

Undergraduate Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Cover Sheet:

Degree: BA in Psychology **For Calendar Year:** 2010 _____
(Date submitted to college committee: Feb. 25, 2011 __ By: Roger Webb _____)
(Date posted on college assessment website: _____)

Overall Rating: _____

(1) Student learning goal(s) addressed this year:

During 2010, the Psychology Department took a radical detour in our use of assessment with an eye to a new goal: the goal of increasing the number of our majors who graduate. Degree completion has become a high priority goal of the Governor, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) and, particularly, of UALR. In meetings with the faculty at the beginning of the academic year both Chancellor Anderson and Provost Belcher announced that increasing UALR's graduation rate was the top priority for the institution. Using the official standard of the six year graduation rate, UALR currently is achieving only a 17.9% graduation rate, and that is the lowest in the State.

The Department adopted the ten instructional objectives suggested by the Working Group on Undergraduate Education of the American Psychological Association several years ago and have presented those in earlier assessment reports. We have made progress on assessing some of those, others not. Because of significant changes in our academic program in the last two years, we need to reconsider how our course offerings relate to our degree and instructional objectives. We are also trying to hire an outside chair. There is an opportunity, therefore, to put objective based assessment on hold while we look at the issue of degree completion—what might be considered a *metagoal*. While our instructional objectives are not likely to change, the weighting and priorities very well may, and we can wait for our new Department Chair to reassess those issues.

(2) Learning outcomes/objectives for those goals addressed this year:

In the Spring of 2010, the Department added 39 students to our data base with the MAPP test developed by ETS (total = 178). That test is designed to measure critical thinking, critical reading and math at the college graduate level. The data did not differ greatly from those collected and reported in earlier assessment reports, and we have halted further testing. Most of our students who generate scores that ETS considers too low are people who came to UALR with an associate's degree from a two year institution, and who we cannot force to take more core courses. With the exception of the foreign language programs, we are the only department in the College that has objective, third party, test data on student performance.

This year we have focused on why our students are not graduating in greater numbers.

(3) Courses & activities where goals were assessed:

We have a data base on 200 graduating seniors in Psychology 4100, Senior Synthesis, collected over the preceding three years, and corresponding data on 367 lower level students. In addition, we have collected data on career interests in Senior Synthesis and some other courses starting in the fall 2010 semester.

(4) Methods used:

We used survey questionnaires, essay questions and standardized interest inventories in data collection. We are also using statistics from University data bases to estimate the number of majors and the number of degrees granted to Psychology majors over the last few years.

(5) What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

The Psychology Department is a good place to start working on student retention and graduation. We have always been one of the largest majors, and we account for a high percentage of the total BA degrees produced by the University. In 1997 and 1998, the Department accounted for about 10% of all BA degrees. That number has fallen off over the last decade, but it has never fallen below 5.5%. With no required courses and half the faculty of competing departments, Psychology used to lead the University in upper level elective SSCH production. We know that total SSCH production has dropped along with the percentage of degree, but how much of that is from Psychology 2300 is not clear. Only about a quarter of our majors take our introductory course, and we know that costs us SSCH plus a major recruiting net.

We really must, however, reexamine the University's degree statistics: this semester we have 77 students who have filed applications for graduation. None of the University's graduation data suggest we could possibly have such a large number of graduates in one semester. There are only a few years since 1993 in which we have been credited with more than 77 graduates for the whole year.

In any recent semester, we have more than 300 declared majors taking courses. We have even more majors, but not all take courses every semester. We are also, however, a department that tends to pick up UALR's more marginal students as majors. Our average ACT scores are below those of the University as a whole.

We began to investigate extra academic characteristics of our students about five years ago with surveys of our graduating seniors. We have data on high school courses, family attitudes about college, parental education, financial support, other colleges attended, work histories in high school and college, marital status, children and other factors that prior research suggested could relate to college success. We collected similar data on samples of students in lower and upper level psychology courses. We started collecting career essays three years ago on some students. In 2010, we started systematically collecting interest inventory data.

Some basic demographics help define who our students are. The following statements are based on survey data from 200 graduating seniors in our Senior Synthesis class between 2007 and 2009. We know there are some errors in these data, but these numbers are close.

