A Recent History of Curriculum and Assessment in Undergraduate Psychology Programs
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Professors have bickered over the undergraduate curriculum in psychology since the first psychology course was taught. Except for a few descriptive studies of course offerings, however, educators devoted little systematic attention to the topic for many years. Since 1950, several concentrated efforts have filled that lacuna (e.g., the Cornell Conference, the Michigan Conference, the Kulik Report, a telephone survey by the American Psychological Association, the Scheirer and Rogers Report, the Association of American Colleges Report, and the St. Mary’s Conference). The following references provide historical background and extensive discussions of these efforts: Lloyd and Brewer (1992), Brewer (1997), and McGovern and Brewer (2003).

In the information that follows, we offer a brief review of how curriculum and assessment issues have evolved over the last 20 years in the undergraduate psychology major. Our description focuses specifically on events and activities that have pioneered in curriculum reform in psychology. We also highlight the important role that Project Kaleidoscope has played in more recent years.

APA’s 1985 Curriculum Resolution

Prompted by repeated requests for guidance and curriculum development, including specific guidelines or standards for undergraduate programs, the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) of the American Psychological Association (APA) recommended and APA’s Council of Representatives approved a far-reaching resolution in August 1985. The resolution reaffirmed that the baccalaureate program in psychology should have a liberal arts curriculum that does not focus primarily on vocational or pre-professional training. The resolution concluded with these prophetic words: “The APA should not prescribe specific course requirements for the undergraduate major in psychology. However, APA should continue to monitor undergraduate education in psychology by means of periodic surveys . . . and continue to weigh the possibility of developing guidelines or models for the curriculum” (as cited in Lloyd & Brewer, 1992, p. 273). This resolution eventually led to the most comprehensive analysis of and recommendations about undergraduate education since bipeds appeared on the evolutionary totem pole.

St. Mary’s Conference (1991)

After 3 years of planning, APA’s National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology was held at St. Mary’s College in Maryland during June 1991. Its specific goal “was to synthesize the scholarship and practice of the teaching and learning of psychology in order to produce a practical handbook for faculty who work with undergraduates. . . .” (McGovern, 1993, p. 4).

Several features distinguished the St. Mary’s Conference from previous ones. Its scope was much broader, selection of participants was more open, many more individuals attended, and they represented much greater diversity in gender and ethnicity. A final distinguishing feature was the participation of five faculty members from 2-year colleges, two high school teachers, two international members (from Canada and Puerto Rico), and one non-psychologist representing the American Association of Higher Education.
Consistent with the broader scope of the St. Mary’s Conference, seven working groups addressed specific topics (assessment, advising, ethnic minorities, faculty development, faculty linkages, curriculum, and active learning) and summarized their conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions in McGovern (1993).

The pleasure and challenge of chairing the Curriculum Group, which consisted of eight talented and (mostly) congenial psychologists, fell to Charles Brewer of Furman University. The studies mentioned earlier provided historical background for the group’s deliberations, but the Curriculum Group tried not to let them determine its approach to the curriculum. The group formulated recommendations in relation to the milieu of higher education in general and of psychology in particular.

Participants at the St. Mary’s Conference explicitly reaffirmed the study of psychology as a science in the liberal arts tradition. They recognized, however, that we have come a long way from the trivium and quadrivium of the Middle Ages. Their report (Brewer et al., 1993) emphasized that the fundamental goal of undergraduate education in psychology is to teach students to think as scientists about behavior and experience. They also identified six goals of the curriculum that complement this overarching goal:

1. attention to human diversity
2. breadth and depth of knowledge
3. methodological competence
4. practical experience and application
5. communication skills
6. sensitivity to ethical issues

Another emphasis was knowledge about the preparation for various career choices.

The St. Mary’s report stressed that the curriculum should be planned to achieve all of these goals. It suggested that the psychology major should consist of four levels of knowledge and skills, to be taken sequentially:

1. the introductory course
2. methodology courses
3. content courses
4. integrative experiences

The introductory psychology course should be a prerequisite for all other psychology courses, and it should provide an overview of topics and methods that illustrate the discipline’s concepts, principles, and theories. Usually taken in the second or third year, the crucial methodology courses should cover experimental, correlational, and case-study techniques of research, and they should involve firsthand data collection, analysis and interpretation. Methodology courses should cover statistics, research design, and psychometric methods, and they should be prerequisites for certain of the content courses.

