

Memorandum

Date: 16 November 2011

To: University Senate

From: Thomas A. Discenna, Chair
Senate Planning & Review Committee

Re: Proposal for a Ph.D. and M.S. in Psychology

The Senate Planning Review Committee (SPRC) reviewed the proposal from the Department of Psychology for a new degree program leading to a Masters of Science (M.S.) and Ph.D. The SPRC read, reviewed and discussed the proposal in addition to meeting with Professor Todd Shackelford, Chair of the Department of Psychology to discuss some of our concerns.

Summary

The Department of Psychology of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) proposes a new program of graduate education leading to a M.S. and a Ph.D. in Psychology. The proposed program would have two concentrations: Biological and Basic Processes and Social and Behavioral Processes. Students in the M.S. program would be given a broad education in both concentrations while Ph.D. students would receive a similarly broad exposure to both concentrations while settling into one of the core areas for their research projects. The Ph.D. degree designed to be an “entry degree to professional careers within the academic and research disciplines of psychology” while the M.S. degree will offer a credential for students seeking entry or advancement in a “variety of industry careers.”

The Department of Psychology projects 16 students in each of the first three years (12 pursuing the M.S. and 4 in the Ph.D.) before reaching a capacity of 36 students in the M.S. program and 12 students in the Ph.D. track.

The Department rationalizes these new programs on the basis of the need for “clinical and nonclinical applications” to reduce “substance abuse and health-risking behavior, or increasing innovation and entrepreneurship, or for that matter, patient compliance.” The Department maintains that it is in a unique position “at the intersection of the social, biological, cognitive and behavioral sciences” which it believes will allow its students to “exploit opportunities for interdisciplinary research initiatives.” Moreover, the Department believes there will be “a shortfall of increasing magnitude” in the production of Psychology Ph.D.s in the very near future.

The Department of Psychology has identified five institutions within the State of Michigan, as well as two Ohio schools and one Canadian university, as benchmarks for this proposal. The Oakland University program is differentiated from these institutions on the basis of the “value and power of across-subdisciplines studies and research

collaboration.” In other words, the benchmark institutions focus narrowly on subdisciplines while Oakland’s program would offer an “across-subdisciplines perspective” without substantially adding to the credit hours a student would need to earn a degree.

The Department of Psychology “has been considering the initiation of a graduate program in its recent hiring.” Therefore, only one additional faculty hire, preferably a senior member to enhance the academic visibility of the department and assist in recruiting, is requested for this program. Moreover, while the Department argues that fully funding Ph.D. students is of paramount necessity, it envisions that “graduate assistantship delivery of undergraduate credit hours would yield additional revenue.” The Library report indicates sufficient resources for the program. The only other resources requested by Psychology are for software and hardware to create a statistics and computing laboratory.

SPRC has identified the following items as strengths and concerns regarding this proposal:

Strengths

1. Students graduating with these degrees will be well qualified for careers of the type that the degree identifies as appropriate for its majors.
2. The degree program offers deep preparation in the field of Psychology.
3. The committee finds that the faculty of the Psychology Department to be exceptionally well prepared to offer a degree of the type identified.
4. In a related sense, the committee also determined that the degree described here would be of great benefit to faculty research.
5. The committee applauds the work of faculty in integrating M.S. students with Ph.D. students, believing that this integration will to the benefit of both groups and to the overall success of the program.
6. Furthermore, the committee finds that the opportunities for undergraduates to work with graduate students on research projects will enrich undergraduate education in Psychology.
7. The size of the undergraduate major in Psychology, reported by the Department as consisting of some 900 students, should provide an ample base for the recruitment of graduate students.
8. The proposal highlights the relationship between the graduate program and the Medical School, a relationship that is also addressed in a letter of support from Brad Roth.
9. The committee determined that with the library resources currently available, that there is significant support for the program.

Concerns

1. Of fundamental concern for the committee is that the proposed degree is narrowly tailored for preparing students for work in academia. Should the projections cited by the

Department of Psychology for increased demand in higher education fail to materialize, it is unclear what students in this program would be trained to do.

2. On a related note, the committee finds that the Department's use of the term interdisciplinary to be unique. It seems, in the context of the Psychology discipline's understanding, to refer to the various sub-disciplines that constitute the field. Thus, while the proposed program does offer some "cross sub-disciplinary" training, it falls short of achieving what we understand as interdisciplinarity, thus further narrowing the degree program. The committee would encourage the department to consider interdisciplinarity in this larger context and seek opportunities for cognate coursework in fields outside of Psychology.

3. The preceding issue becomes most acute for us when considering graduates of the M.S. degree. The Department claims that graduates of this degree will qualified both to seek admission to Ph.D. programs in Psychology as well as be trained for positions in a variety of industries. However, given the narrowness of the education received at this level, the committee questions whether this will be the case.

4. The narrowness of the program also concerns us in regards to attracting students to the program.

5. The committee is also concerned that research ethics is not given a prominent position within the curriculum. Our review found only a few lectures devoted to this topic and while Professor Shackelford claimed that ethics was an intrinsic part of the entire curriculum, we believe that setting it out as a consideration independent of it being embedded within coursework would go far toward highlighting its importance.

With these in mind the SPRC, by a vote of 6-0, offers its support to the graduate program in Psychology.