**MSU Departmental**

**Assessment Report, September 2015**

Academic Year: 2014-2015

Department: Psychology

Program(s): Psychology

## 1. What Was Done

The psychology department assessment called for assessing students’ performance on learning outcomes 1, 2, 4, 5, and 10 during the 2014-2015 academic year (see Table 1 in Psychology undergraduate assessment plan). However, because of critical emergencies in the department, we suspended the 2014-2015 assessment until 2015-2016 and instead focused our assessment on two critical areas: Our Research Design and Analysis I and Research design and Analysis II courses and Academic Advising. The critical changes affecting this decision were (1) the unprecedented 80% growth in our majors over the last 6 years from 222 to 400 students, (2) realization of how this growth has created a bottleneck crisis in our curriculum, (3) a funded .40 FTE professional advisor for Psychology during 2014-2015 with potential refunding for this position in 2015-2016, (4) long-standing concerns among psychology faculty for improving our academic advising, and (5) the retirement of chair Colleen Moore and no communication regarding assessment goals for the academic year to faculty teaching those necessary courses. Although the delay in our 2014-2015 assessment is unfortunate, we believe this flexibility is essential to accommodate the recent enrollment emergency and is the best course of action for our students. I’ll elaborate on the two critical issues below…

First, our five sequentially-required courses in the Psychology major are Psyx 100 (Introductory Psychology), Psyx 223 (Research Design and Analysis I), Psyx 225 (Research Design and Analysis II), Psyx 490/495 (Undergraduate Research/Field Practicum), and Psyx 499R (Senior Thesis). Among these 5 requirements, Psyx 223, Psyx 225, and Psyx 499R are bottlenecks for our department whereas most students take Psyx 100 and Psyx 499R in their first and last semesters, respectively.

Second, due to longstanding unacceptable student-to-faculty ratios, advising has traditionally been a struggle for the Psychology department. During undergraduate assessment questionnaires distributed from 2005-2011, psychology students (N = 180 respondents) rated “undergrad program,” “instruction,” and “research and field practicum,” 3.63, 3.87, and 3.71 respectively, on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 3 (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). However, they rated advising as **2.77**, which is below the midpoint of the scale and signifies general dissatisfaction with advising. Starting in 2012, Psychology implemented the peer advising office to assist faculty in advising our large number of students and allow for more accessible (i.e., walk-in) appointments. In 2014, Mr. J.T. Bruner was hired as our professional advisor charged with recruiting, training, and supervising our peer advisors and in running our Psychology Advising office. Although we sensed improvement in our students’ advising experiences during this period, we knew it was important to collect empirical data with more in-depth questions on advising.

## 2. What Data Were Collected

1. To examine bottlenecks, we researched the standing of students enrolled in our two largest bottleneck courses over the last 3 years. The reason to exclude Psyx 499R from this analysis was that most students take this during their last semester and are therefore seniors. Taking Psyx 223 during one’s junior or senior year would necessarily delay graduation because one then needs a minimum of 3 more semesters to successfully complete the other sequential courses (Psyx 225, Psyx 490/495, Psyx 499R). In addition, 10-20% of student must retake either Psyx 223, Psyx 225 or both, further delaying graduation.
2. To assess advising in our department, we did two things. First, we asked every student who entered the advising office with a question to sign in to our log to examine the total number of students assisted in this office and by Mr. Bruner. Second, we designed and administered a 14-question survey designed to measure students’ opinions regarding their experience with advising (see Appendix A) and administered this survey to students in upper division courses during spring, 2015.