Content courses cover major substantive areas, and the curriculum should be structured to ensure adequate coverage of natural and social science facets of the discipline. Moreover, the report included two examples that suggest how departments might divide courses into clusters and require psychology majors to take a certain number of courses from each cluster. Integrative experiences for seniors may take several forms, including internships; research projects supervised by faculty members; or capstone courses, such as History of Psychology, Advanced General Psychology, or Great Ideas in Psychology.
The St. Mary’s conferees concluded that no one curriculum is best for every school and every student but that all programs should reflect certain common characteristics and emphases. These are summarized as recommendations and suggestions (McGovern, 1993).

The impact of a conference report is difficult to assess, but the St. Mary’s Conference prompted many important activities, and others are in the offing. Two documents are especially noteworthy. One is the previously mentioned report of the conference, Handbook for Enhancing Undergraduate Education in Psychology (McGovern, 1993). As McGovern and Reich (1996) pointed out, this book “has been used by faculty as a source of ideas to renew undergraduate programs, as a stimulus for faculty development, and as a guide for the periodic reviews and evaluations mandated on different campuses” (p. 252). Numerous empirical studies recommended in the Handbook have been published, and others are in progress. The second document, “Principles for Quality Undergraduate Psychology Programs,” is a “concise blueprint for innovation and change in undergraduate education” (McGovern & Reich, p. 252). After extensive review, the APA’s Council of Representatives adopted the revised Principles as official association policy in February 1994. This document is neither prescriptive nor proscriptive, but its promulgation is the closest that APA has come to providing specific direction about undergraduate programs in psychology. These two documents will help to shape our discipline for years to come.

Psychology Partnerships Project (1999)

The American Psychological Association sponsored a conference dedicated to the promotion of academic partnerships for solving problems across educational contexts. An invitational conference, the National Forum of the Psychology Partnerships Project (P3), was held in 1999 at James Madison University under the able direction of Virginia Andreoli Mathie of the host institution. Conference participants, who represented diverse academic contexts, collaborated in 1 of 10 work groups that each reflected a different dimension of academic life. Two groups directly pertained to the evolution of the psychology curriculum as practiced from high school through graduate education: Curriculum and Assessment.

The Curriculum Group affirmed principles from the St. Mary’s Conference. Members of this group re-emphasized the importance of science as the foundation for the psychology curriculum, regardless of the context in which it is implemented. They also developed the “psychology trunk,” a teaching resource that includes basic supplies and demonstrations in psychology that can be borrowed from the APA to enhance teaching and learning.

The Assessment Group produced two products that contributed to the evolution of national thinking about curriculum matters. The “Assessment All-Stars” produced a rubric about the development of scientific inquiry skills in psychology that is in press in the Teaching of Psychology. The rubric articulated a five-level model regarding how individuals change in their thinking from having no exposure to psychology and its scientific principles through the sophisticated reasoning of those who are trained at the graduate level. The rubric addressed eight domains of scientific reasoning including observation, ethics, collaboration, self-assessment and other skills. The article also offered an example of how the rubric could be used to promote authentic assessment by applying its developmental outcomes to a typical assignment in the History and Systems course. The second product from the All-Stars was the sponsorship of the first discipline-specific assessment conference, which is described later in this article.

APA’s Task Force on Learning Goals and Outcomes (2001)

In 2001, APA’s Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) appointed a Task Force on Undergraduate
Psychology Major Competencies and charged it to develop goals and learning outcomes for the undergraduate psychology major. This group, under the leadership of Jane Halonen, developed a preliminary proposal concerning current expectations related to learning goals and sought suggestions from interested individuals and professional groups in psychology. As part of the feedback process, a team from the Task Force presented their ideas at Project Kaleidoscope’s 2001 Summer Institute in Snow Bird, Utah, and modified the proposal based on this valuable collaboration. The resulting “Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Goals and Outcomes: A Report” has been endorsed by the BEA and is available online for review and comment at: www.apa.org/ed/pcue/taskforcereport2.pdf. The Task Force plans to propose adoption by the APA’s Council of Representatives in August 2003.

