Quality Benchmarks in Undergraduate Psychology Programs

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Performance benchmarks are proposed to assist undergraduate psychology programs in defining their missions and goals as well as documenting their effectiveness. Experienced academic program reviewers compared their experiences to formulate a developmental framework of attributes of undergraduate programs focusing on activity in 8 domains: curriculum, assessment issues, student learning outcomes, program resources, student development, faculty characteristics, program climate, and administrative support. A continuum of performance was conceptualized for each attribute in each of the domains to characterize underdeveloped, developing, effective, and distinguished achievement for undergraduate programs. The authors hope to inspire a national conversation about program benchmarks in psychology in order to improve program quality, encourage more effective program reviews, and help optimally functioning programs compete more successfully for resources on the basis of their distinguished achievements.

Keywords: benchmarking, curriculum, undergraduate education, program evaluation

There is little formal consensus about what constitutes quality in undergraduate psychology programs. After analyzing the academic program reviews of psychology departmental consultants, Korn, Sweetman, and Nodine (1996) concluded that there was no common understanding about the criteria by which to evaluate psychology programs. The authors lamented the absence of a rubric that could assist programs and reviewers in accomplishing academic program reviews, an increasingly common practice in higher education (Bogue & Saunders, 1992; Wergin, 2003; Wergin & Swingen, 2000). To fill this void, this article proposes a rubric for program review in psychology.

Psychology faculty, department chairs, and program directors will benefit from having a reasonable set of criteria for assessing program performance. These characteristics—commonly referred to in higher education as “benchmarks” (e.g., Middaugh, 2001; see also Bergquist & Armstrong, 1986; Bogue & Saunders, 1992)—provide standard reference points, facilitating program review internally through self-study or externally through department consultants. Elucidating and developing a common understanding about such benchmarks will help psychology programs accurately assess their distinctive qualities and successful features while recognizing other aspects of their program performance that warrant further development.

Ultimately, “benchmarking” should promote more active engagement of all campus constituents (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). College and university administrators can rely on such benchmarks to compare the performance of their institution’s program with the performance of programs found in peer or aspirant institutions; they can also use them to support a program in forging a distinctive mission. The use of benchmarks can spur faculty to improve the quality of the learning climate (Umbach & Por-

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If students are aware of benchmarks, they can make informed choices when considering matriculation in a program as well as use such benchmarks to guide their individual progress (cf. Dunn, McEntarffer, & Halonen, 2004). Indeed, quality benchmarks might be a more reliable way of assessing the quality of an academic program than some popular and subjective indicators (e.g., the college and university ranking system used by US News & World Report).

In this article, we review the typical process and scope of academic program reviews to justify why a more systematic approach is needed. Next we discuss the evolution of assessment scholarship that addresses psychology program quality. We introduce eight broad educational dimensions, or “domains,” of evaluation—curriculum, assessment issues, student learning outcomes, program resources, student development, faculty characteristics, program climate, and administrative support—and their accompanying attributes along a continuum from underdeveloped to distinguished. The resulting framework can help evaluators determine the appropriate level of program development in each of the domains. We address the implications of broadly adopting a more standard framework for evaluating program quality. And we conclude by inviting a broader conversation about how the APA can assist in recognizing programs that achieve distinction.

The Role of the Academic Program Review in Psychology

All educational entities need and benefit from periodic review (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). Consequently, regulating agencies have embraced principles of regular, systematic assessment as the foundation for accountability (Halpern, 2004; Halpern et al., 1993). Administrators have been asking programs to engage in some form of program review to respond to accountability concerns from regional accrediting bodies, professional associations, and legislative mandates at the state level for many years.

The review protocol varies with the institution. For example, programs cycle through evaluation procedures at predetermined intervals, typically conducting a review every 4 to 7 years. An authority on the campus, most likely the dean or department chair, commissions a group of faculty to gather data for preparing a self-study when prompted to do so by other officials in academic affairs or a campus’s institutional research office.

In many instances, the academic program review protocol involves recruitment of an impartial, outside consultant, who reviews the self-study, visits the campus, and compiles a critical commentary. Programs differ in their use of external examiners, who may conduct their work alone or with another external reviewer. Some campuses adopt a blended model, incorporating both off-campus and on-campus experts, faculty from other programs who can provide important local perspectives during the process (for a discussion of and resources pertaining to conducting an external departmental review, see Pusateri, Poe, Addison, & Goedel, 2004; see also Conrad & Wilson, 1985).

Many institutions specify reporting requirements with a template outlining the basic dimensions of the program review that reflect the priorities and values of the institution. However, assessment scholars have also published generic review models (e.g., Barak & Breier, 1990; Barak & Mets, 1995; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Project Kaleidoscope, n.d.-a.; Wergin, 2003). Several models specific to the psychology review have also emerged in the scholarship of teaching and learning in psychology (e.g., Levy, Burton, Mickler, & Vigorito, 1999; Pusateri et al., 2004;
Stoloff, Apple, Barron, Reis-Bergan, & Sundre, 2004; see also Sheehan, 1993, 1994).

Following nascent trends in higher education, educational practitioners have been increasingly concerned with questions of educational quality. Perhaps spurred by Boyer’s (1997) call for reconceptualizing the nature of scholarship, scholars of teaching and learning in the discipline have examined many facets of the educational experience from the standpoint of quality improvement. Our proposal represents a logical extension of the scholarship addressing curricular expectations that have developed in the discipline since the assessment movement began in 1985 (McGovern, 2004; see also Pusateri, 2002).

Educational Assessment Scholarship in Psychology

Although curriculum scholars in psychology had regularly scrutinized the nature of undergraduate curricula (see C. L. Brewer et al., 1993; McGovern & Brewer, 2005), reviewing educational assessment practices in psychology instruction first formally emerged in connection with the 1991 St. Mary’s Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology. The APA-sponsored conference, led by Thomas V. McGovern, brought together teams of volunteers to examine ways to promote quality along the various dimensions of undergraduate psychology education.

One team, under the leadership of Diane F. Halpern (1988), discussed the need for and impact of assessment as a legitimate force in higher education. Moreover, this team’s chapter (Halpern et al., 1993) published in the Handbook for Enhancing Undergraduate Education in Psychology (McGovern, 1993a) emphasized the importance of sound assessment and promoted the need to incorporate reasonable funding and rewards for such activity (see also Halpern, 2004).

The first large-scale outcomes-oriented curriculum project following the St. Mary’s Conference was the development of the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (APA, 2005). In 1996, under the leadership of high school psychology teacher Laura Maitland, a group from Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS) and some college advisors described a science-centered model for the high school course that provided rigor and flexibility. Consistent with the original plan to create a living document that should undergo systematic revision, a second task force revised the model in 2005. They articulated outcomes consistent with five domains in psychology (i.e., methods, biopsychological, developmental, cognitive, and variations in individual and group behavior). Although the document targeted high school classes, many colleges and universities have reported that the document assisted them in redesigning their introductory courses (e.g., Smith & Fineberg, 2006).

