined amount of time or never receiving the course load reduction.

F. Program Support

Strengths. The DPS is the largest department within the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and there is strong support for the program and the program’s initiatives and trajectory from the Dean. Housed in the newly remodeled Linquist Hall, the program provides excellent teaching and research spaces, some of which was supported through grants acquired by the Chair of the DPS. The Program is also supportive of and interconnected with other interdisciplinary programs throughout the university such as the seemingly popular and successful interdisciplinary Neuroscience minor, a cooperative minor with the College of Health Professions and the College of Science, and new initiatives such as the Behavioral Health Technician certificate.

Opportunities. Due to university budget cuts, departmental financial support has declined over the past three years from \$31,400 down to \$18,500, which has directly impacted faculty discretionary funds by reducing them from \$1,000 per year down to \$750. In a similar manner, student research and conference travel funding seem to consistently remain low and difficult to obtain. The review team recommends that the College Development Director

work with the DPS to seek out donors specifically to support undergraduate research and travel. These types of outreach initiatives also have the potential for creating reciprocating relationships for current students to donate to similar initiatives as alumni in the future. Some space shortage risk also seems to exist related to newly planned hires.

There also seems a great opportunity to grow the program in two ways. First, students and some faculty suggested that the current tutoring program should be increased. Specifically, growing the current program by recruiting students from *Psi Chi* and upper division courses and possibly encouraging a faculty mentor, with some sort of incentive (i.e., reassign time) to oversee the development of this program. Second, there seems to be a natural fit and with faculty expertise to develop a B.S. in Neuroscience. Nationwide, there is a trend for many psychology departments to add this as a major.

G. Relationships with the External Community

Strengths. The DPS makes noteworthy, successful efforts to reach out to and maintain a positive relationship with the local community through various educational offerings and outreach. The DPS offers various course modalities and structures to students. The DPS offers a significant number of face-to-face, virtual, and online classes at various times throughout the day, and they offer classes at other physical sites, the Davis and Farmington campuses, within the state-designated service region. The DPS continues to work on significantly expanding an already robust Concurrent Enrollment (CE) program, which both helps to provide classes to high school students in the community as well as fulfill the Regional University mission as designated by state of Utah. CE numbers for the department increased dramatically from 318 students in 2017 to 1509 students in 2023 with more outreach and expansion planned. The DPS also continues to expand its curriculum offerings, such as by offering a new Associate of Science program, which should serve to better reach a wider audience of individuals with varied academic plans as well as provide “stackable” educational credits. Throughout all these varied educational modalities and structures, as well as in responding to adjustments necessary during the onset and post-onset of COVID, faculty seem to be working efficiently at meeting the educational needs of the community in a variety of contexts.

The DPS also provides community outreach and education through other approaches than solely course offerings. Faculty members provide service to the community by serving on the board of directors or volunteering at local agencies and by engaging in community-focused research. The DPS also incorporates service-learning and practicum elements into courses which results in students providing support to the community through social skill trainings, tutoring, and other similar initiatives.

Opportunities. As the DPS continues to expand offering a greater number of courses to students using a variety of delivery methods, the external review team does have concerns of overextending the resources and time of the faculty within the department. Specifically, the primary concern is that in a department already working at a very high level of efficiency, it is unclear how an expansion of course offerings through additional CE classes can occur without resulting in a departmental loss of current resources, time, program offerings, etc. Concerns about additional faculty workload and stressors become relevant to this CE

expansion as well and have the potential of exacerbating the workload concerns previously identified. The review team understands that this CE expansion is driven primarily by current state, and perhaps university, demand, but the DPS should clearly identify and articulate to the appropriate entities the support needed to continue with this expansion without it coming at a cost to a department already delicately balancing various demands.

H. Concluding Thoughts

The DPS Chair, Dr. Aaron Ashley, effectively and efficiently guides the department. Dr. Ashley brings strong leadership skills and has demonstrated his commitment to advancing the department. The review team would like to conclude with the highlights and opportunities to improve the department and program. First, there are several things to celebrate about the DPS.

- The faculty are productive researchers, and they regularly include students as co-presenters at conferences and as co-authors on publications.
- The psychology faculty take on meaningful service roles at the department, college, university, and national level. They have created a culture of supporting one another and their students. This has contributed substantially to their success, and their ability to face challenges.
- The faculty are excellent teachers who put their students first, even in the face of enrollment increases that are difficult to manage under the best of circumstances. The faculty consistently engage in HIEEs across classes of all sizes and in classrooms that are not always conducive to doing so. Supporting this assessment, students unanimously voiced their appreciation for the faculty's commitment to teaching.
- There is a long-standing culture of thorough and innovative program and student assessment in the DPS. Their curriculum is aligned with the APA Guidelines 3.0 (APA, 2023) and these guidelines are also interwoven in the DPS SLOs.
- As the Dean noted, the DPS is the "crown jewel" of the college with outstanding faculty and students.
- The DPS is actively engaged in community outreach that provides a public exemplar for Weber State through its CE program and service-learning projects.

There are several opportunities to advance the DPS as well.

- Requiring a career course for majors would align with national trends and assist in most students in understanding and applying their psychology degree to the workforce.
- There is a clear need to revise the current advising plan. The DPS has already started this process, and we are confident that they will devise and implement a plan to resolve some of the advising concerns.
- Assessing workforce preparedness is a pressing concern of APA and the DPS would better serve their students if this was more developed in the assessment plan.
- The DPS needs more faculty. While this is often a request in program reviews, given the historical context of past program reviews and the need to reduce the systemic culture of working overloads this current request is designed to target specific ongoing need.

In sum, Weber State's DPS is an exemplary program in all respects with a strong dedication to advancing the profession, the university, and its students through student-centered instruction. The dedicated faculty work hard and efficiently to comprehensively meet the needs of the student, the university, and the broader community. We sincerely hope that this feedback will be beneficial to helping them take the next steps of becoming an even better department.

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