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A National Survey of Requirements for the Psychology Major

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In 1979, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) began the Academic Program Evaluation Project (Ostar, 1986). In the same year, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission introduced performance funding to encourage the evaluation and improvement of academic programs (Rudolph & Nixon, 1986). A 1984 report from the National Institute of Education supported the use of assessment to determine whether or not educational goals were being met. According to Ewell, et al. (1990) 83% of the states have or are considering higher education assessment mandates or initiatives. Furthermore, regional accrediting agencies now are required to include outcomes assessment to receive federal recognition.

Assessment of graduating seniors in colleges and universities has turned its focus towards the major with an emphasis on curricular evaluation and development (Marchese, 1989). The combination of the measurement of student learning with the evaluation of institutional priorities and curricula, has created a need for specialized measurement models and instruments. Because an instrument intended to evaluate both students and curricula must reflect the goals of the individual department, nationally standardized tests have proven to be largely unsatisfactory. Erwin (1989) has suggested that department goals should be established and that these should be used to produce an appropriate method for assessing the major.

In order to determine the content most appropriate for the ACAT instrument, PACAT conducted a survey of psychology departments at public and private post-secondary institutions. The surveys requested information concerning the role of various content areas in the curriculum of the major. The results have been used to isolate common patterns of curricular offerings and requirements, identified by content area rather than course.

Sample

Between October 1988 and January 1990, surveys were sent to 1,148 departments of psychology in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands which were listed by the College Entrance Examination Board (*Index of Majors*, 1988) as offering 4 year baccalaureate degrees with a major in Psychology. Completed surveys were received from 598 (52%) of the departments. Multiple surveys submitted by departments with multiple "tracks" increased the total number of surveys received to 650. Forty-five surveys from 36 departments were dropped either because they were blank or were incorrectly completed. The data from the remaining 605 surveys are included in the present study.

Instrument

The survey was constructed using 10 randomly selected college and university catalogs and comparing the descriptions of courses required for a major in psychology. A total of 21 content areas were identified and included on the survey. Participants were asked to indicate, for each area, whether it was required, part of a list of options, or counted as an elective within their major. In addition, they were asked to indicate whether the content area was presented as a separate course, as one of several major topics within

a course, or both. A write-in area was provided for the inclusion of content areas which did not appear on the instrument. Respondents were asked not to include content areas taught only in introductory level survey courses.

Results

The survey responses were tallied and each content area was coded according to the position it occupied within the structure of the individual major. Six categories of response were used with a seventh, "not offered," for content areas which either were unmarked or marked incorrectly (see Table 1). The "write-in" content areas also were grouped into categories where possible and tallied.

The coded responses were subjected to the SPSS-X Quick Cluster routine which grouped them into initial "proto-curricula." These content area "proto-curricula" were refined to individual curricular models with a fixed content area core and a predetermined number of areas selected from a list of options. Responding departments then were tested individually to determine the degree to which they matched each curricular model and were grouped accordingly. The more complex curricula were identified first and departments which matched them were not included in the determination of subsequent, less complex patterns. For content areas in the core, a department was considered to match the curricular pattern if it required 80% of the content areas with more than half being taught as separate courses. For the optional areas, a department met the criterion if it required 80% of the minimum number of optional content areas with more than half being taught as separate courses. Eight curricular patterns finally were identified which could account for 573 of the 605 interpretable surveys (see Table 2).

VARIMAX rotation factor analysis (SPSS-X) also was performed on the data to determine whether or not the responses would produce logically consistent factors. Although not necessarily appropriate for the design of assessment instruments, the results of this analysis (see Table 3) suggest that the surveys were sufficiently sensitive for the purpose of identifying curricular patterns.

DISCUSSION

The response rate of 562 departments out of the 1,148 surveyed in 1989-90 (49%) has provided a very adequate national sample. The overall total of 605 surveys received suggests that approximately 8% of Psychology departments offer multiple tracks through the major.

As would be expected, two content areas stand out as more or less universal requirements: statistics and experimental design. In addition, a distinct group of content areas appears to serve as options beyond this core: abnormal; life span development; history and systems; human learning and cognition; personality; physiological; social. The division of responding departments into eight distinctive curricular patterns, however, argues against making a single broad generalization from the overall survey findings. None of the curricular patterns precisely matches the list of areas above, the closest being pattern A which would match only 136 of the 605 responding departments.

The findings of this survey and the requests by participating departments for different curricular versions of the ACAT support the contention that a single instrument is inappropriate for the assessment of graduating seniors in psychology. The findings also suggest that the data collected by surveys of psychology departments should be interpreted cautiously to insure adequate representation of curricular diversity.