Encouraged by the broad acceptance and enthusiastic adoption of the National Standards, APA’s Education Directorate next impanelled a group of undergraduate faculty to address learning expectations for college-level work in psychology. Chaired by Jane S. Halonen, the group developed a set of 10 learning goals coupled with their related learning outcomes (Halonen et al., 2002b). The group sought feedback to refine the list of expectations of best practices in teaching undergraduate psychology and to provide assessment recommendations associated with the learning goals (Halonen et al., 2002b). APA’s Board of Educational Affairs approved the framework in March 2002, and the Council of Representatives endorsed the Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major in August 2006.
A parallel activity also contributed to the evolution of psychology’s educational assessment practices. Spearheaded by Virginia Andreoli Mathie, the 1999 National Forum on Psychology Partnerships (also known as P3, the Psychology Partnerships Project) adopted the philosophical position that partnerships—cooperative pedagogical ventures across levels of training (i.e., from secondary to graduate-level instruction)—could provide some solutions to common educational problems. A variety of work groups convened for a five-day meeting at James Madison University to pursue solutions based on that premise. One task force formed in this initiative examined assessment concerns at all levels of education in psychology. Led by high school teacher Rob McEntarffer, the group later sponsored the first national “Best Practices” conference on educational assessment in psychology in September 2002. Measuring Up: Educational Assessment Challenges and Practices for Psychology (Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004) highlighted and expanded on the most impressive contributions from conference participants.

The most recent collaboration on outcomes involved an attempt to create developmental expectations based on the National Learning Goals and Outcomes (Puccio & Halonen, 2006). Inspired by the Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges (PT@CC), the APA organized a group of educators representing two- and four-year programs to describe how students’ abilities should evolve in an undergraduate psychology program.

In little more than a decade since the St. Mary’s Conference, assessment-related activities now permeate psychology education at all levels. As educators refine their benchmarking abilities to identify explicit performance criteria in psychology education, it logically follows that this strategy can be applied at a higher level of analysis. Just as student learning can be meaningfully assessed (e.g., Graham, 1998; Halpern, 1988), psychology programs can be evaluated for how well they achieve reasonable goals or demonstrate appropriate attributes that lead to sound educational experiences for undergraduates. We now turn to our proposal for establishing and using benchmarks to support undergraduate programs in psychology.

**Attributes of High-Quality Programs in Psychology**

Undergraduate psychology programs demonstrate a broad range of quality. Some psychology programs, especially those beset with challenging politics and insular attitudes, evolve into environments with minimal collegiality and little coherent curriculum planning. Others manage—even when resources are barely adequate—to provide coherent learning experiences in an atmosphere that produces active engagement from faculty and students. Of course, there are stellar programs with cooperative colleagues, high-quality leadership, and good resources that prepare their graduates for immediate employment or for further study in the discipline or a related field.

As a team of experienced program reviewers, we identified a set of performance criteria that, when interpreted in light of an institution’s mission and culture, can assist program personnel in optimizing experiences for students. A secondary goal was to help qualified psychology programs of all sizes and scopes lay legitimate claim to the title “distinguished program.” Deans, provosts, and presidents routinely cite the most vivid exemplars from their most successful programs when they have the opportunity to capture public attention or donor largesse. Campaigning either formally or informally to secure a niche among the most successful or “distinguished” programs on campus can produce multiple positive outcomes, including enhanced resources, more frequent public recognition of accomplishments, and improved student recruitment and retention.

We use the term *distinguished* to refer to the characteristics of a psychology program that makes exceptional contributions to how well students learn about the science of psychology. We designate the next level of program function as *effective*, which represents making an adequate, appropriate, and positive contribution to student learning. A *developing* benchmark falls below a distinguished or an effective benchmark but still constitutes a marginal contribution. In contrast, characteristics that are *underdeveloped* are counterproductive to a program’s educational mission. In some cases, the presence of underdeveloped areas can indicate a lack of well-defined goals within a program; in others, low-rated benchmarks reflect leadership and personnel problems, avoidance or neglect of responsibilities, lack of faculty and student engagement, severe resource constraints, or even collegial ambivalence or intradepartmental conflict.

The labels developing and underdeveloped are not meant to be pejorative, nor are they used to condemn the educational efforts within a program. These particular eval-
ative descriptions can highlight problems and redirect a program’s efforts toward renewal and revitalization of purpose and pedagogy or point to the need for a critical reassessment of a program’s educational goals. The labels should not be used to downgrade faculty efforts, to place a program on probation, or to reduce the amount of administrative support a psychology program receives (i.e., summative assessment). Instead, the labels are appropriate for formative assessment, a multidimensional method for evaluating a department’s progress toward mastery of the quality benchmarks. To paraphrase Halpern’s (2004) views on a related issue, student learning outcomes, we can hardly expect faculty (or department chairs) to embrace quality benchmarks and to critically examine their undergraduate programs if punishment for perceived or real shortcomings results. Thus, we view developing and underdeveloped as constructive, not constricting, labels that facilitate more successful program evolution.

In presenting the following framework, we also do not want to be construed as promoting a single desired profile of benchmarks. As critics of the psychology curriculum (e.g., C. L. Brewer et al., 1993; Halpern, 2004; see also McGovern, Furumoto, Halpern, Kimble, & McKeachie, 1991) have noted, different program and institutional strengths, history, traditions, resources, personnel, and students dictate taking different educational approaches. The central issue is how a program chooses to capitalize on its strengths while constructively addressing areas that need improvement. Whether an internal or an external party undertakes the evaluation of a psychology program, the goal of benchmarking is to identify evidence of success and encourage improvement.

Although scholars have offered a general framework for program reviews (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1992), we propose that eight broad dimensions or domains—curriculum, assessment issues, student learning outcomes, program resources, student development, faculty characteristics, program climate, and administrative support—must be assessed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of an undergraduate program of psychology. These domains represent traditional areas of academic program review for psychology and embody contemporary issues viewed as essential to quality higher education. We rely on a developmental matrix organized along these eight key domains to capture program attributes across the four levels of quality: distinguished, effective, developing, and underdeveloped.

Curriculum

The undergraduate curriculum represents a prominent aspect of a quality undergraduate program in psychology (C. L. Brewer et al., 1993). Program reviewers typically conduct a thorough review of course offerings; however, a thorough evaluation should go beyond an analysis of mere course offerings. Table 1 describes the range of performance for the undergraduate curriculum.

Science foundation. Our curricular proposal begins with the assumption that a sound contemporary curriculum should parallel the established set of Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Goals and Outcomes (Halonen et al., 2002a) grounded in both the science and application of psychology. The cornerstone of any optimal undergraduate curriculum in psychology should emphasize the empirical foundations of the discipline (Toulmin & Leary, 1992). A distinguished program would not only offer individual coursework in scientific methods but would ground all coursework in the scientific foundation of the discipline (National Research Council, 1995).

