

# If students want to go to graduate school, then how can we help them get there?

## A Multi-method Approach to Boosting Graduate Program Acceptance Rates

### Capital University's Psychology Department

While there are many psychology-related jobs available for psychology majors after graduation, in order to be a "psychologist" students must obtain a graduate degree. Acceptance into psychology graduate programs is very competitive, with acceptance rates for doctoral programs averaging 20% (based on a sample of 1,286 psychology graduate programs; Kohout & Wicherski, 2000), while acceptance rates for programs at schools that are of interest to our majors (e.g., the Ohio State University) are much lower than 20%. Psychology faculty were disappointed in the number of seniors reporting rejection by their top-ranked graduate school. The department asked the following questions: (1) What skills and qualities do we want our majors to have when they graduate from Capital? (2) What curricular and co-curricular experiences will foster these skills and qualities? (3) How do we design experiences that best prepare students for seeking a variety of jobs after graduation AND for succeeding in graduate school and the GRE, MCAT, or LSAT? (4) How can we make the learning goals of the university, department, and American Psychological Association coherent threads that are emphasized throughout the curriculum? (5) How can we extend the time horizon of what students learn in our courses beyond the end of the course? The department used a multi-method approach and viewed the situation from many perspectives, including: Alignment between Department Goals and Disciplinary Goals, Curricular Review, GRE General Test and Psychology Subject Test Scores, Academic Advising, and Written and Oral Communication.

### Alignment between Department Goals and Disciplinary Goals

Department Goals	APA Recommendations (Halonon et al., 2006)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognition of ethnic, cultural, social and gender diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize, understand, and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A broad and deep knowledge base incorporating both social and natural science aspects of each discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiarity with major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Methodological competence in statistics, research design and assessment methods including the use of technology for these purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation</li> <li>Demonstrate information competence and the ability to use computers and other technology for many purposes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practical research, laboratory or field experience to generalize a scientific style of thought to the realm of application</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respect and use creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and the scientific approach to solve problems related to behavior and mental processes</li> <li>Develop realistic ideas about how to implement their psychological knowledge, skills, and values in occupational pursuits in a variety of settings</li> <li>Understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues</li> <li>Develop insight into their own and others' behavior and mental processes and apply effective strategies for self-management and self-improvement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective communication skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate effectively in a variety of formats</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensitivity to ethical issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically, and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology</li> </ul>

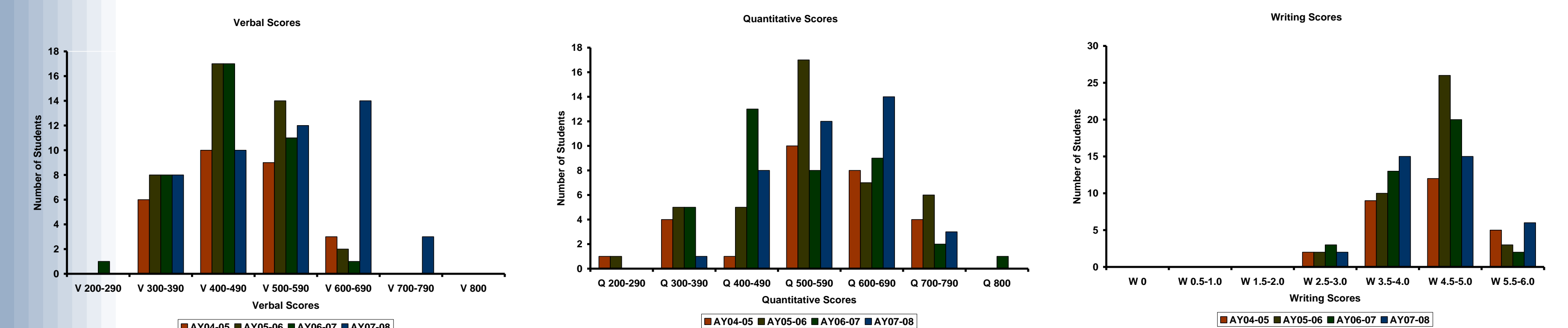
### GRE Psychology Subject Test Scores, Graduate Program Recommendations, & Curricular Review

