Dean’s Response to the Program Review Committee’s Final Report
Department of Psychology
September 2002

Long a highly regarded unit at BGSU, the Department of Psychology has continued to grow in strength in recent years, as program review has demonstrated. Outstanding programs such as Industrial-Organizational Psychology and Clinical Psychology remain highly regarded, while a relatively new Behavioral Neuroscience program (to which the department is a principal contributor) has developed rapidly, showing great promise of distinction. Psychology faculty are active in research, and their work regularly appears in top journals. Applications for admission to the graduate program remain strong and admission is highly competitive. Undergraduate enrollment has grown, and majors generally rate the program highly. Moreover, the department has used the results of assessment to develop a plan to revise the curriculum to make it more responsive to the needs of undergraduates, demonstrating a commitment to make a good program even better.

Although the department is fundamentally sound, the Program Review Committee’s final report identifies several areas that need attention. These include developing a strategic plan that fosters greater programmatic focus and enhances the department’s strongest areas; creating a reward structure and workload that encourages excellence in research and teaching; increasing external support for research; and restructuring the graduate and undergraduate curricula.

Dr. Dale Klopfer, the Department Chair, offers a very thoughtful and thorough response to the PRC report. He accepts most of its recommendations, asks for clarification of others, and takes issue with several—notably the committee’s admonition to develop greater focus at the graduate level and its approach to developing differential workloads for faculty based on research productivity. The questions he raises deserve serious attention, and I hope to address them briefly in this document and more extensively as the College works with the department to implement the PRC’s recommendations.

With the following stipulations, I accept the recommendations contained in the PRC’s report:

The PRC’s recommendation that the department develop sharper focus at the graduate level is not simply a response to the external reviewers’ report; it is informed by BGSU’s approach to doctoral education. Our goal is to support a limited number of sharply focused Ph.D. programs that have achieved or have the potential to achieve national prominence. This strategy is grounded in an understanding that as a medium-sized institution with limited resources, BGSU does not have the ability to support competitive doctoral programs that offer Ph.D. work in all or most areas of a particular discipline. Larger, better
resourced institutions may be able to do so. But given our circumstances we are more likely to achieve distinctive programs when we focus our resources on a few areas—both across the University and within departments—and make them nationally competitive. This institutional strategy has informed program development in all areas. Thus, we offer doctoral work in photochemical science, not in chemistry as a whole or a variety of fields within the discipline; we offer the Ph.D. in rhetoric and writing, not in other areas of English such as literature or linguistics. Since its inception, program review has been guided by this approach to doctoral education. As a result, all programs undergoing review have received a consistent message to focus their efforts, especially in doctoral education. While the department must make difficult decisions as it selects the areas in which it will offer doctoral work, doing so will enable it to focus resources in ways that will maintain the strength of nationally ranked programs and achieve national prominence in the other area(s) selected. While this process will mean that some faculty members’ areas of specialization will lie outside the designated doctoral foci, it need not result in a department of haves and have nots. Faculty members whose specialties lie outside the areas of doctoral focus should be encouraged to develop research programs that dovetail with the work of colleagues in doctoral areas, both inside and beyond the department. Such an approach should foster strong research programs, attract doctoral students to their classes and labs, and enhance the strength of our areas of focus.

In selecting the three or four areas of doctoral focus, the department should be guided by the following criteria: reputation of the program, student demand, quality and number of students recruited, placement of graduates, current faculty resources to deliver the program, potential for generating external support, and centrality to University mission. As the department begins the process of establishing areas of focus, the Dean of the Graduate College and I will be available to meet with appropriate committees or the entire department to answer questions and provide information. Because this response is late in arriving, the deadline for submitting areas of focus will be extended to December 1, 2002.

I agree with Dr. Klopfer that faculty members who have legitimate research/teaching interests in more than one area should be listed in both areas. This should encourage collaboration, highlight faculty research/teaching interests to graduate students, and encourage faculty to contribute to doctoral areas outside their primary area of expertise.

Because prioritization of doctoral areas will have a profound influence on strategic planning, the department’s strategic plan should be completed by February 15, 2003.

PRC’s call for differential rewards focuses heavily on teaching loads. Because this has profound budgetary implications, this process must be
carried out in close cooperation with the College. I take as a starting point that a teaching assignment of two courses per semester is appropriate for productive, research-active faculty in a doctoral program. Reducing a faculty member’s load to three courses per year should occur only on an ad hoc basis and under the following circumstances: when a grant buys out part of a faculty member’s teaching assignment; when the department employs grant overhead funds or grant buy-out funds to release a faculty member from a teaching assignment to work on a major grant proposal or to pursue research; when a faculty member accepts an editorial position with a major journal; or, in a few cases, when truly exceptional and sustained research productivity warrants a reduction. By the same token, the department should develop criteria that assure that faculty members who have not maintained a high level of research activity teach five or six courses per year. As it changes teaching loads, the department must revisit its merit policy to assure that faculty members who assume heavier teaching responsibilities are rewarded appropriately for their greater contributions to the instructional mission. The department should submit a preliminary plan for determining teaching assignments to the College by December 1, 2002 with a final to follow by January 15, 2003.

PRC encourages the department to increase its externally funded research, and I concur. Although opportunities for external funding vary across different areas of the discipline, faculty in all areas should be encouraged to pursue appropriate opportunities to the fullest. The department strategic plan for external funding due in the College on May 1, 2003 should help the department develop a strategy to encourage success across a wider range of areas, thereby ensuring a broader base for external support than currently exists.

With respect to differential rewards for securing external funding, research productivity, teaching, and other activities, I do not believe that PRC is enjoining the department to establish a mechanical system that increases rewards according to a mathematical formula that favors success when the odds are longest. What the department must assure is that high quality performance across a wide range of important activities—including grantsmanship—is rewarded. I simply ask the department to revisit its merit system to assure it does so and to report the results of its review and any changes it wishes to make by December 15, 2002.

I am impressed by the department’s ideas for revision of its graduate and undergraduate curricula and for encouraging undergraduate research—an area in which it has established a good record. I ask the department to move ahead with undergraduate curriculum changes quickly, beginning with the introductory course from the 200 to the 100-level so that it can be offered to students in Fall 2003.

While the department has several difficult issues to address, I am confident that
by doing so, it will strengthen its signature programs, achieve distinction in at least one other area, enhance research productivity and external support, and serve undergraduate and graduate students effectively.

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Donald G. Nieman, Dean                      Date

Concurred:

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John W. Folkins, Provost                   Date