Curricular structure and sequence. Benjamin’s (2001) analysis of curriculum concluded that there is not an explicitly defined common core in the discipline (see also McGovern, 1993b, 1993c). However, surveys of curricular offerings have consistently listed methodology courses as among the most frequent offerings in the major, and virtually all programs require statistics or methods courses (Kulik, 1973; Messer, Griggs, & Jackson, 1999; Perlman & McCann, 1999a, 1999b; Scheirer & Rogers, 1985; Woods, 1979). Recent research suggests that most programs continue to require a core set of research courses (Perlman & McCann, 1999a; Stoloff, Sanders, & McCarthy, n.d.). Optimal programs specify and sequence course requirements to promote coherence across the requirements and electives. A distinguished program would provide a rationale for course offerings and attempt to unify the major in a capstone experience designed to integrate the variety of course offerings. Merely to label an existing course a capstone experience is insufficient. Instead, a distinguished program would provide syllabi or student portfolios (e.g., Keller, Craig, Launius, Loher, & Cooledge, 2004; Paris & Ayres, 1994) to document how a course functions as a capstone experience.

C. L. Brewer et al. (1993) suggested that sequencing of courses is important and that an integrative experience is critical to the curriculum. We believe that programs should explicitly sequence an introductory course, an orientation to the psychology major course, substantive content courses, and the capstone or integrative experience course. An outstanding program would consider the developmental nature of student learning and how courses should be structured to maximize learning in domains of scientific inquiry (Halonen et al., 2003).

Course variety. A sufficient breadth of courses should be offered in a strong program, but offerings alone do not constitute a distinguished program. Some programs offer a greater number of specialized courses than do others because of the number of available staff, the presence of a graduate program, or their educational mission.

Disciplinary perspective breadth. Psychology is epistemologically diverse, resulting in distinct factions within the field (Koch, 1992). McGovern et al. (1991) suggested that a program might adopt a “thematic model” focusing on a particular domain (e.g., development, biopsychology) consistent with an institutional mission. Yet, even a thematically based program would offer students an introduction to the perspectives represented across the discipline (e.g., physiological, humanistic, cognitive, behavioral).

Curricular ethics. Few undergraduate programs offer a course in psychological ethics (Stoloff et al., n.d.),
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Underdeveloped</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Distinguished</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science foundation</td>
<td>Includes no scientific orientation in curriculum</td>
<td>Employs limited, nonsystematic scientific orientation in curriculum</td>
<td>Builds curriculum on science foundation</td>
<td>Executes science-based curriculum that requires students to demonstrate skills and behaviors of scientists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular structure and sequence</td>
<td>Does not specify structure; student may design own curriculum that can be entirely driven by student’s narrow interests</td>
<td>Specifies core requirements but pays little or no attention to sequencing to develop skills or depth of content; student options may be narrowed but rationale for design may be ambiguous</td>
<td>Specifies and sequences core requirements that include some student choice (may entail requiring orientation and capstone experiences); students can identify some aspects of the rationale for curriculum design</td>
<td>Specifies and sequences curriculum to reflect developing student cognition; students can articulate the rationale for a balance of core courses and electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course variety</td>
<td>Offers a narrow focus in the curriculum driven by tradition or faculty interests</td>
<td>Provides a curriculum of some breadth, but faculty interests may still predominate</td>
<td>Offers balanced, broad curriculum that represents psychology as a multifaceted discipline</td>
<td>Provides balanced, broad curriculum that offers students opportunities to evaluate and integrate elements of the multifaceted discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary perspective breadth</td>
<td>Focuses on a single disciplinary perspective (e.g., concentrates solely on behaviorist perspective)</td>
<td>Focuses on a limited subset of disciplinary perspectives</td>
<td>Focuses on multiple disciplinary perspectives</td>
<td>Focuses and integrates multiple perspectives in a critical, complementary manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular ethics</td>
<td>Ignores ethics education in the curriculum or attends reactively to ethical concerns when forced to do so</td>
<td>Deals minimally with ethics as isolated components of the curriculum (e.g., develops research participation rules; discusses ethics only in research methods course)</td>
<td>Promotes recognition of and adherence to relevant ethical codes by students</td>
<td>Infuses ethical training at appropriate levels of the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular cultural diversity</td>
<td>Fails to address diversity issues in curriculum</td>
<td>Offers “stand alone” diversity experience (e.g., a single course or requirement)</td>
<td>Offers multiple diversity experiences with at least one being required</td>
<td>Integrates diversity issues at multiple levels in the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service learning</td>
<td>Fails to use local community resources as context for learning</td>
<td>Describes community contexts to facilitate learning but may not actively involve students in community life</td>
<td>Provides some opportunities to expose students directly to needs of community in context of the discipline</td>
<td>Systematically plans for community activity (e.g., service learning) to help students integrate their learning and contribute to community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
yet APA student affiliates are required to adhere to the APA Code of Ethics (APA, 2002). At a minimum, a developing program would ensure that students are knowledgeable of, and adhere to, ethics in their research practices. A distinguished program would include all aspects of the Code of Ethics at appropriate levels of the curriculum.

**Curricular cultural diversity.** Guzman, Schiavo, and Puente (1992) chronicled the emergence of diversity in coursework throughout the undergraduate curriculum. Guzman et al. suggested the importance of broadening existing coursework and making deliberate efforts to include minority psychologists and perspectives. Additional guidance for inclusion of multicultural content is available (e.g., APA, 2003; Lutsky et al., 2005; Trimble, Stevenson, & Worell, 2003). Although inclusion of information about multicultural perspectives diversifies the curriculum, a distinguished program would encourage additional efforts, including specialized coursework (see Trimble, 2006; Trimble et al., 2003; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2007).

**Service learning.** Community involvement offers unique opportunities for application of the principles of psychology to ameliorate local problems (Raupp & Cohen, 1992). Valuable service learning extends beyond mere volunteer work and provides strong curriculum-based offerings that link volunteer experiences with content of the discipline (Kogan & Kellaway, 2004). A distinguished program would provide structured service learning experiences with a linkage to the application of psychological principles.

**Assessment Issues**

Historically, higher education offered limited measures of accountability (Poindexter, 2003; Shavelson & Huang, 2003), but legislators, students, parents, and accrediting bodies now demand evidence of student learning (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Often somewhat reluctantly, academic programs have begun to implement outcomes assessment (Angelo, 1999). Unfortunately, many of these assessment programs lack a coherent framework for evaluating the major as a whole (but see Halonen et al., 2002b). Although accountability to external constituents represents one important aspect of program review, optimal undergraduate psychology programs engage in the assessment process for the purpose of continuous self-improvement. Table 2 details performance distinctions for assessment issues.

**Assessment planning.** A proactive plan for assessment of program effectiveness begins with attention to university and departmental mission statements. Without a unified approach and a clear vision (Angelo, 1999), programs can fall prey to piecemeal assessments that do not capture the essence of student learning (Ewell, 1997). Consistent with the goals of the individual program, an effective program assessment plan will do more than merely satisfy external mandates. Assessment will be strengthened by a collaborative approach that includes faculty, students, and alumni (Wehlburg, 1999). All participants in the program can provide data concerning their satisfaction with the program and their perspective on its strengths and weaknesses. Halpern (2004) suggested surveying students, alumni, and employers. One measure of student satisfaction might be student evaluations of teaching (e.g., d’Apollonia & Abrami, 1997; Greenwald, 1997; Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Marsh & Roche, 1997; McKeachie, 1997); however, this measure addresses only one aspect of student satisfaction with the program. Students can also provide data concerning their perception of skills and abilities learned, career preparation, and their satisfaction with more global aspects of the program. The assessment plan should include ongoing measures of accountability for student learning and improvement of program effectiveness.