## 3. What Was Learned

1. Across 6 semesters, we found that 65% of students (520 out of 800) taking Psyx 223 were at the junior or senior level. Moreover, 29% of students took this course as a senior, meaning they still needed to register for 3 additional semesters, possibly delaying graduation by two or more years! When I shared this with my faculty they were surprised and disturbed. This is a drastic shift from our department recommended 4-year plan for our majors (see <https://montana.edu/psychology/advising.html>) in which we recommend students take this course the first semester of their sophomore year. Similarly, 54% of students in Psyx 225 were seniors, which meant they had at least two additional semesters to register after they passed the course. According to our professional and peer advisors, the most common reasons given for students not taking 223 are (1) not yet having completed the math pre-requisite of M145Q or higher and (2) the course has been full every time they registered. If students come into MSU below level III in the math requirements, then they must first take more remedial math courses, which delays M145Q, and thus our required Psyx 223 course.
2. In terms of visitors to the advising office, we had 414 students (236 fall, 178 so far in spring) visit our advising center between sept 2014 to April 2015. That is a remarkable number for a department of less than 390 students. In addition to these students, Mr. Bruner and I have met with 67 prospective students and their families (30 fall, 37 by April 2015), with each meeting lasting approximately 1 hour.
3. For the survey, the 64 students who completed the survey consisted of 22 sophomores, 19 juniors, and 23 seniors. A large majority (89%) were psychology majors, but the others were from a wide range of outside majors, and 14 were transfers. The mean for each of the 14 questions is shown in Appendix A. The overall mean across questions was **3.82**, which is considerably higher than the previous **2.77** rating for Psychology advising given between 2008-2011. Moreover, all responses were above the midpoint of the scale, ranging from 3.3 (the office helped me explore my own interests) to 4.5 (the office was available during posted hours). Thus, this survey demonstrates that students are overall pleased with our advising office.

## 4. How We Responded

1. Since discovering the severity of the 223/225 bottlenecks, the psychology faculty have met several times and have identified 3 solutions. First, we now attack the problem in students’ initial semesters. When they first meet with their advisors or when they first enter the advising office, our first question, regardless of their reason for the visit, is “when are you taking Psyx 223?” and “have you already completed the math requirement?” If the answer is “no,” we stop whatever we are doing and outline the best strategy and explain why taking these courses early is imperative for graduation. Second, because catching students early to take these required courses is of course fruitless unless we have enough openings, we have advertised and hired additional faculty capable of teaching Psyx 223, Psyx 225, and Psyx 499R and asked for extra section money to offer up to 3 sections of each course per semester. In 2014-2015, we offered 2 sections of each course each semester. Since then, we tried to offer 3 sections of Psyx 223 in fall 2015 and plan to offer 3 sections of Psyx 225 and Psyx 499R in Spring 2016.[[1]](#footnote-1) Third, we have discussed the possibility of reversing the order of our required Psyx 225 and Psyx 223 courses. The main advantage of this for alleviating the bottleneck is that students could take Psyx 225 simultaneously with the Psyx 223 math pre-requisite, potentially speeding graduation rates. Also, although unrelated to the bottleneck problem, another advantage is that students would have knowledge of experimental design prior to learning the statistics involved in testing that design. Of course there are also potential disadvantages and we do not yet have unanimously support for the switch in order. Hopefully we will have a definitive answer on this by the end of the semester for possible implementation as early as fall 2016.
2. For the advising survey, the advisors and I have met several times and will continue to meet throughout the semester to discuss options for improving our service to students. Specifically, although students were generally satisfied will all aspects of our advising changes, the questions with the lowest reported satisfaction were “The advising office helped me explore my own interests,” “The advising office provided information about classes I had not previously known I was able to take,” and “The advising office was knowledgeable about career opportunities within the field of psychology.” The advisors and I are working to improve performance in these areas by bringing in outside speakers from the community to discuss career opportunities outside of academia to students. During last spring, we brought in several such speakers including a school psychologist from Missoula and an Industrial Organizational consultant living in both Bozeman and San Francisco.

**Appendix A: 2015 Psychology Advising Survey Results**

Question Score

1. The advising office was able to answer questions about Montana State University

graduation requirements. **3.6**

2. The advising office was able to answer questions about psychology degree requirements. **4.1**

3. The advising office gave me correct information regarding academic regulations.

(such as add/drop dates, financial aid, graduation requirements, etc.). **4.6**

4. The advising office was knowledgeable about career opportunities within the field of psychology. **3.4**

5. The advising office was knowledgeable about majors, minors, or classes that could

supplement my psychology degree. **3.5**

6. The advising office listened to my concerns. **3.9**

7. The advising office provided information about classes I had not previously

known I was able to take. **3.4**

8. The advising office helped me explore my own interests. **3.3**

9. The advising office was open and welcoming to students in need. **4.1**

10. The advising office took sufficient time to answer my questions. **3.8**

11. The advising office showed interest in helping me. **3.7**

12. The advising office encouraged open discussion. **3.7**

13. When the advising office could not answer my questions, they directed me to someone who could. **3.9**

14. The advising office was available during posted hours. **4.5**

1. We hired a NTT instructor to teach the 3rd section of Psyx 223 this fall, but he backed out 3 weeks before the start of the semester due to health reasons. We are still planning to offer 3 sections of 225 and 499, pending provost approval. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)