

University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Department of Psychology  
Undergraduate Assessment Report (2001-02)  
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This report describes the undergraduate assessment activities conducted by the Department of Psychology during the 2001-2002 academic year.

Discussion of 2000-01 Assessment Results

We began the year by holding a department meeting in September 2001 in which we discussed the results of our assessment activities (described in the 2000-2001 Assessment Report). We had collected data in the spring 2001 semester, but the report could not be completed until late May, 2001. It was distributed to all faculty shortly thereafter. During the meeting I presented the summary data on student writing. Summarizing that conversation is difficult, but a few points emerged.

- First, many were surprised that there was as much writing being assigned as the summary indicated. Some expressed the opinion that they thought they were in the minority in requiring writing when, in fact, the vast majority of undergraduate psychology courses include a significant written component.
- Second, many were surprised at the extent of the library and data analysis components. My sense was that several faculty members who did not require writing were being persuaded to do so.

Another goal of that meeting was to firm up plans for the 2001-2002 academic year. Because of the interest raised about writing, we decided to repeat the analysis for the current academic year, and to conduct data collection during the fall semester in order to get a somewhat different sample of courses and instructors.

Consequently, information was assembled during the fall semester and analyzed during the spring. However, due to an exceptionally busy late spring agenda, we could not meet to discuss the results. We did, however, meet on September 16, 2002 to discuss the latest data. That meeting and its outcome will be discussed at the end of this report.

Assessment Methods used in 2001-02

I distributed a survey form to each of the instructors of the 39 sections of undergraduate psychology courses (100-through 400-level, excluding non-classroom courses such as directed study and internships). After two weeks, a follow-up memo was sent to those who had not responded. Because participation was voluntary, no further pressure was used; 33 sections are therefore included in this report. The missing six sections were taught by a total of four instructors and they ranged from 100 to 400-level courses.

The survey asked whether any sort of written assignments were required in the course and a series of questions about the nature of such assignments. The instructors were also asked to randomly select two psychology majors enrolled in their course and to photocopy the written work submitted by those students and to give those copies to Leger for additional analysis.

### Assessment Results from 2001-02

I will summarize the data on written requirements, then present the data derived from analysis of the students' writing.

#### *Assignments*

Twenty-six of the 33 (78.8%) reporting courses had at least one assignment, and nine of the 26 had two or more assignments. Therefore, across all 33 courses, there were 63 assignments, or 1.9 assignments per section on average (including those courses with no assignments). The mean number of pages required across all 33 courses was 6.0. (There is no reason to believe that the six sections for which no data were obtained would alter appreciably these summary statistics. My informal snooping revealed that four of the six sections required writing, one did not, and the last I couldn't find out).

Turning now to the 26 courses that had a writing requirement, 57.7% had at least one assignment that required library research, 23.1% included a data analysis requirement, 62.9% gave students the option of revising after obtaining feedback, 96.2% provided students with advance information about the grading criteria, and 65.4% included writing mechanics in their grading criteria. Instructors were involved in grading in 92.3% of the sections, either alone or in conjunction with a teaching assistant. Finally, written requirements accounted for an average of 25.9% of the possible points in these 26 courses (or 20.4% across all sections).

#### *Student Performance*

A total of 50 papers (two from each of 25 assignments originating from 20 courses) were submitted to me for assessment. (This return rate was disappointing and if this assessment technique is used again, a more proactive method will need to be devised to remind instructors to collect up and copy their students' writing samples). On a more positive note, however, the papers I did receive tended to be longer than average [mean = 8.3 pages] for the entire set of assignments and more of these assignments included evidence of library work [19 of 25 or 76%, relative to 57.7% overall]. Thus, the papers received tended to be biased toward the more substantial "term paper" sort of assignment.

All papers that I received were scored by me for writing mechanics. I turned to the last full page of text and noted errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. All papers were double-spaced and the number of errors ranged from zero to six with a mean of 1.6 errors. Unlike last year—when two very poorly written papers were received—I found all of the papers submitted this year to be at least "adequate." There was still variability of course and there is still plenty of room for improvement, since the absence of errors does not necessarily mean that the prose was as clear or concise as one might wish. Overall, however, I judged these papers to be quite good.