**Data gathering.** Ongoing data collection should be part of a program’s culture (Hatfield, 1999). An effective plan is one that a program can achieve by identifying a limited set of goals (e.g., Allen, 2004) and continuously collecting data to measure the outcomes of these goals. A distinguished program would measure program effectiveness through a multimethod approach for continuous program improvement (e.g., periodic assessment of student learning in introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses). Ideally, these data would be publicly accessible (e.g., available on a department’s Web site).

**Program improvement.** Collection of data without reflection or corrective feedback offers little in the way of program improvement. Minimal changes in programs often occur in developing programs that collect data to satisfy external mandates. Optimal programs purposefully examine data collected for program improvement purposes. A distinguished program regularly uses data for analysis and improvement.

**Program promotion.** Programs that have demonstrated improvement should promote their accomplishments. Such promotion, for example, can attract and retain students and faculty, invigorate institutional interest in a program, potentially solicit support from alumni donors or other funding sources (e.g., granting agencies, foundations), and create positive “town and gown” connections between colleges and the communities in which they reside. Personnel in developing or underdeveloped programs may disassociate themselves from the chore of good public relations, but effective and distinguished programs publicize their improved student success.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

The APA Task Force on Undergraduate Major Competencies (Halonen et al., 2002a) provided guidelines for structure of the undergraduate major. Programs should demonstrate that they are providing students with developmentally appropriate writing, speaking, research, collaborative, and technology opportunities. Table 3 describes the range of performance in student learning outcomes.

**Writing skills.** Psychology programs in liberal arts colleges have historically valued writing as an essential component of an undergraduate degree. Despite the importance of writing, few programs clearly articulate mechanisms to ensure the competence of student writing (Dunn, 2006). For example, although a program may include writing as an important goal, frequently there is no systematic
plan to ensure that students engage in discipline-specific writing tasks.

Programs functioning at a minimal level require at least one “writing-intensive” course. Outstanding programs provide a systematic plan for developing writing skills by offering more than one writing-intensive course and by integrating other writing-related activities (e.g., APA style, outlining and drafting, online searching using PsycINFO) into several courses in the curriculum. Several innovative liberal arts schools have implemented sequenced writing-intensive programs (Hillard & Harris, 2003; Wolfe & Haynes, 2003). Wolfe and Haynes acknowledged the difficulty of assessing development in writing and presented a model for linking the general education core with psychology. The critical element of their program is a sequencing of writing experiences; the drawback is the labor-intensive effort devoted to the project.

**Speaking skills.** Many programs provide students with opportunities to develop speaking skills through informal mechanisms (e.g., oral reports in class). A distinguished program emphasizes the importance of speaking skills and provides opportunities for all students to present their work in a public setting (e.g., an undergraduate psychology conference, a classroom symposium). Students would also be encouraged to participate in professional conversations that might be available in a structured seminar course.

**Research skills.** Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, and Deantoni (2004) provided strong support for enhancing communication skills in students who participate in undergraduate research. A unified and coordinated effort to offer authentic, engaging undergraduate research experiences is essential. These experiences might begin with students working closely with a faculty member to assist in research

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**Table 2**

Assessment Issues Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Underdeveloped</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Distinguished</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment planning</td>
<td>Does not engage in assessment planning; demonstrates no proactive thinking about program effectiveness</td>
<td>Generates minimal assessment plan to satisfy external mandate with no intention of follow-through</td>
<td>Accommodates external mandates but focuses on getting legitimate evidence about program quality</td>
<td>Engages proactively about program effectiveness through continuous, vigorous, and consensual assessment planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data gathering</td>
<td>Does not gather minimal effectiveness data</td>
<td>Gathers limited range of data only when externally mandated; relies on sources of data external to the department</td>
<td>Gathers broad range of data on semiregular basis and analyzes periodically as required</td>
<td>Collects and analyzes range of data continuously to answer program quality questions; multiple methods and sources may include student and alumni input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program improvement</td>
<td>Makes changes in program based on whim or personal agenda rather than program effectiveness data</td>
<td>Makes changes in program that minimally link directly to program effectiveness data</td>
<td>Improves program based on data analysis of program effectiveness prompted by external mandates</td>
<td>Regularly improves program based on systematic data analysis prompted by faculty-owned assessment process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program promotion</td>
<td>Does not use assessment data in public relations, outreach activities, and resource requests</td>
<td>Reacts to program promotion opportunities with haphazard use of assessment data</td>
<td>Incorporates some elements of program effectiveness data in program promotion activities</td>
<td>Integrates assessment practices into program promotion activities to enhance program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that has already been established, but with discrete responsibilities assigned to the student. The ideal culmination of the experience would result in a student-directed independent research project, an honors thesis, or a similarly engaging research activity.

**Collaborative skills.** In addition to a program that provides students with skills-based research opportunities, students should also be provided with collaborative learning opportunities that mirror professional experiences. Recent advances in the study of collaborative learning (Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999) suggest that collaborative experiences enhance learning and improve sociobehavioral skills. Although Springer et al. concluded that collaborative learning is beneficial for students in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology (STEM) fields, use of this technique and empirical support for this approach is neoteric. Collaboration is an essential skill that students should demonstrate at the completion of a degree insofar as it is possible to do so, and therefore programs should systematically provide structured collaborative activities (Thompson, Vermette, & Wisniewski, 2004).

**Information literacy and technology skills.** Technology plays a critical role in virtually every discipline (Laird & Kuh, 2005). Merriam, LaBaugh, and Butterfield (1992) proposed minimum training guidelines for instructing psychology students. The Association of College and Research Libraries offers psychology-specific outcomes that include (a) developing a research plan, (b) identifying keywords and related terms, (c) carefully selecting terms relative to the database, and (d) using appropriate com-

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Underdeveloped</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Distinguished</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Requires no systematic writing projects</td>
<td>Offers writing projects consistent with individual faculty commitment to writing in some courses</td>
<td>Develops writing skills through limited requirements in targeted classes (e.g., may include foundation or writing-intensive courses)</td>
<td>Implements systematic developmental plan for required writing (e.g., all senior-level courses are writing intensive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking skills</td>
<td>Does not provide systematic opportunities for developing oral abilities</td>
<td>Provides haphazard opportunities consistent with individual faculty commitment to develop oral abilities</td>
<td>Implements limited formal or informal opportunities to develop oral abilities</td>
<td>Requires developmental oral performances to facilitate oral skills that may culminate in presentations in professional contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>Provides no systematic opportunities or support for student scholarship</td>
<td>Offers selected elective opportunities (e.g., research team) for motivated students but minimal mentorship of students</td>
<td>Incorporates variable research experience as part of the curriculum that accommodates student skill and motivation levels</td>
<td>Requires scholarship from all majors as a performance obligation that integrates content and skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative skills</td>
<td>Offers no systematic instruction or opportunity related to collaborative work</td>
<td>Facilitates opportunities but fails to provide instruction or feedback to facilitate collaborative skills</td>
<td>Provides some training in and feedback for improvement in collaborative skills</td>
<td>Embeds multiple required collaborative activities supported by sound preparation and developmental feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information literacy and technology skills</td>
<td>Does not facilitate students’ effective use of information literacy and technology</td>
<td>Provides limited exposure to technology, usually in the context of a single course</td>
<td>Requires experience in multiple contexts to develop a minimum set of technology and information literacy skills</td>
<td>Facilitates refined and creative use of technology and information literacy for professional activities through systematic learning opportunities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mands (e.g., Boolean operators). McCarthy and Pusateri (2006) offered psychology-specific student learning outcomes for information literacy. In addition to traditional information literacy skills, we suggest that programs consider the role of technology in the professional development of students. Students should be provided with opportunities to become technologically literate (e.g., about statistical software). Distinguished programs ensure that students are provided with opportunities to develop technological expertise that generalizes beyond the university.

