Psychological and Brain Sciences
A department in the College of Natural Sciences offering the B.A., B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in Psychology.

The Review Process
This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Dr. Sandra Weller, University of Connecticut Health Center
Dr. Max Haggblom, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
Dr. Piet de Boer, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine

Main Issues
The report described a large department with a history of strength in the field. Recent NRC rankings have placed the department in the top 30 of nearly 200 departments surveyed. The department is currently configured into five divisions, an organizational structure generally supported by the faculty, but which can present obstacles to cross-divisional collaboration. Regardless of this impediment, the department benefits from a high level of collegiality. The quality and breadth of new faculty is an additional benefit to the department, as is the stability and performance of the long-term chair. Since the previous AQAD review, the undergraduate major has grown from approximately 1500 majors to approximately 1900 majors. However, faculty in the department have decreased since the last review, causing issues with scheduling that must be resolved. Graduate education in the department is independent among divisions. This configuration, although working well for some research, reflects various funding models and that are not always clear and could be improved. Graduate student funding has remained a problematic obstacle to recruiting and retaining graduate students. As noted in the last review, the facilities available to the department are in poor condition. Long-term action is necessary to prevent this from being an ongoing difficulty for the department. Despite these difficulties, the department is very strong, attracting excellent faculty and students at all levels.

The reviewers offered a number of recommendations:

- The team recommended that the department draft a department-wide mission statement that speaks to research, graduate training, undergraduate education, and the relations among these areas. The statement should be a collaborative effort across all five divisions.
- In response to shortcomings in the department’s facilities, the team urged the department and University administration to create a long-term plan for space and facilities.
- The popularity of the undergraduate major has presented difficulties along with its obvious benefits. Among these are: strained resources in the areas of graduate teaching assistants and departmental advising, limited accessibility to courses within the major; scheduling difficulties; and oversized upper division courses. While the department has pursued a number of initiatives in this area, the team felt more could be done, such as an increase in the number of graduate teaching assistants and the creation of a course coordinator position to handle scheduling, grading, and exams for the large core requirement courses.
The team urged the department to create three additional support positions: one in the chair’s office, one to administer undergraduate teaching, and one for financial support.

While the five-division structure of the department has generally worked well and has the support of the faculty, the team noted concern about the limits this presents to cross-divisional collaboration. While the team did not advocate immediate change, it recommended that the department develop additional cross-divisional programs, such as the Stress Research Group and the Center for Research on Families, in order to promote collaboration across divisions within the department.

The team endorsed an increase in graduate student stipends within the department, as well as a revisiting of the campus-wide curriculum fee. The combination of the high fee and stipends below those of peer departments has impeded the recruitment of top-tier graduate students.

## Results of the Review

The Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences discussed the report of the external reviewers and offered a number of responses and recommendations based on the review.

- The department concurs with the review team’s recommendation that the department develop a meaning mission statement and five-year plan.
- The department is continuing to work with the University to ensure that appropriate faculty are allotted space in the Life Sciences Building and that the resulting space in Tobin be renovated. The Dean of the College of Natural Sciences noted the University’s plan to make an fMRI facility a part of its Institute for Applied Life Science and the benefit that this development will have on the department.
- TA support for large classes, as compared to national departments, is unacceptably low, and the department is continuing to work to increase this deficiency.
- The department is organizing discussion regarding its division structure that will consider models for how to support emerging initiatives while exploring various organizational models. Cross-fertilization between graduate programs, especially in the life sciences, is a college-wide issue that the Dean noted will be addressed as part of the upcoming strategic planning process.

## Outcomes Assessment

The Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences has an established set of student learning objectives for the undergraduate major, including the ability to think scientifically about behavior and mental processes, use critical thinking skills, and apply broad perspectives to behavior from both an individual and cultural point of view. The department uses a series of measures to determine if these learning outcomes are being met. Each required course in the major is built around stated learning goals. The department reviews each syllabus to confirm that these goals are part of the curriculum. The department is also in the process of developing an online survey to be completed by each class of students every April.