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TABLE 1: TALLY OF CONTENT AREAS INCLUDED IN SURVEY

Content Area	Required		Option		Elective	
	*		*		*	
Abnormal	110	1	297	1	183	1
Animal Learning/Motivation	52	63	198	44	66	68
Clinical/Counseling	33	10	145	14	227	59
Community	4	10	33	11	59	82
Comparative	5	21	80	26	63	78
Developmental	136	3	272	1	160	6
Educational	18	4	50	2	168	29
Experimental Design	439	59	32	2	28	11
Forensic	3	3	12	7	45	46
Gender	3	14	52	25	192	98
History and Systems	212	20	130	6	144	20
Human Learning/Cognition	105	30	279	21	97	27
Industrial	11	4	121	7	242	28
Minority	4	9	18	18	70	80
Personality	127	7	289	2	148	3
Physiological	107	12	302	2	113	14
Psycholinguistics	4	11	51	24	66	79
Sensation and Perception	23	35	247	20	94	52
Social	99	2	297	5	169	0
Statistics	493	36	27	1	12	4
Testing and Measurement	85	6	192	11	199	29

"WRITE-IN" CONTENT AREAS (Content area names are based upon nomenclature provided by respondents.)						
Adjustment	2	0	6	0	23	0
Behavior Modification	1	0	12	0	20	0
Computer Analysis/Use/Application	4	0	6	0	8	0
Environmental	1	0	5	0	14	0
Exceptionalities	2	0	14	0	25	0
Group Dynamics	4	0	12	0	20	0
Health/Sports	0	0	11	0	20	1
Human Sexuality	2	0	9	0	27	0
Psychopharmacology	3	0	14	0	30	0
Religion	3	0	5	0	12	0
Other	12	1	60	1	134	2
* Of each pair of columns, the column on the left represents respondents who indicated that the content area was taught as a separate course. The column on the right indicates that the material is taught but as part of a broader course containing one or more additional areas.						

TABLE 2: PACAT PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULAR PATTERNS

PATTERN A

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **136** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE	Optional Areas (Select 2)
Abnormal	Clinical and Counseling
Animal Learning and Motivation	Developmental
Experimental Design	History and Systems
Human Learning and Cognition	Sensation and Perception
Personality	Testing and Measurement
Physiological	
Social	
Statistics	

PATTERN B

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **98** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE	Optional Areas (Select 2)
Abnormal	Animal Learning and Motivation
Developmental	Clinical and Counseling
Experimental Design	Human Learning and Cognition
History and Systems	Physiological
Personality	Sensation and Perception
Statistics	Social
	Testing and Measurement

PATTERN C

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **89** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE	Optional Areas (Select 2)
Developmental	Abnormal
Experimental Design	Clinical and Counseling
Social	History and Systems
Statistics	Human Learning and Cognition
	Personality
	Physiological
	Testing and Measurement

PATTERN D

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **94** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE

Experimental Design
History and Systems
Statistics

Optional Areas (Select 1)

Abnormal
Clinical and Counseling
Developmental
Human Learning and Cognition
Personality
Physiological
Social
Testing and Measurement

PATTERN E

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **87** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE

Experimental Design
Statistics

Optional Areas (Select 2)

Abnormal
Animal Learning and Motivation
Developmental
Human Learning and Cognition
Personality
Physiological
Sensation and Perception

PATTERN F

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **49** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE

Statistics

Optional Areas (Select 3)

History and Systems
Human Learning and Cognition
Personality
Physiological
Social

PATTERN G

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **11** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE

- Abnormal
- Developmental
- Social

Optional Areas (Select 3)

- Animal Learning and Motivation
- Clinical and Counseling
- Experimental Design
- Human Learning and Cognition
- Personality
- Physiological
- Testing and Measurement

PATTERN H

(Of the 605 classifiable surveys returned, **9** fell within this curriculum.)

COMMON CORE

- Abnormal
- Experimental Design

Optional Areas (Select 2)

- Animal Learning and Motivation
- Clinical and Counseling
- Developmental
- History and Systems
- Statistics
- Testing and Measurement

TABLE 3: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF WEIGHTED RESPONSES

<p>FACTOR 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life-Span Development• Abnormal• Social• Personality• Clinical/Counseling	<p>FACTOR 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Animal Learning and Motivation• Sensation and Perception• Physiological• Comparative	<p>FACTOR 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minority• Gender• Community• Psycholinguistics• Forensic
<p>FACTOR 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Industrial• Testing and Measurement• Clinical/Counseling• History and Systems	<p>FACTOR 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Statistics• Experimental Design	<p>FACTOR 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Human Learning and Cognition• Educational