About three quarters of our majors are female and about 70% are white. The majority are first generation college students with neither parent having a four year degree. About 40% have at least one child. Over three fourths are working, and over 60% say they are solely responsible for paying their college costs. Over half took at least one AP course in high school. A quarter report attending only one college (i.e. only UALR), but about half transferred one or more courses in

their major. Almost 90% say their initial college enrollment was as a full time student (taking more than 12 SSCH) and about half say they have been continuously enrolled since first beginning college. Over half report that their first college was within thirty minutes of home. Having at least one parent with a college degree is a strong predictor of whether a student took the college prep course in high school, assumed they were going to college while in high school, took more AP courses, and are receiving financial help from his/her family.

About two-thirds have some student loan debt, and over half receive Pell grants. Student estimates of total student loan debt at the end of the undergraduate degree range from zero to \$80,000, with a modal estimate of \$30,000.

What we are exploring at the moment are the differences between our graduating seniors (the ones who have made it) and lower level majors and other students enrolled in Psychology courses. While we find differences, none so far appear to be very important in explaining the differences among the groups. What we obviously need are longitudinal data in which we follow students through their years as Psychology majors. One of our professors, Robert Corwyn, who is a leading expert working with large data bases, is having better luck getting data from OIR, so we hope we can relate more of what we have to University data bases.

Findings beyond demographics: As psychologists, we feel we are in a better position than other departments to go beyond the demographics to infer student characteristics. We noted in an earlier report an apparent lack of achieved personal identity in the career essays from many of our students. The construct of identity is a core idea in developmental and cognitive psychology. The notion is that mentally healthy adults have a coherent cognitive image of who they are, how they fit into the world, and where they are going. In classic developmental psychology (e.g. Erik Erikson), this is a task mastered in adolescence with details about career and relationships to be nailed down later. Recent research in psychology suggests that the current generations of students are not as far along in the identity process as were young people of earlier generations. There was an article about drifts young people by Robin Marantz Henig “What Is It About The 20-Somethings” in the *NY Times Sunday Magazine* (August 18, 2010), and a new comic strip, “Dustin”, in the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* that features a hapless twenty something living with his frustrated parents. If it makes the *NY Times* and the funny paper, it must be a real phenomenon. Our earlier data from UALR, suggest that only about 15% of our students have reached the stage of identity achievement, but this appears to be part of a cultural trend.

One clear downside to a lack of personal identity is the difficulty in selecting careers and planning education. College education assumes that students have a ball park notion of where they are going—particularly after the first two years—and are choosing courses and a major in some rational relationship to their eventual career choices. There is much evidence that many of our students do not warrant such an assumption.

Here are supporting statistics from University data: In the Spring 2010 semester, the Department had 174 full time declared majors (defined by taking 12 or more SSCH) and 168 part timers. Of these 342 students, 85 (25%) already had more than 124 cumulative SSCH. That is, they had enough SSCH for a degree prior to their current semester. We do not know the individual stories on these students. A much higher percentage of part timers had over 124 hours, so maybe more of our part timers were not actually seeking a degree. Anyone who transfers after the first two years or changes majors will almost certainly need more than the bare minimum 124 SSCH, but these numbers are startling—30 of these students had over 140 SSCH. This statistic would be consistent with the notion that

many of our students are drifting through their educations with no clear sense of purpose—or any great need to graduate. Someone has coined the term *Meanderthals* to describe these students.

The Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) apparently has come to a conclusion similar to that suggested here. They opened a web site where students could take interest inventories on line at no cost. (Note: UALR has made interest inventories available at a low cost for years, but, according to the director of the testing office, of late virtually no one has availed themselves of the service.) Interest inventories are potentially useful because they get at student characteristics that we might actually be able to do something about. Ill focused patterns of interests would also be one diagnostic indicator of poorly defined identities.

Technical aside: Psychologists have been measuring interests since at least 1916, and doing it very well. Interest inventories are designed to measure and predict things that a person would enjoy doing—not necessarily competence or opportunity. There are two major interest inventories available today. The Strong Vocational Interest Blank has been available in one form or another since about 1920 and is considered the gold standard. The Kuder Vocational Preference Inventory does not give the same level of detail in its reports that the Strong does, but it is a psychometrically sound instrument. The conflict we have in the present situation is that the Strong is the better test in terms of the information it reports and the career material to which it relates, but the Kuder is what the State has made available free.

The problem can be seen in the State on-line Kuder site where it is possible to click on a switch that gives job preferences in terms of the six type Holland Model. The Holland model developed by John Holland has become the consensus model for career interests. A publication gives the Holland codes for all of the jobs in the Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Job Titles*. Unfortunately, when a student clicks the Holland button, the instruction appears to "enter your Holland code". The Kuder site does not generate that information; a student has to find this from some other source! The Strong reports its first level of information in the Holland model, then gives scores on 20 general interest areas (comparable to the Kuder report) and finally on about 200 specific jobs.