**Program Resources**

No program can operate without the resource support necessary to carry out its mission. Psychology programs vary widely in availability of resources, and this reality can influence program function. Moreover, the perception that adequate resources for new initiatives will not be forthcoming can affect faculty’s willingness to take risks and expend effort in developing new programs in teaching or scholarship.

Creative and forward-thinking psychology programs typically have specific plans for the best use of any new financial resources. The best programs use strategic planning and creatively use the resources they have to augment their resources. Table 4 addresses the range of performance connected to program resources.

**Physical facilities.** The physical facilities available for teaching, scholarly activity, and other departmental functions can affect program quality (Project Kaleidoscope, 1998). Positive effects on student opportunities to engage in hands-on science, student enrollments, faculty productivity, external funding, faculty morale, faculty recruitment, and interdisciplinary endeavors have all been reported when science programs move into well-designed facilities. Without adequate spaces for scholarship, faculty research suffers, and students lose the opportunity to engage with faculty in research activities. Comfortable, convenient, attractive spaces invite students and faculty to “stick around,” setting up the conditions for creating a community in which learning continues outside the classroom. Proactive programs attend to apportionment of space, make creative and efficient use of current space, and seek opportunities to collaboratively use space with other campus units.

Few psychology programs probably believe that they have adequate space. Departments of psychology have not been successful in securing laboratory facilities consistent with those in the traditional hard sciences. Defining the scope of laboratory facilities has been difficult, and the need for laboratory facilities cannot be overstated (Benjamin, 2000). Project Kaleidoscope (n.d.-b), a national alliance working to build strong learning environments for undergraduate students in mathematics, science, and engineering, offers guidance for the entire scientific community. Instead of identifying specific technology or laboratory configurations, these recommendations suggest facilities that are consistent with institutional mission and departmental needs. They also encourage dissolution of scientific boundaries to allow for shared and efficient use of laboratories. Distinguished programs would serve as leaders for defining necessary laboratory space and facilities.

**Administrative support.** Throughout this article, we have identified teaching and research activities that characterize distinguished programs. These activities cannot be successfully accomplished without appropriate administrative support (e.g., clerical staff, lab assistants). As an example, we identified undergraduate research as an essential component of a distinguished program. Administrative support for this important activity must be present in the form of faculty release time or a similar mechanism for balancing the workload of individual faculty. Without sufficient administrative support, strong undergraduate research activities are not sustainable.

Administrative support can be further delineated as funding for pretenure or posttenure faculty. An exceptional program would offer support for new faculty members as they acclimate to the many demands for teaching, research, and service. Support for new faculty will include funds for start-up activities, mentors, support for pedagogical development, and release time for research activities (Project Kaleidoscope, 2004). Providing posttenure faculty with opportunities for sabbaticals, periodic reductions in teaching load, or similar incentives will help to sustain department vitality.

**Extramural funding.** Universities, colleges, and departments are under pressure to obtain independent funding for facilities and operating costs associated with research. Departments in the early stages of development may have individual faculty members who seek external support through small-grants programs. A distinguished program would expand beyond individual efforts and build teams to secure the necessary funding for research activities, curriculum development, facilities, equipment, and new faculty positions (Glass, 2004).

**Departmental Web site.** A well-designed and maintained departmental Web site has numerous functions. A Web presence can promote a program to the larger community (inside and outside the institution). A high-quality Web site can help to recruit students and provide current students with essential programmatic guidance.

**Technology.** Ready access to computers, software packages, and Internet resources can enhance student learning. Distinguished programs make significant efforts to optimize the technology funds they have in relation to student learning and faculty research needs.

**Alumni connections.** In addition to making financial contributions, alumni can serve as important resources. Programs can use alumni as mentors and career consultants, and alumni expertise can be useful in helping to identify program strengths and weaknesses and in providing advice on how a program might grow or change direction.

**Student Development**

Physical space and technological resources fulfill basic educational needs, but they do not ensure a vibrant educational experience. Distinguished programs emphasize activities that encourage and enhance student opportunities to
interact with and learn from faculty in numerous settings. Extracurricular activities and participation in program decision making can also provide superb contexts in which students can enhance their leadership skills. Table 5 addresses the various dimensions of student development.

**Student advising.** Many resources are available to assist programs in developing effective advising systems (e.g., Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000; Kramer, 2003; National Academic Advising Association, 2004). Ware et al. (1993) formulated a list of key components of advising that can serve as a basis for examining advising in psychology programs. Advising should provide students with accurate information about program requirements. Good advising attends to the academic needs of students, and when necessary, faculty members should refer students to available student counseling services. In exceptional programs, faculty engage in “multimodal” advising or a recognition that students differ (i.e., some require constant support, and others are self-directed), and faculty are prepared to provide students with information

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**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Resources Domain</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extramural funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental Web site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and resources that will allow students to develop an appropriate balance of support and independence.

**Advising materials.** Inattentive programs routinely let their advising materials become outdated. In contrast, optimal programs recognize that students will need many advising venues to find the right fit with their advising needs. Program personnel make great efforts to ensure that print materials and advising sessions provide appropriate direction.

**Student organizations.** Participation in active, engaged student organizations can enrich student learning experiences (Huang & Chang, 2004). Involved student organizations reflect student and faculty commitment to a program that fosters intellectual engagement. Membership and participation in Psi Chi and other organizations (e.g., psychology club) may provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty and to become more involved in their own intellectual development (e.g., Millard, 1999).

**Participation in program decisions.** Providing students with a role in program decision making engages students in the life of the academic enterprise and enhances the development of personal responsibility. Examples include having a student advisory committee that provides input on program policies and curriculum decisions, including student representatives on important committees such as search committees, and enlisting the help of student groups in recruiting students, interviewing faculty job candidates, and advising (e.g., peer advising groups).

### Faculty Characteristics

Faculty behaviors and expectations have a strong influence on student engagement and learning (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Table 6 presents faculty development attributes that influence learning.