The report provides details of five suggested goals and learning outcomes in each of two categories:

A. Knowledge, Skills, and Values Consistent with the Science and Application of Psychology
   1. Theory and Content of Psychology
   2. Research Methods in Psychology
   3. Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology
   4. Application of Psychology
   5. Values in Psychology

B. Knowledge, Skills, and Values Consistent with Liberal Arts Education that are Further Developed in Psychology
   1. Informational and Technological Literacy
   2. Communication Skills
   3. Socio-cultural and International Awareness
   4. Personal Development
   5. Career Planning and Development

The Task Force recognized from the outset of their work that their recommendations would have significant implications for departmental assessment planning to promote the improvement of teaching and learning in psychology. For example, members of the Task Force stipulated that any goal or outcome included in their proposal should be measurable. They also speculated about multiple ways in which any goal or outcome could be assessed, including evaluating which methods (e.g., portfolio, standardized tests, authentic assessment strategy) might provide greater promise for any given learning goal. In the second phase of the work, Task Force members developed a companion piece to assist departments in implementing and assessing the goals and outcomes. Members of the Task Force visited Project Kaleidoscope’s 2002 Summer Institute in Williamsburg, VA, to unveil their assessment recommendations and seek feedback. The document was again modified to reflect suggestions from PKAL participants. APA published the results with an electronic resource called “The Assessment Cyberguide,” which is being prepared for the APA’s website.

**APA’s Education Leadership Conference (2001)**

APA’s Education Directorate and its BEA sponsored an historic conference, “Re-Thinking Education in Psychology and Psychology in Education,” October 23-25, 2001 in Arlington, VA. Participants discussed present and future challenges related to seven questions, including the following:

1. What competencies in technology should every undergraduate psychology major and every graduate student in psychology have?
2. Should there be national standards for the undergraduate psychology major and what are the pros
and cons?
3. What psychological science basics should K-12 teachers know and be able to apply to teaching and learning?
4. What psychological knowledge should students have by the end of elementary school, middle school, and high school?


The P3 Assessment All-Stars recruited the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2 of the APA) and Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, GA, to cosponsor “Measuring Up: Best Practices in Assessment in Psychology Education Conference” September 27-29, 2002. The conference, formally hosted by Bill Hill of Kennesaw State, drew substantial support from psychology departments across the country along with funding from the American Psychological Association, CASTL, and other professional organizations. Approximately 250 participants heard keynote addresses from Diane Halpern, Robert Sternberg, Donna Duffy, and Randy Ernst, individuals who were selected for their assessment expertise and for their representation of different psychology contexts from the high school psychology course through graduate education. Six comprehensive assessment plans from stellar undergraduate programs were profiled during the conference. Poster sessions and concurrent sessions also provided highlights of innovative assessment practices.

Dana Dunn (Moravian College), Chandra Mehrotra (College of St. Scholastica), and Jane Halonen (James Madison University), original members of the Assessment All-Stars, are editing a book that will include selected presentations from the Measuring Up conference. Tentatively titled *Measuring Up: Assessment Challenges and Practices for Psychology*, the book will be published by the APA.

**Project Kaleidoscope (2000-2002)**

Since 2000, psychology has been included in PKAL’s Summer Institutes and the timing of psychology’s involvement in PKAL has been fortuitous. These Institutes have allowed national curriculum leaders the opportunity to collaborate with a broad range of faculty members participating in PKAL with mutually beneficial results. Participants gained new insights and learned new strategies to take back to their home departments. In turn, the APA-inspired work on national goals and outcomes provided an organizing framework for the last two Summer Institutes. Highlights from the one in Williamsburg, VA (“Undergraduate Psychology Programs: Current Best Practices & The Future”), May 29-June 5, 2002, are available online at: www.pkal.org.

**Conclusion**

Since the St. Mary’s Conference in 1991, impressive progress has been made in addressing pivotal issues concerning undergraduate programs in psychology. Predicting the future is difficult (and often embarrassingly wrong), but we predict that even more important and far-reaching developments will unfold soon. Hence, we have never been more excited and optimistic about the future of undergraduate psychology. May all our dreams come true—and none of our nightmares.
References