Bruce Moore and Roger Webb in our Department began collaborating in the Fall semester of 2010 to get students to try the State website and for some students to take the Strong inventory. We funded the Strong tests and reports with Department funds and assessment money from the University. The results were mixed, and we are just beginning to grasp them. The following comments must be considered tentative.

Webb offered extra credit in his Developmental Psychology course for students took the Kuder inventories and wrote a short report on their experience. Moore offered the opportunity to take the state materials and the Strong in his Organizational Psychology course. Webb offered the Strong to a few developmental students who seemed to be engaged in the process after taking the Kuder and to all his upper level students.

It was fairly clear that the better outcomes were in Moore's course where most of the students took the inventories and seemed to be actively engaged in the process. This is not surprising since most of those students have made a career commitment to some area of professional psychology. Webb's Developmental students include a wide variety of majors and backgrounds. About half the class of 70 students took the State materials and submitted a report, but many seemed to be doing the minimum to receive extra credit. With a few exceptions, there did not seem to be a genuinely positive reception in the Developmental class. Webb got a much better response in his upper level Personality Development course where several of the students not only took the State inventories, but also took the Strong Inventory and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and got a career advising report from the publisher of the tests.

This semester Webb and Moore are repeating their efforts. In the Developmental class, Webb intends to move his lectures on identity forward in the class schedule and try to get students to take the State inventories as part of the course. He will offer an opportunity to take the Strong to students who appear positively engaged. All students in Webb's Tests and Measurement course will be offered the Strong.

What is surprising, disturbing, but in some ways confirming of the discussion above is the lack of serious interest shown by the majority of Webb's Developmental students in the Fall semester. One would think that students who were adrift and unsure of where they were going in their careers would jump at the opportunity to take career interest inventories and get some professional guidance. The lack of response suggests that not only are many students not far along in their career identity formation, but they are not terribly worried about it. We are going to have to take more time to see where the response to the interest inventories is taking us.

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

As we stated above, it is too early to know how an exploration of interests and identity will affect our efforts to increase graduation rates. We remain hopeful.

In addition to data collection, members of the Department have taken note of things our students have said in advising sessions or discussions in classes that may relate to retention. What follows should be considered hypotheses, rather than statements of fact. Also, the following statements are not official positions of the Psychology Department, but points of discussion among some members of the Department.

1. The University has made a laudable effort to upgrade the standards for incoming students. We are no longer accepting the least qualified even as conditional admissions. This should have an impact on the quality of students entering our major. The effects, however, have a lag time since relatively few of our majors take Introductory Psychology with us, and that is where we would first expect to see changes.

2. Regardless of all our other considerations, the major cause of students' failure to complete degrees must be the lack of aptitude and poor educational background. If we

can do anything for the student with a 16 on the ACT and a 1.76 GPA who simply vanishes, it is not obvious what that might be. UALR, however, has many students with good ability, but from such a disadvantaged family and educational background that their chances of success are seriously compromised. We know the concept of “scaffolding” applies, and we need to explore what we can provide for these students. The first year college experience courses that some departments are developing would be a good start. Several of points 3-8 below relate to this in some way.

3. Students continue to have unrealistic and ill informed notions about their educations. Some of this relates to an apparent failure to digest advising from University College or from the Department, and some must relate to family backgrounds with no college graduate parent to offer guidance.

We think many students do not understand the relationship between their choice of undergraduate major and career choice. In many fields of professional training, or even entry level jobs, a person’s undergraduate major makes little or no difference. Many of our students apparently believe that they need to major in the field closest to where they are trying to find a career, sometimes apparently because the words sound alike (e.g. Social Work requires Sociology). We think this may be behind some of the major changing we see and may be delaying graduation for some students. This is a problem that should be addressed in advising, but we may need informational programs addressing the issue.

Karin Jones who works in our office collected material on jobs that people with BAs in psychology had gone into and prepared a handout. Many of our advisees expressed surprise at the range of things psychology majors were doing with no graduate degree.

4. Some of us believe that we may have underestimated the impact of financial considerations in educational decisions. We fear that some of our students do not want to graduate because they will no longer qualify for student loans, Pell grants, etc. and the clock will start running on repaying student loans. State lottery scholarships may be having an impact, but see below.

