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External Review
M.A. in Psychological Research
CSUF Department of Psychology,
College of Humanities & Social Sciences

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Introduction

After reviewing the self-study of CSUF's M.A. program in Psychological Research and reading their website, graduate student handbook, and curriculum vitae of the professors in the department of Psychology, the external review team conducted a site visit on Friday, February 10, 2023. During that site visit, reviewers met with Dean Sheryl Fontaine and Associate Dean Jessica Stern; Program Coordinator, David Gerkens; MA Committee faculty: Angela-MinhTu Nguyen, James Garcia, and Melinda Blackman; full-time faculty: Adam Roberts, Eriko Self, Laura Zettel-Watson, Iris Blandon-Gitlin, and Yuko Okado; department chair, Jessie Peissig; department staff: Phil Schierer, Cynthia Landin, Daniel Sohn, and Jocelyn Lopez Pulido; and also M.A. students and alums in the department.

Overall, reviewers were impressed with the high quality of this program, including the breadth of the curriculum, depth of research performed by students alongside faculty, and quality of preparation this program provides for students interested in careers or Ph.D. programs. The program faces minor challenges in scheduling, mentoring, deepening community, and accommodating the rapid growth of the undergraduate major in Psychology, but overall is thriving.

Strengths & Commendations

The M.A. program appears to be a vibrant, successful, and high-demand program. Overall, the program is well-designed and appears to be aligned with the university-wide graduate learning goals and strategic plan. There are nearly 77 applicants per year since the last 7-year review. Of these applicants, an average of about 16.4 students are admitted per year (about 21%). Of these admissions, about 14.85 students enroll (~90% yield). Professors interviewed identified the quality of their students being high. In our estimation, given an analysis of faculty CVs, the quality of the faculty is also high and the breadth of their research interests is wide, so this is a very good match of high quality students and high quality faculty. The dedicated students and committed faculty who are actively engaged in innovative and interesting research are a strength of the program.

We commend the program's recent efforts to assess faculty advisor-student fit in the admissions process, which will likely assist with reducing student's time to degree completion and research training. Furthermore, the program is designed to train and educate students who are prepared for competitive PhD programs, as well as industry, government, and higher education, thus offering students a wide array of future options.

Many faculty and students mentioned the program's strong statistical and research methods preparation that provides students with a marketable skill as well as thorough preparation for Ph.D. programs. We observed several research groups and labs that, although limited by space, provide diverse and rigorous opportunities for students to engage in basic to applied research. The PAC computer lab offers advanced statistical and analytical software at no additional cost to graduate students. The program also offers a few awards and graduate assistantships to support graduate student research and scholarship.

We also observed strong and coordinated leadership for the program, including the M.A. Program Coordinator (Dr. David Gerkens), the M.A. Committee Faculty, and the Graduate Program Secretary (Cynthia Landin). The program's leadership was praised as collegiate and receptive to input. Additional sources of community support include the Psychology Association of Graduate Students of Color & Allies (PAGSOCA) and their highly committed faculty advisor (Dr. Angela-MinhTú Nguyễn).

Although we noted several strengths of the M.A. program, this review illuminated opportunities for growth and improvement. These recommendations are designed to support stellar faculty and students and to advance the sustainability of the program.

Opportunities for Growth

To improve this already-strong program, the reviewers have a few recommendations for establishing tracks to focus on subfields, improve communication within the graduate program, deepen community, and address slight inequities.

Tracks

One challenge identified by both faculty and students is the scheduling of classes. Students wanted more predictability of classes being offered and professors wanted more student enrollment in classes to avoid the threat of class cancellation. Moreover, there is a rule at Cal State Fullerton that if a course is not offered in five years, it is automatically deleted from the catalog if not granted an exception. Finally, for students who were undergraduates at CSUF, they may have already taken many 400-level course offerings and be looking for more courses to take.

