

Building a Strong Undergraduate Program in Psychology: Nurturing Community

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What constitutes an effective undergraduate department in psychology? This question, along with the myriad of plausible answers, generates strong emotionally-laden responses from those of us committed to the teaching of psychology. Numerous resources offer administrative guidance for departmental efficiency. Perhaps the best source is the *Handbook for Enhancing Undergraduate Education in Psychology*, which was produced as a result of the St. Mary’s Conference (McGovern, 1993). *The Handbook* offers principles for quality undergraduate programs in psychology that emphasize the importance of students, faculty, and curriculum. Objectively evaluating the effectiveness of a department is difficult, yet essential.

Approximately two years ago, a STP task force (Ellsworth, Hill, Korn, McCarthy, & Scott-Johnson, 2000) met to develop standards of good practice for designing and conducting a self-study of undergraduate programs in psychology. Establishing universal principles for a self-study was more difficult than we had imagined. Uniform criteria that would help to identify exceptional departments needed to be balanced against autonomy and individual institutional systems. However, four important areas emerged from our discussions: faculty, students, curriculum, and community. Three of these components (i.e., faculty, students, and curriculum) naturally evolved from earlier work (McGovern, 1993). Evaluation criteria for specific curricular requirements, faculty evaluation techniques, and student outcomes have been debated elsewhere at length (e.g., Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Braskamp & Ory, 1994); therefore, I would like to focus on the issue of community in this essay.

The community of an undergraduate department of psychology is a microcosm of the larger university culture and encompasses students, faculty, and curriculum. Community is influenced by this larger environment and its shared sense of commitment toward a common set of beliefs and goals.

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The core of any academic discipline shapes the experience of the undergraduate and this curricular framework can act as one cornerstone of a community in which scholarly challenges are encouraged. Disagreement and discussion can be healthy and valuable, although allowances must be made for a diversity of opinions. Amidst these discussions we are united by common goals that serve as points of agreement that allow faculty to work together objectively despite differences in philosophical perspectives. Hence, a strong undergraduate program must be open to balancing the need for change against protection of the integrity of the discipline within the curriculum.

Students are central to the departmental community and they should be involved as collaborators in shaping virtually every aspect of the department. Students can share in discussion of the many important decisions that enhance the departmental community. It may therefore be useful to appoint student representatives to committees and invite them to departmental meetings. Similarly, faculty should collaborate to nurture the cognitive and emotional development of students in a mutually respectful atmosphere. Informally sharing information about psychology with students is often critical to students' decisions about future professional endeavors. This means that student events, such as Psi Chi activities, department picnics, and student research symposia are shared with faculty rather than just attended by faculty.

Faculty set the tone or at least shoulder the largest portion of the responsibility for nurturing a positive student community. Actions within our community are directed at both colleagues and students. Therefore, creation of a sense of community should begin with welcoming new faculty as they enter the department. Although tenure criteria are provided to each new faculty member, subtle, unspoken tenure criteria must also be communicated. Offering friendly collegial support is critical for building a sense of community. One mechanism for building community is to attend to the single goal of teaching students. If we can remain attentive to this goal, it may allow us to remain objective and to make decisions that will produce positive outcomes. For example, budgetary constraints frequently impose difficult decisions. Funding priorities and resource allocation should advance the curricular priorities rather than individual agendas. This perspective requires challenging the status quo with a willingness to compromise for the purpose of advancing departmental goals.

A strong sense of community is embodied through the collective efforts of the faculty. Thus, the individual efforts of faculty are critical to development of community. When I consider what makes a good teacher, in addition to the essential knowledge, several affective traits seem to be important: respect, humor, and passion. Students are usually capable of independently studying and learning basic factual information gleaned from attendance in a course. Truly exceptional students are distinguished from average students by their active involvement with the discipline. Students become so involved largely through faculty mentorship. These students have been mentored by faculty who are passionate about their subject matter and respectful of their students. Mentorship can only occur if faculty are open and willing to share their passion for the discipline of psychology with their students. Halonen perhaps best captured this teaching philosophy

in her APA 2000 address entitled "The Alchemy of Teaching." She likened passion for teaching to magic! Magic occurs when students are provided with safe and intellectually nurturant environments. I have found that humorous anecdotes, with linkages to the appropriate content, provide students with specific examples that help them to learn and to understand complex concepts.

Similarly, the magic of learning occurs when faculty are available to talk with students about informal aspects of psychology. Ultimately, the atmosphere of the academic department must provide faculty with the freedom, encouragement and acceptance that will result in the spontaneous exploration of teaching and learning. An environment that nurtures diversity and encourages development of intellectual pursuits allows for intellectual and personal growth of the faculty. Although a department must be cohesive collectively, a healthy environment requires opportunities for individual growth.

Community, as an essential component of an undergraduate program in psychology, is critical for a strong undergraduate program. This perspective is embodied by the emerging field of positive psychology that includes the subjective experience of both individuals and groups. The departmental environment can be influential in moving individuals toward their optimal abilities through responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, and tolerance (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Psychology departments should consider the key role of their departmental communities in shaping the undergraduate experience and do all that they can to nurture and grow their communities in ways that reflect the very best of what psychology has to offer as a science and practice.

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