



Psychology

A department in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the B.A., B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. in Psychology.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

David Balota (Washington University)
Nicki Crick (University of Minnesota)
Cheryl Sisk (Michigan State University)
Steve Suomi (National Institutes of Health)
Tim Wilson (University of Virginia)

■ Main Issues

The team noted Psychology's "extremely strong" history, and its status as "one of the absolute best" departments at UMass Amherst. The team observed that the research doctoral program had been ranked 27th out of 190 departments in the nation by the National Research Council in 1995, and in the team's view the department had "maintained its high quality in the last ten years." This continuing excellence was found to be "especially impressive" given surging undergraduate enrollment pressure and financial cutbacks, and much credit was given to the department chair and senior leadership.

The team's central finding was that the department is at a "critical fork in the road": many of the faculty who built the department's strength are due to retire in the next few years, and given the investment many universities are making in Psychology "competition for top faculty will be fierce." With its current resources, the team believed maintaining the department's competitiveness will be "very difficult;" with some investment it should be possible for the department to reach its goal of moving into the top 10% nationally.

The team found that the department's "two critical needs" are for adequate, modern laboratory space and for competitive start-up packages for new faculty. The team observed that "over the past 30 years, the infrastructural requirements, equipment, approaches, and methods of psychological research have changed dramatically, and are now more similar to those of the biological sciences than the social sciences." Start-up packages of \$500,000 are now common in some areas. Hiring new faculty increasingly involves competition with medical schools with low teaching obligations. The team urged the department to consider acquisition of more space in surrounding buildings, conversion of classrooms in Tobin Hall to labs, and restructuring teaching loads for research-active faculty.

The undergraduate program was found to be "quite rigorous and well-managed," with good opportunities for experience in research labs. Advising was seen as a strength, and students were "enthusiastic and positive" about their experience. The team observed, however, that the program is facing "severe enrollment pressures."

The graduate program is “clearly one of the best in the country,” but the team expressed concern that the doctoral program will soon face enrollment reductions because support for graduate students is below that of competitors in terms of both level and duration of support.

The team offered comments on the four main divisions in which the faculty are organized:

- Neuroscience was found to be “internationally recognized” and to have an “enviable” record of research success. The large number of expected faculty retirements, however, indicates “not only a critical mass crisis, but also the absence of the new generation of faculty members.” Recruitment of new faculty was said to be “essential,” and will “require competitive startup packages and research laboratory space.”
- Cognitive and Developmental Psychology has a “rich history,” and prominence in several areas of both cognitive and developmental psychology. The collaborations with engineering, linguistics, computer science, communication disorders, and education were praised. The difficulty of replacing senior faculty, availability of adequate research space, and low graduate stipends were all seen as concerns.
- In Personality and Social Psychology, the “biggest challenge” identified by the team was making effective use of the recent \$3 million gift to create a program in the psychology of peace and the prevention of violence. While this gift represents a “unique opportunity” and has generated great enthusiasm among the faculty, there is disagreement as to how to proceed. The team “felt strongly that the program should build on the strengths of the social psychology program, rather than trying to be too different from it,” partly because of the opportunity to leverage exiting areas of strength and partly because “it is unclear whether the financial resources available to the peace psychology program are sufficient to fund an entirely separate program that tries to develop in a different direction.”
- Clinical Psychology includes “nationally and internationally known scholars who are highly productive researchers as well as expert teachers and clinical supervisors.” Research success is strong, and many faculty have won national awards. A special strength of the program is the Psychological Services Center, which provides important opportunities for clinical research and instruction and outreach to the community. However, the team found that “resources have not kept pace with advances in the field or the current needs of this outstanding group of faculty and students,” especially with respect to technology and staffing.

■ Results of the Review

The Dean concurred with the team’s assessment of the department’s current strength and its potential to become even more competitive, but also with the concern that replacing the departing senior faculty members will require new funding for start-up, facilities, and graduate student support. The Dean said she was “committed to investing in new faculty in Psychology,” but also acknowledged that this department is expected to have more retirements in the next few years than any other in the College.