- Conducted an Overall Psychology Assessment, Spring 2009**
  - Used a subset of items from the GRE Psychology Subject Test.
  - There was a significant difference between incoming first year students and graduating seniors,  $t(47) = -8.708, p = .000$ ; Cohen's  $d = 3.05$ . This indicates that students increase their knowledge of psychology as they advance in the program.
  - However, the mean score of graduating seniors was 17 (3.54) out 30 points possible, or 57%.
  - ETS data for the Psychology Subject Test are currently unavailable.
- Examined Structure of GRE Psychology Subject Test and Compared to Current Curriculum**
  - Experimental Psychology (40% of questions): Learning, language, memory, thinking, sensation and perception, physiological psychology, ethology, comparative psychology
  - Social Psychology (43% of questions): Clinical, abnormal, developmental, personality, social
  - Research design (17% of questions): Measurement, research design, statistics
- Examined Graduate Program Requirements and Recommendations**
  - Many graduate programs want students to have an assessment course as an undergraduate.
  - Graduate programs in forensic psychology (popular with our majors), want students to have a forensic psychology course.
- Reviewed the Curriculum and Made Changes**
  - Created and added a required cognitive psychology course because this is a significant component of the GRE Psychology Subject Test and it is an important avenue for future research in psychology.
  - Removed the counseling course as a required course because it is not needed for graduate study, it is not targeted on the GRE Psychology Subject Test, and in order to do counseling as a psychologist students need a graduate degree. Removing counseling as a required course allowed us to add cognitive psychology as a required course without increasing the number of credits required for the major.
  - Created an assessment course as a recommended course for students considering an advanced degree in psychology.
  - Created a forensic psychology course for students interested in pursuing an advanced degree in forensic psychology.
  - Note that in preparation for these additional courses, the department had removed other courses from the *Bulletin* in the previous year.

References  
 Halonon et al., (2006). *APA Guidelines of the Undergraduate Psychology Major*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollage/about/psymajor-guidelines.pdf>  
 Kohout, J., & Wicherski, M. (2010). *Applications, Acceptances, and Degrees Awarded to Master's- and Doctoral-Level Students in U.S. and Canadian Graduate Departments of Psychology: 2009-2010*. APA Center for Workforce Studies. <http://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/11-grad-study/applications.aspx>

### GRE General Test Scores

- Examined Institutional GRE Performance**
  - Institutional data provided by ETS appear in the three graphs. ETS does not disaggregate data by major.
  - Scores are for 4 years (AY 04-05 – AY 07-08).
  - ETS presents scores as grouped frequency distributions with class intervals of 200-290, 300-390...
- Feedback from Students**
  - Many majors reported low GRE scores and insufficient acceptance rates into their top-ranked graduate programs.
  - Some students reported not preparing for the GRE or taking the GRE "cold".
- Response**
  - Piloted GRE preparation course designed to help students understand the GRE structure and encourage students to prepare for the test.
  - Recognize that the course cannot teach students what they should have been learning throughout their time at Capital.



### Academic Advising

- Being Proactive about Student Preparation for Graduate Study**
  - Recognized the need to emphasize writing, quantitative, and philosophy courses as important for GRE preparation.
  - Recognized the need to emphasize courses outside of psychology that facilitate success in graduate programs, such as philosophy and natural science courses.
- Created Academic Advising Resource**
  - The resource (available at: <http://www.capital.edu/29575.pdf>) encourages students that want to go into occupations that require a graduate degree to take more quantitative, writing, and philosophy courses, along with other supporting courses outside of psychology.
  - Academic Advising also occurs within courses across the curriculum.
- Help Students Develop Realistic Expectations**
  - Provide realistic guidelines for students to understand the requirements for entrance into graduate school.
  - Include post-baccalaureate plans with the four-year plan that students create in PSYC 100.
  - Help students understand how course activities add value to students' education.
  - Not fully or formally implemented.
- Develop Accurate Student Self-assessment**
  - Help student define and determine "quality".
  - Help students know what they don't know and when they need to ask.
  - Not fully or formally implemented.

### Written and Oral Communication

- Consistent Grading Expectations Across Courses**
  - Adopted a writing rubric to be used across courses, available at: <http://www.capital.edu/31812.pdf>
  - Adopted an oral presentation rubric, available at: <http://www.capital.edu/31811.pdf>
  - Department also contributes to the University-wide Oral Communication Assessment conducted by the HLC Assessment Committee by scoring students on that HLC Oral Communication rubric, too.

Psychology Skills and Knowledge

General Skills and Knowledge