Given the interests of faculty members, we see four general areas that can be developed into tracks of the M.A. program. These tracks include:

·   Cognitive/neuropsychological/physiological track

- Social/industrial/organizational/health track

- Developmental/life-span development/evolutionary track

- Quantitative/Methods and Measurement track

One of the growing areas in the department seems to be faculty interest in multicultural psychology. This was also mentioned as an emerging trend in the field in the program's self-study. The Department could offer multicultural psychology as an 'overlay' area, complementing either general study or any specific track. For example, within the context of the social/industrial/organizational/health track, a student can work with a social psychologist on areas of racism, or a student can work with an I/O psychologist on management selection in a growing multicultural workplace. A student interested in multicultural issues and developmental psychology can work with a developmental psychology professor on different cultural parenting practices. Essentially, multicultural psychology and diversity, equity, and inclusion can be integrated throughout the program, rather than offered as a specific track.

This recommendation has advantages for advisor/research matching, scheduling, and class enrollment. The program can be marketed as having strengths in these four areas, so applicants will know before submitting their applications what to expect from the program. They should thus be prepared to take classes from these areas of research. With respect to scheduling, the program can pair two areas per semester, so all four areas can be presented in a single academic year. For example, a cognitive/neuropsychological/physiological 500 level course and a social/industrial/organizational/health 500 level course can be offered during the fall semester, and a developmental/life-span development/evolutionary 500 level course and a quantitative 500 level course could be offered in the spring semester. The next year, different courses within these four areas can be offered. This example can accommodate students who might be interested in cognitive development, so they can take a cognitive course in the fall and a developmental course in the spring, and another student who is interested in program evaluation, so they can take an I/O course in the fall and a quantitative course in the spring. Students should be expected to take one of these courses in both semesters of their first two years in the program. This should help address the class enrollment problems that the program ran into recently.

The program/department may decide on different tracks, but our arguments in favor of identified tracks remain true. If the program is marketed in this manner, students may be happier with the program, scheduling will be more predictable, hiring can be planned within tracks, and the department can request targeted resources consistent with these tracks.

Community & Communication

As mentioned above, the program has impressive numbers of applicants. An area of slight concern is that the four-year graduation rate is 74%, meaning that one in four students does not graduate in a timely manner. This is in line with CSU norms but creates room for improvement.

For the program committee and psychology department, we suggest considering opportunities to foster more community amongst graduate students, improve communication throughout the program, and improve an already good mentoring culture. We recognize that fostering community during the pandemic period was a challenge for all. Some suggestions include:

- Revise the graduate student handbook. While the program has frequent GA opportunities, multiple student associations including PAGSOCA (Psychology Association of Graduate Students of Color & Allies), a broad rotation of 520T classes, and an impressive record of placement in jobs and Ph.D. programs, not all students are equally aware of how to access these resources. As stated in the "Tracks" section, students would appreciate receiving a schedule of which PSYC 520T classes will be taught in the next few semesters as well as a timeline of deadlines to expect throughout the academic year, both within CSUF and for academic conferences and Ph.D. programs. Despite a strong orientation to the program in the required first class of PSYC 500 and extraordinarily helpful office staff, some students still feel confused.

- Share, among faculty, a list of how many students each faculty mentors. As is true across academia, mentoring work often falls disproportionately on women of color. Spending time in a department faculty meeting discussing best practices of mentoring may also help equalize the burden of who does the in-depth work of supporting graduate students, and help to make the often-invisible work more visible. Students suggested instituting a formal mentor-mentee agreement, to increase transparency and also encourage mentor-mentee pairings earlier in a student's time in the program. Related to mentoring, the department and college may consider developing a system where mentors/advisors receive credit for mentoring students. For example, the chair of a student's master's thesis can receive a certain amount of "points" and a member of a student's master's committee can receive a fraction of the points (e.g., ⅓ of the points of chairing the thesis committee). After a certain amount of accumulated points, the professor can receive an earned course release.

- Consider seeking opportunities to do structured thesis-work, perhaps in student-led writing groups or a 1-unit thesis class. While PSYC 510 guides students through the research process and many professors provide in-depth mentoring, some students beyond their first year could benefit from more structure beyond their advisors alone, and this could also address the feelings of isolation or lab-focused cliques that naturally occur.