Library work appeared in 38 of the papers (two from each of 19 assignments) as evidenced by in-text citations and a reference section. The authors of these papers cited from one to 11 references (mean = 5.2 references per paper). Students seemed to follow a variety of referencing style guidelines, but all were complete in citing the information that would be needed to find the source. There were several papers that were inconsistent in referencing style, but I hasten to add that this sort of error appears in the reference sections of seasoned veterans!

Data collection or analysis appeared in 14 papers (seven assignments). Four of these assignments came from research methods courses and they were, as one would expect, more thorough and sophisticated in the procedures that were employed to analyze data. Another assignment came from an advanced course that had a methods course as a prerequisite, and data analysis was also reasonably advanced. The other two assignments came from lower-level course and the data were presented as simple sums and means, which seemed perfectly adequate for the task.

### *Final Summary*

To summarize the main points, nearly 80% of all undergraduate psychology courses had at least one writing assignment, and these averaged about six pages in length. Over half these courses required library research and about a quarter required data collection or analysis. Grading criteria were spelled out in advance, and about two-thirds included writing mechanics in their criteria. The papers were generally well-written and exhibited proper referencing styles and data presentation, when included. All these measures were similar to those obtained during the spring 2001 semester.

### Future Assessment Plans

We have now conducted undergraduate assessments in several ways, each with its advantages and disadvantages. We realize that curricular changes and their consequences for student performance take time to implement and measure. Therefore, we plan to conduct assessment on a yearly basis but to cycle through three protocols, each designed to assess a different aspect of student performance.

- *Year 1 (2001-2002):* Writing. This report.
- *Year 2 (2002-2003):* Research. This is intended to measure student competence in (1) using the library and similar resources to acquire published information pertaining to behavioral processes, (2) collecting data and performing quantitative analysis of data, and (3) writing research reports.

Specific measures will include the following: (1) reviews of all honor's thesis proposals and completed theses submitted through the Department, (2) surveys submitted to all faculty asking about undergraduates who have assisted them recently in research and about their duties, (3) surveys of graduating seniors about their research experience, including such things as assisting in faculty research, presentations at conferences, and writing of research reports, and (4) surveys distributed to students enrolled in Psychology 299, 350, 399H, 450, 451, and 499 to

obtain information about current research activities. Many of these sources will return some of the same information, but the goal is to not miss anything, so some redundancy is acceptable.

- *Year 3 (2003-2004): Knowledge.* One of our main goals is to increase the depth of knowledge that students have about psychology. This will be assessed in two ways.

First, we will acquire GRE scores from our students who take the GRE, both on the advanced psychology exam and the general test. (The latter is needed to provide a reference point for the former). These are not scores of students applying to our graduate program, but the scores from any of our students who take the GRE regardless of the program to which they apply.

Second, we will ask students (graduating seniors toward the end of their last semester) about their applications to graduate or professional school programs and whether they have been admitted.

In both cases we will be looking for trends over time. Since we have not done years 2 or 3, the first pass will establish a baseline with which to compare data from subsequent years.

Our plan is to cycle through this set of three protocols and to distribute the information to faculty for discussion. By allowing time to elapse between repetitions of a protocol, we hope to be able to detect trends and adjust accordingly.

Report of the meeting on September 16, 2002: A draft of this report was circulated to all faculty about a week in advance of a regular faculty meeting, held on September 16. About 20 minutes were devoted to a discussion of the report. We began by discussing the findings of the writing survey and student writing exercises. The results were quite similar to what we obtained last year, so there was nothing surprising that emerged, and the consensus was that we would probably need to wait for more time to elapse before re-assessing writing in order to detect any trends that may occur. In that light, there was widespread support for establishing an ongoing cycle of assessment activities. Some minor modifications of the initial plans were suggested and approved. We agreed that the details of the data collection protocol would be left to the assessment coordinator in collaboration with the Department's Executive Committee. We plan to proceed with the second year of the plan for the 2002-2003 academic year.