#### Teaching orientation.

Although it is not essential that every faculty member demonstrate stellar teaching skills, a program is not likely to thrive if teaching talent is nonexistent. Distinguished programs carefully recruit good teachers and nurture them to enhance their talents through appropriate faculty development activities (e.g., pedagogy...
workshops, university-based teaching centers, colloquia given by distinguished teacher–scholars.

Scholarship orientation. Most tenure and promotion guidelines prominently feature an explicit expectation about the nature of scholarship. At a minimum, faculty need to maintain scholarly activity, and they may be required to publish a target number of publications in specific venues to qualify for advancement. In struggling programs, faculty may be disengaged from scholarship. Distinguished programs energize their faculty to develop and maintain research agendas that are consistent with local expectations and resources.

Resource development. Faculty vary in their orientation toward procuring resources; some believe the institution should bear full responsibility for supplying labs and classrooms to accomplish the educational mission, whereas others recognize they may need to take action themselves (e.g., grantsmanship). Faculty operating in distinguished or effective settings compensate for the realities of shrinking support for higher education by competing for external funds.

Professional involvement. Programs in which faculty are isolated from the wider professional community are at risk of becoming out of touch with developments in psychology education and in the discipline as a whole. Faculty who are active in professional organizations at the local, regional, national, and international levels bring new ideas, practices, and energy that enrich the program. Ideally, such professional involvement is underwritten by the institution through travel funds or awards. Distinguished

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 6</th>
<th>Faculty Characteristics Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Underdeveloped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching orientation</td>
<td>Delivers course experiences without regard to pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship orientation</td>
<td>Produces no scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource development</td>
<td>Invests no time in generating resources for professional or departmental support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional involvement</td>
<td>Demonstrates little or no professional affiliation beyond the campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community orientation</td>
<td>Disengages from community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility to students</td>
<td>Does not engage in formal or informal student contact outside of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty ethics</td>
<td>Ignores guidelines for accepted ethical conduct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
programs encourage faculty to attend and participate in conferences, workshops, and professional organizations.

**Community orientation.** Faculty differ in their contributions to the local community. This aspect of faculty behavior can be underdeveloped for many reasons—too many students, an engrossing research program, or substantial professional or campus obligations. Although difficult, community engagement can reap enormous public relations benefits for individual faculty and their institutions.

**Accessibility to students.** Chickering and Gamson (1987) listed the encouragement of contact between faculty and students first in their list of seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. Faculty accessibility provides a good barometer of how well a program’s climate contributes to faculty–student interaction. Interaction with faculty in class and generally on campus can have positive effects on student engagement and learning. Interaction with faculty can also occur during advising, service-learning experiences, social settings, research, and in other out-of-class contexts. Although faculty accessibility is desirable, a balanced and professional relationship with students must be maintained. Faculty can provide too much accessibility, thus hindering the academic and professional development of students.

**Ethics.** The APA maintains an ethical code that governs the behavior of psychologists in practice and in the classroom (APA, 2002). Despite the code’s relevance to many aspects of academic function, some faculty may navigate with little regard for or adherence to the ethical code. Distinguished faculty performance is reflected in ethical behavior that serves as a model for faculty peers and students in the program.

**Program Climate**

Recent literature on student engagement supports the idea that faculty activities affect student learning (Umbach & Porter, 2002). A supportive climate can motivate faculty to “go beyond” in their teaching, scholarship, and service. Strong programs provide a positive and supportive working environment in which faculty can be creative and take risks in their professional lives and in which multiple viewpoints can be expressed and are respected.

In programs characterized by a poor climate, programs may develop factions, faculty may feel marginalized, or colleagues do not feel supported. Lack of social support and a perceived lack of appropriate rewards and recognition contribute to burnout and a corresponding loss of effectiveness on the job (see Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Table 7 highlights elements of program climate.

**Program ethics.** Two facets of ethics need to be considered: ethical treatment in research ethics and general pedagogical practice. Faculty should model appropriate ethical practices in their scholarship and in their recognition of the contributions of students and colleagues to research. APA, as well as other disciplinary societies (e.g., Society for Neuroscience), provides useful guidelines for ethical research practices. The revised APA Code of Ethics (APA, 2002) provides explicit criteria for determining authorship for doctoral dissertations, yet these criteria should also be considered when undergraduate students and faculty engage in collaborative research. An effective program maintains active and productive lines of communication with appropriate institutional review committees (e.g., institutional review boards, institutional animal care and use committees).

Beyond mere adherence to research ethics, a strong program embraces the general principles of the APA Code of Ethics (APA, 2002). Although the General Principles are aspirational in nature, they provide excellent! guidance. For example, faculty in distinguished programs not only recognize the inherent imbalance of power that exists between faculty and students but strive to achieve a level of integrity that exceeds ethical standards.

**Program leadership.** Characteristics of program leadership can have a strong influence on program climate. The chair can promote a climate that encourages respect for multiple viewpoints, as opposed to one in which some faculty voices are not solicited or heard. Leadership can be critical in setting a tone of respect, ensuring that all faculty are treated fairly (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1998; Leaning, 1998).

The role of the program head is multifaceted and goes well beyond ensuring a supportive professional climate (e.g., Lucas & Associates, 2000; Stark, Briggs, & Rowland-Poplawski, 2002). Depending on the institution, the program head may play a major role in setting the program’s agenda and priorities, evaluating faculty performance, and representing the program’s interests to the rest of the institution and to the larger community. Effective program leaders enable faculty to achieve their goals. Effective leadership promotes shared decision making and program planning.

**Relation to university community.** Distinguished programs are outward looking; they are aware of their role in the institutional community and seek to maximize their contribution to the institution’s overall mission and goals. They actively seek ways to promote the institution through their programs, effective teaching, scholarly activities, and service. In contrast, underdeveloped or developing programs are self-involved and isolated from the wider university community.

**Program involvement in local community.** Underdeveloped or developing programs have a detached or tenuous relationship with communities in which their institutions are situated. Distinguished programs value and foster contributions to the larger community by promoting and rewarding faculty activities to “give psychology away” to serve the local, regional, or national community. Distinguished programs welcome opportunities to interact with communities by sharing expertise, time, and resources in ways that educate students, share the discipline’s knowledge, and constructively aid the public.
Collegiality. Faculty members can function as a tight-knit group with a common mission, or they can operate in parallel, intersecting only when department activities help them converge. In some cases of underdeveloped programs, the absence of collegiality represents rampant individualism. In other cases, programs may struggle with long-standing conflicts; indeed, the precipitating event may be long forgotten—only the affect remains. In contrast, programs with more optimal functioning expect conflicts but rely on their collegiality to resolve them in a manner that leads to program improvement and enhanced relationships among the faculty. Behavior is professional and collegial, so that tensions are treated as constructive opportunities rather than destructive influences.