- Create a LinkedIn group to connect students, faculty, and alumni. This could help the program better track the outcomes of its graduates as well as increase the program's already-impressive visibility. A career panel of alumni, perhaps as part of Psych Day, would also be welcomed by students.

- Reinstate the chairs' newsletter, since, in the past, this has been a method of successfully connecting students, faculty, and alumni, as well as celebrating successes and fostering community pride and knowledge.

- Consider monthly luncheons to deepen community, communication, and professional development.

- As the diversity of the graduate student body increases, faculty and student awareness of multicultural issues is imperative. In fact, PAGSOCA was formed due, in part, to subtle insensitivity and microaggressions. Ideally, an organization such as PAGSOCA should not be necessary, but at this point, students of color are burdened with having to educate others about their needs and also supporting one another. We recommend the department engage in ongoing assessment and evaluation of department climate and seek opportunities for all faculty, staff, and students to develop cultural and structural competencies. The department has been hiring diverse new faculty, but can also hold trainings for all faculty, increase invited speakers on issues of diversity, encourage curriculum that includes minoritized groups across many classes, and engage in more conversations about successfully mentoring diverse students.

Beyond the department, other opportunities require the support of the college and university administration.

- Reduce the frequency of cancellation of graduate classes. In each of the last few semesters, one section of PSYC 520T has been canceled. This cancellation reduces cohort community, pushes grad students into 400-level undergraduate classes that are not always equivalent to more focused graduate seminars, and causes some faculty reluctance to offer graduate courses. There was uncertainty over how many students are required for a graduate-level class to be viable and during our visit the Dean's office clarified that 8 students is sufficient. The university's five-year course retirement rule has also been a burden to the psychology MA program, recently mandating the retirement of several 500-level PSYC courses. The Track suggestion, above, may help to address this issue, but there may be a period of adjustment even if Tracks are implemented.

- Although space is a premium at many universities, the Psychology department will need more space to support its growing faculty and student population. Many Psychology faculty require lab space and equipment to conduct their research. Additional space will offer more opportunities for the M.A. program and CSUF's growing undergraduate population to be involved in research. This includes seeking a graduate student lounge space. While the computer lab creates a quiet work space, and individual labs have room for a few students at a time, the existing Psych Lounge is shared with 3,700 undergraduates. A graduate student lounge with a microwave, secure storage space, and comfortable seating could encourage opportunities for informal peer mentoring and support, increasing student persistence and success.

- Explore ways to better encourage interdisciplinarity. While psychology graduate students take classes in departments such as biology, business, child and adolescent studies, and aging studies, this requires an involved bureaucratic process and no means of compensating faculty in other departments when they advise students outside their department. For instance, the professor of Child & Adolescent Studies who teaches PSYC students in the Autism Lab would appreciate release time or other credit for that supervision. Because so much psychological research is resource-intensive, partnerships beyond CSUF could also help students access an fMRI machine, EEG, or other advanced research opportunities for which the department does not currently have equipment. Access to this equipment will be beneficial to faculty research as well.

- Strengthen staff support. The dedicated departmental staff would appreciate more training opportunities to develop their skills, including opportunities to learn with staff in other departments. Tuition reimbursement for more than 6 units of classes and a return to the "step" program that offered raises for positive annual reviews could help our campus retain our best workers.

Conclusions

Overall, this is a strong graduate program that deserves more support. On the day of our site visit, department faculty learned that they will be able to hire two new full-time faculty in AY23-24, which may help alleviate some of the advising burdens and potentially allow for a few more graduate students to be admitted each year, so that graduate classes do not face last-minute cancellations. This is a positive development. The addition of a track system may help to address many of the identified areas of challenge. Intentional efforts to reduce implicit and explicit bias and promote belonging will improve climate for students, staff, and faculty, and advance the program's goals. Faculty need to be rewarded for chairing master's thesis committees and also for serving on thesis committees. This will serve to encourage a more equitable distribution of mentoring workload. With additional support, this program has the potential to continue producing high quality science as well as training diverse researchers to enter Ph.D. programs and the workforce.