

Beyond the Department

January 30, 2013

President's Note: In the last few Presidential Columns, the issue of expanding the interdisciplinary nature of psychological science has been discussed as it relates to "Big Data" as well as partnerships with other disciplines. This month, APS Past President Elizabeth D. Phillips (formerly Capaldi), who serves as Executive Vice President and Provost at Arizona State University, provides another perspective on this topic. Specifically, she addresses how administrative structural changes, a reconceptualization of how we organize graduate faculty and graduate education, and novel ways of assigning teaching credit for courses at Arizona State University have facilitated the development of interdisciplinary approaches to psychological science.

-Joseph E. Steinmetz



Elizabeth D. Phillips

Psychology is inherently interdisciplinary. The field encompasses a broad range of research topics, and most of us work across the subdisciplines within our field and, increasingly, with other disciplines. The organizational impact of this was brought home to me when I was head of the Department of Psychological Sciences at Purdue, where we discussed whether the department should stay in the School of Humanities, Social Science, and Education, or move to the School of Science, or maybe become an independent School of Behavioral Science. As you might imagine, there was no agreement on this — what were then called physiological psychologists (now behavioral neuroscientists) wanted to go to science; the industrial/organizational psychologists said, “How about business?”; the one humanistic psychologist we had said, “How about Humanities?”; and so on. Today, many psychologists in universities are not even in the psychology department. Psychologists participate in many other fields —

neuroscience, decision science, and law, just to mention a few — and they can be found in business schools, engineering, medical schools, communications, education, and other disciplinary-based academic units throughout the institution.

Nonetheless, the psychology department is still the main organizational unit for academic psychologists. Of course, core disciplinary expertise is critical in order to have rigorous interdisciplinary scholarship, and many faculty still operate within a single discipline. But a department can be limiting to faculty who wish to work outside the department. Sometimes faculty who publish in interdisciplinary journals find their scholarship disparaged by those who are not familiar with those journals, and those who teach outside the main lines of their own discipline are also frequently not valued by a home department that needs the disciplinary courses covered. This is a particular issue given the high workload carried by most psychology departments. Psychology is always one of the most popular majors and one of the most popular electives, with more students wanting in than most departments can handle.

However, a department can facilitate interdisciplinary work by adopting features we have used here at ASU in our many interdisciplinary schools and colleges. The benefits to psychology departments are numerous: Many universities are investing heavily in interdisciplinary centers and programs, and psychology should be part of these endeavors. Also, many fields have an increased appreciation of the importance of behavior, and psychologists should be the ones involved in teaching our field as needed in other units.

One way we have facilitated expansion beyond departmental structures at ASU for all disciplines is to use graduate faculties to supervise graduate education. Thus, the graduate faculty in psychology includes all faculty who are qualified to supervise graduate work in psychology regardless of their departmental location.

ASU made this change in 2008. The graduate faculty in a particular field at that time approved the other faculty to be added to the graduate faculty in that field. In 2008, the psychology department had 46 faculty who sat on doctoral committees. Now, the total number of graduate faculty in psychology is 120, with 52.5 percent coming from departments or schools other than psychology. This enhances graduate education by connecting students in the psychology department to more faculty, and also reduces the workload of the psychology department by increasing the number of faculty who can serve on graduate committees and supervise dissertations and theses.

To encourage interdisciplinary teaching at ASU, we fund planned enrollment with money going to whichever unit paid the person teaching the course regardless of what the course is. This treats interdisciplinary and disciplinary teaching the same. Within this model interdisciplinary schools, such as the School of Sustainability, which crosses all units on campus, can manage to teach their courses, as the reward for these credit hours goes to the unit that pays the instructor, providing the same reward for teaching in sustainability as for teaching in the home unit. And psychologists can teach psychology in units other than their own department, with the funds returning to their department.

Undergraduate education requires a curriculum designed by faculty whose expertise is relevant to the degree program. But there is no necessary tie between degree programs and departments, and many academic units administer a number of undergraduate degree programs. Once the relevant faculty design the curriculum, the administration of undergraduate education requires advisors, course schedulers, and

enrollment managers, all of whom can operate independent of departments.

For some of the interdisciplinary units at ASU, faculty members are organized into “faculties” that are more permeable than the typical psychology department areas. The faculties are designed to be flexible and able to respond rapidly to the evolving intellectual work. Changing the number of faculties or their membership requires no approval from the university.

Psychology departments are large enough and diverse enough to function as interdisciplinary schools. Departments that run their programs via faculties that change as our field evolves, with faculty included from across the university, broaden their reach and improve the education of our students.