Table 7
Program Climate Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Underdeveloped</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Distinguished</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program ethics</td>
<td>Fails to enact standard ethical protocols as dictated by the profession</td>
<td>Complies minimally with ethical standards in both research and teaching</td>
<td>Complies fully with accepted ethical regulations, including active institutional review processes</td>
<td>Proactively ensures ethical practices, including the use of institutional review process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program leadership</td>
<td>Experiences leadership that does not promote departmental progress</td>
<td>Limits leadership functions to single individual routinely enacting decisions without faculty support</td>
<td>Shares leadership across members to accomplish diverse objectives; plans by consensus whenever possible</td>
<td>Shares leadership and actively pursues leadership planning to provide for future development of department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with university community</td>
<td>Maintains isolation from the university community</td>
<td>Projects minimal interest due to sporadic involvement in and contribution to the university</td>
<td>Contributes to university service that is tailored to departmental strengths</td>
<td>Shoulders significant responsibility at university level, including leadership role in advancing the university and its mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater community involvement by program</td>
<td>Does not connect to the local community</td>
<td>Invests minimally in community activities, driven by personal interests of motivated faculty leaders</td>
<td>Pursues active connections collectively with extra-university community (e.g., advisory board, community volunteering) that blend departmental interests with community contribution</td>
<td>Achieves noteworthy departmental involvement in local, regional, or national service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>Maintains or tolerates contentious atmosphere as shown by inappropriate alliances, generational conflicts, and litigation; climate feels threatening</td>
<td>Maintains overall functional climate but one that is challenged when conflicts develop; climate feels fragile</td>
<td>Promotes professional climate that models tolerance of and respect for diverse viewpoints; climate feels comfortable</td>
<td>Exploits conflicts as potential change agents; department faculty demonstrate mutual respect for students and colleagues regardless of seniority; climate feels stimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for individual and cultural differences</td>
<td>Demonstrates intolerance for diversity</td>
<td>Demonstrates limited tolerance but neglects the value of cultural diversity as shown by homogeneity or lack of sensitivity to individual differences</td>
<td>Values diversity but may not systematically promote a climate in which this value is prominent</td>
<td>Purposefully builds across differences to promote a culturally and philosophically diverse faculty; department is “purposefully heterogeneous”</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Respect for individual and cultural differences. Diversity refers to cultural and ethnic differences, and a positive climate emphasizes the strengths rather than the weaknesses of these differences (Trimble et al., 2003). Distinguished programs seek to build a strong and diverse community that does more than tolerate diversity. The first step begins with a clear understanding that culture influences the perceptions and interactions of those who are different. Distinguished programs recognize and value these differences and can aspire to effect organizational change by implementing culturally diverse policies and programs.

Administrative Support

Issues related to program administration (e.g., faculty workload, tenure standards) are also key factors in how well a program functions and meets its goals. For example, financial or release-time support can directly affect the extent to which faculty engage in scholarship. Table 8 summarizes dimensions of administrative support.

Institutional administrative climate. Deans and other administrators are key players in facilitating a program’s ability to reach its full potential. Although there is much that creative and energetic faculty can do to accomplish their goals, support from the institution at levels above the program level is crucial if a program is to be able to achieve and sustain success over the long term. Institutional administrative support (or lack thereof) can range from hostility or punitive action (including removal of resources), to “benign neglect,” to cases in which programs benefit from strong, collaborative relationships with administrators. In some cases, lack of support may be traceable to a lack of coherence between the mission and goals of a program and those of the institution as a whole. Open communication concerning needs, priorities, and expectations, along with consequences (e.g., appropriate rewards and recognition) are important in enhancing strong collaborative relationships between deans and program heads.

Mission. A well-designed mission statement that results from active faculty input and approval can be a catalyst for growth and development. The department mission statement can communicate the core values and goals of a program to internal and external constituencies, set program direction for the future, and point to priorities that can be agreed on across the program.

Bylaws and procedures. A functioning set of program bylaws and procedures can be a hallmark of a distinguished program. Agreed-on operating procedures can keep a program functioning and moving forward, even in times of leadership change or other transitions. Program bylaws and procedures should be consistent with the requirements established by collective bargaining, where relevant. They should be applied equitably and updated periodically. New faculty should be made aware of program procedures so that all faculty understand how the system works.

Evaluation system. Nothing renders a program climate less workable than ambiguous performance standards for the faculty. In the absence of clearly articulated criteria for promotion, tenure, and merit considerations, favoritism may substitute for outcomes that should have been derived from faculty effort. Distinguished programs recognize that a perfect evaluation system will remain elusive but still invest in providing criteria that accurately reflect the scope and quality of work undertaken by program personnel as well as the program’s and the institution’s accepted standards.

Teaching assignments. Good teaching should be recognized, indicators of good teaching should be specified, and faculty should be given time and support to improve their teaching. Teaching load affects pedagogy in the classroom, faculty service and scholarship, and faculty quality of life. Although class size per se is not an impediment to providing a quality learning experience for students, the number of students, the number of different courses taught by a faculty member, and other aspects of teaching load (e.g., teaching new courses or courses outside one’s area of expertise) can all influence quality of teaching. Chronic teaching overloads (and the burnout that can accompany them; see Maslach et al., 2001) also affect faculty willingness and ability to create new curricular experiences for students. Optimally functioning programs provide for flexibility and some control over their teaching assignments by faculty. These programs also recognize the importance of equity issues in teaching responsibilities.

Scholarship support. A program’s orientation toward and support for scholarship are two crucial issues that affect faculty scholarly activities. Successful programs encourage and facilitate active scholarship by providing faculty with time, facilities, and financial support to pursue research goals. Situations in which faculty scholarship is expected but not supported by the program can be especially problematic for faculty. Most programs have written guidelines for scholarship expectations, but faculty also receive social messages about the value of scholarship when they see whether and how colleagues are rewarded for research efforts. Both written guidelines (i.e., evaluation criteria) and unwritten social cues provide an indication of how scholarship is viewed in a program.

Distinguished programs also recognize and support the dynamic nature of faculty scholarly activities and understand that individual faculty members may have different goals for their scholarship at different stages of their careers. In a well-functioning and supportive environment, the diversity of scholarly activities is recognized (e.g., see Halpern et al., 1998; O’Meara, 2005; see also Halpern & Reich, 1999; Myers & Waller, 1999), and all faculty are not pressed to have their scholarly activities fit one model.

Recognition system. Distinguished programs recognize and reward faculty and student accomplishments and actively pursue recognition for faculty and student achievements from external constituencies (e.g., through nominations for institutional or national recognition). In
well-functioning programs, awards and recognition are not capriciously given but are the result of a thoughtful process linked to the program’s values and goals. Formal recognition should encompass the broad range of faculty contributions in all areas of faculty life—teaching, scholarship, and service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8</th>
<th>Administrative Support Domain</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension</strong></td>
<td><strong>Underdeveloped</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional administrative climate</strong></td>
<td>Shows hostility or lack of communication; misalignment of vision/priorities between program and higher levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission</strong></td>
<td>Shows no interest or investment in developing a mission statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bylaws and procedures</strong></td>
<td>Does not adhere to institutional policies, bylaws, or systematic procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation system</strong></td>
<td>Operates in the absence of criteria for personnel decisions, resulting in unpredictable outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching assignments</strong></td>
<td>Assigns inappropriate faculty responsibilities (e.g., chronic overloads, inequitable assignments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarship support</strong></td>
<td>Discourages scholarly activity through insufficient support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recognition system</strong></td>
<td>Ignores achievements of faculty and students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recognizing Distinguished Undergraduate Programs in Psychology

Various forces in the discipline of psychology, such as the Society for the Teaching of Psychology and APA’s Education Directorate, have created helpful resources to improve how the science of psychology is taught. Numerous resources meant to strengthen teaching and learning in psychology—from goals for the major to psychology’s place in the liberal arts curriculum—are also available. We believe these resources should be constructively used by teachers, program directors, and administrators and that one vehicle for doing so is to establish benchmarks for distinguished psychology programs.