5. We see problems with the minor requirement delaying some students in completing their degrees. One of our professors allowed himself to be elected to the Faculty Senate with the sole purpose of eliminating the minor requirement and achieved nothing on that front in a two year term beyond having a motion referred to committee. If the group currently working on reformulating UALR’s degree requirements recreates local history on this topic, the minor requirement is likely to be preserved because some departments think they gain an advantage in SSCH production by making students have minors.

This is not to argue, it should be noted, that departments should not offer minors for students who want them. The Psychology Department recommends the IT minor to our students and believes it may be the single best offering in our undergraduate curriculum.

6. Eliminating the minor requirement would arguably have no impact on the quality of a UALR degree, and would bring UALR into line with virtually all good universities. Altering the foreign language requirement would affect the quality of our degree, but the requirement should be examined. Many programs are already excused from the requirement, and it is an apparent stumbling block for most of our majors.

7. When three-quarters of our majors are female and 40% have children, we believe that the University needs a child care center.

8. One of our professors made inquiries of the ADHE administrator responsible for the lottery scholarship program concerning the percentage of students at the various colleges in the State receiving lottery scholarships. This inquiry was made fairly early in the preceding semester, and a promised report has not appeared. We suspect that UALR may be disadvantaged because of our large percentage of non-traditional, older, and part time students. Improving access to lottery scholarship aid could have an impact on retention.

9. The Department needs to reconsider the direction in which our BA program is evolving. We have pushed our BA program toward more methodological and statistical requirements, and we believe those are the most important transportable skills we teach. It may well be, however, that the Department needs to explore splitting our program into something like a traditional liberal arts degree and a more rigorous pre-professional degree. Only 4% of psychology majors, on a nationwide basis, go on to a Ph.D. program so a strong methods track may not match the needs of many of our students.

10. The Department also needs to keep an eye on being “student friendly” in dealing with students and their requirements. When we were accounting for 10% of UALR’s total BA production, some of us have the memory of working with students to see how we could make what they had on their transcripts work with degree requirements. At some point, some of us feel we drifted toward a more legalistic approach. Some of us feel now that we have made strides toward getting back to our earlier attitude, but we need to keep the issue in mind. While not arguing we should give away the store, there are often points of discretion in dealing with student requirements, and those should be resolved, as often as possible, in favor of the student.

Summary. Professors Moore and Webb are committed to working with student interest measures—and, as noted, so apparently is the ADHE—because we are convinced that the lack of clarity in career goals is a major source of delay in degree completion.

Points 1-10 above involve a number of observations or conjectures that may or may not prove to be either correct or actionable. A questionnaire used at the time of advising might be one way to collect data on what students believe about requirements, majors, future careers, etc. A few phone calls to people with 150 SSCH and no degree might be illuminating. (Would students admit to delaying graduation because they could not afford to lose student aid?) Some of the points we touch on (i.e. the minor requirement and a child care facility) are clearly outside the control of the Department, though we can lobby higher powers. Again, it is critical to note that points 1-10 are not official opinions of the

Psychology Department, but observations by the person writing this report and some other members of the Department.

In our future work on the problem of student retention and graduation, we intend to be guided by fundamental principles of organizational change in which we have some modest expertise. When trying to change behavior to maximize a measurable goal, potentially causative factors need to be evaluated on two dimensions: 1) How broad or extensive would the impact of altering the factor be, and 2) how hard or expensive would it be to change the factor. Obviously, what we would like to identify would be factors easy and cheap to fix that had broad impact. On the other hand, it does not make sense to spend a lot of time or money on something that would have only marginal effect. Our next efforts need to be directed at identifying more potential factors and sorting out the issues identified along the lines of the model we are suggesting.

Finally, we add a moral caveat. Currently the focus of the Governor, the ADHE and UALR is on increasing student graduation rates. One of the best ideas ever to come out of Psychology is known as Campbell's Law (after the late, great, Donald). Campbell's law states that anytime you have a simple numeric criterion for an important social process, you will inevitably corrupt both the criterion and the process. Our best example to date has been the simple minded use of standardized test scores to evaluate primary and secondary education, and we know what a disaster that has been and continues to be. We must hope that higher education in Arkansas does not go down a similar track with graduation rates. UALR has a clear interest in changing the current standard criterion of the six year graduation rate, and that would not constitute corruption, but good management. We must hope, however, that we don't corrupt the degree. As psychologists, we firmly believe that institutional contingencies will always override verbal statements from administrators in determining actual behavior.