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 expect 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**

- Recognition of ethnic, cultural, social and gender diversity
- A broad and deep knowledge base incorporating both social and natural science aspects of each discipline
- Methodological competence in statistics, research design and assessment methods, including the use of technology for these purposes
- Practical research, laboratory, or field experience to generalize scientific methodological thinking to the realm of application

**APA Recommendations (Halonen et al., 2006)**

- Recognize, understand, and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity
- Familiarity with major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends
- Understanding and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation
- Demonstrate information competence and the ability to use computers and other technology for many purposes
- Respect and use creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and the scientific approach to solve problems related to behavior and mental processes
- Develop realistic ideas about how to implement their psychological knowledge, skills, and values in occupational pursuits in a variety of settings
- Understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues
- Develop insight into their own and others’ behavior and mental processes and apply effective strategies for self-management and self-improvement
- Effective communication skills
- Sensitivity to ethical issues
- Weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically, and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology

### 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 = 0.000; Cohen’s d = 3.06. 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 (46% of questions): Learning, 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 area 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 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.

### GRE General Test Scores

**Examinined Institutional GRE Performance**

- Institutional data provided by ETS appear in the three graphs. ETS does not disaggregate data by major.
- Some students reported not preparing for the GRE or taking the GRE “cold”.

**Feedback from Students**

- Many 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**

- Focused 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.

### Written and Oral Communication

**Consistent Grading Expectations Across Courses**

- Adopted a writing rubric to be used across courses, available at: [http://www.capital.edu/11812.pdf](http://www.capital.edu/11812.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.

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