We realize that the proposal described in this article may seem modest to some readers or that further promoting educational assessment beyond the classroom will conflate the misuse of summative approaches (e.g., gatekeeping functions, summary evaluations) with formative ones (e.g., evaluating ongoing program development, steering department direction). Such concerns are reasonable, but we, like others (e.g., Halpern, 2004; Halpern et al., 1993), maintain that thoughtful, planful, and ongoing evaluation of educational programs in psychology is no longer optional. Simply put, it is essential.

We anticipate that our proposal will be met with skepticism, uncertainty, or even the concern that introducing benchmarks will increase the competitive atmosphere already felt in higher education and within some psychology programs. In this section, we discuss common concerns among programs: perceived competition for students, resource discrepancies, the prestige problem, and the misuse of benchmarks for summative rather than formative evaluation.

**Competition Concerns**

The advent of ranking lists, such as those published annually by US News & World Report, has increased the view that colleges and universities are competing for students. Will a mechanism to identify distinguished psychology programs lead to a similar round of ratings and rankings fever? We think not. In reality, such competition already exists, and perceptions of institutional reputation—real or imagined—already exert some “market” influence over students, faculty, and administrators. We believe that the availability of benchmarks will enable programs of all types to tout what they do well and to address areas that need improvement. Neither the availability nor the use of our recommended benchmarks will lead to a zero-sum game of competition among institutions. Instead, they will encourage much-needed pedagogical introspection rather than outward-focused competitive leanings.

**Resource Constraints**

Some institutions simply have greater economic resources than others. Will the availability and use of benchmarks allow the institutional “haves” a greater advantage in the educational marketplace than the “have-nots”? There have always been resource discrepancies among institutions (e.g., large vs. small, public vs. private) and within institutions (e.g., technology- and equipment-intensive majors vs. traditional liberal arts offerings).

We maintain that regardless of the available resources, any psychology program can identify some distinguished and effective benchmarks. Even with resources aplenty, no single institution is expected to excel on every dimension. Each program should independently decide which benchmarks are appropriate for its learning goals, students, and available resources.

Indeed, benchmarks such as those presented here can provide programs with information that can identify areas where resources are needed and can help programs justify arguments for resources needed to reach the next level of performance. Discussion of goals, priorities, strengths, and weaknesses can help to focus a program on where resources can best be targeted. As we noted above, it will not be possible, even in near-utopian academic environments, for a program to excel in all dimensions. It may be possible, however, to identify areas where a modicum of resources, or a redirection of energy, can pay large dividends in terms of success in a particular domain. Other domains that require more resources than are currently available may need to take a back seat.

These decisions, of course, must be made within the context of institutional priorities. We believe the benchmarks presented here can serve to open a dialogue between programs and administrators concerning issues such as how best to target available resources and the types of support needed to accomplish higher levels of performance.

**The Prestige Problem**

Institutions are perceived to vary widely in academic prominence, status, and reputation (D. J. Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002). Some institutions are known only locally, others regionally, and still others are national, even “household,” names. Will the advent of benchmarks for distinguished programs of psychology merely reward those institutions that are already perceived as prestigious? Not necessarily. The benchmarks should be used only to evaluate the excellent contributions that a program makes to undergraduate psychology education. Prestige is usually a force at the institutional level but not the department or program level. There are many lesser known programs at otherwise prestigious institutions that neither attract nor retain students. On the other hand, exemplary departments and programs do tend to be known independent of other perceptions about an institution. Thus, the use of benchmarks to improve educational offerings and student experiences will likely enhance a program’s standing among interested constituencies independent of traditional status factors.

**Misusing Benchmarks**

One of the difficulties of integrating assessment into higher education has been the fear that formative assessment directed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom will be used for summative purposes (i.e.,...
punitve performance evaluation, including retention, ten-
ture, and promotion decisions; funding choices). This same
fear, albeit on a program scale, may inhibit interest in using
benchmarks for distinguished programs. Some programs
might fear that the presence of underdeveloped or de-
veloping characteristics might trigger a critical review from
the institution’s administration. Instead, the identification
of less effective characteristics should spur program mem-
ers to reevaluate and revise what is being done (or not
done) within the program. We believe that quality bench-
marks will encourage resolutions in search of solutions, not
penalties, punishments, or recriminations.

We understand these and other concerns about instit-
tuting benchmarks for undergraduate psychology programs
of distinction. We believe, however, that the availability
and use of benchmarks will promote program cohesiv-
iness, collegial discussion, and collaborative planning, ac-
tivities that can steer any program into the future. We
reiterate a key point made earlier in this article: Regardless
of its size, scope, or resources, no program should, nor will
it ever, receive a mark of distinction on every evaluative
dimension. These benchmarks are meant to encourage on-
going improvement—they serve as inspiration or goals for
aspiration, not a fixed destination. We hope that the bench-
marks will encourage psychology programs of all types to
consider what they do well and to identify areas that
continue to develop or that need urgent special attention.

Conclusions
Are undergraduate psychology programs ready to embrace
a developmental framework of benchmarks for evaluating
their educational effectiveness? Several years ago the an-
swer to this question would have been a negative one.
Faculty members, department chairs, program directors,
and other academic administrators now routinely recognize
the essential need to evaluate student learning. Other inter-
ested parties, notably government agencies and higher ed-
ucation funding sources, have long called for such account-
ability. We predict that undergraduates will soon demand
that psychology programs document their strengths and
areas for growth.

We do not regard this demand as misguided consum-
erism or self-perceived student entitlement. Instead, we see
the creation, implementation, and maintenance of bench-
marks for identifying distinguished programs to be a pos-
tive educational development. Various calls to advance
program quality, assess learning outcomes, and focus on
student development at all types of undergraduate institu-
tions are coalescing. Our role as educators is to meet those
expectations in a great variety of institutional contexts.

We view our work as an impetus for a national con-
terface about the appropriate use of benchmarks in psy-
chology to improve program quality for students, faculty,
and administrators. In pragmatic terms, our proposed
benchmarks can promote more effective program reviews
and fair competition for resources. Resource allocations
within institutions frequently are determined without ben-
efit of a systematic framework. Skeptics might argue that
this model, singularly applied to a department of psychol-
ogy, would not provide a fair and competitive advantage,
yet we believe that these benchmarks provide clear evi-
dence of performance and that the model can potentially be
applied across disciplines. More ideallyistically, we place
the program benchmarks and academic program reviews
within the scholarship of teaching. We hope that the critical
examination of performance attributes along the proposed
continuum—from underdeveloped to distinguished—will
serve as a catalyst for pedagogical improvements.

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