

Department Profile: Washington College

May 18, 2003

Washington College is the tenth oldest college in America and the first founded after the revolution. It is also the only college that President George Washington gave permission to use his name. The college was founded through the efforts of William Smith, who felt strongly that American youth should not be sent abroad for an education but should be schooled within the borders of the new country. A tireless fundraiser, it is estimated that Smith collected 6 percent of the available currency in Maryland to open the college, a remarkable fundraising feat which has stood ever since as a challenge to development officers.

While Marylanders gave heavily to found the new college, the major benefactor of this first college in the new nation was President George Washington himself who not only provided a sizeable gift but agreed to serve on the College's Board of Visitors & Governors. Washington visited Chestertown and the College several times in his life and was awarded an honorary degree in 1784.

In the early 1800s, the Maryland legislature voted to create a University of Maryland with one center at St. Johns College in Annapolis and the other at Washington College on Maryland's Eastern Shore but in a sleight-of-hand later emulated by various legislative bodies, passed the legislation but declined to fund it. Because of their neglect or foresight as the case may be, the University of Maryland did not appear until rail had replaced sail as the primary mode of transportation and the balance of the population had shifted from the Eastern Shore to the mainland side of the Chesapeake Bay. Washington College therefore stayed what it was intended to be, a small and intensive academic institution. Student-Faculty ratio is 12:1.

Washington College currently has about 1200 full-time undergraduates, and has long been known for its strength in creative writing and for the Sophie Kerr Award given to the graduating senior deemed most likely to become a successful novelist; the award is currently about \$70,000.

Several major fires over the past centuries have erased many of the oldest records of the college but it is known that a psychology course was offered at Washington College by a Professor James as early as 1898 in the department of philosophy. Psychology courses then moved to the education department and, up to the end of World War II, were primarily psychodynamic and developmental in nature. In 1954, the department of education and psychology split into two separate departments and psychology began to differentiate itself from its "teacher education" role into a more appropriate stance. By the late 70s, the department had grown to four full time faculty members, and the curriculum was clearly designed to integrate the applied and basic aspects of behavioral science with a wide range of clinical courses. In 1987 the department moved from the Division of Social Sciences to the Division of Natural Sciences, and in 1989 moved into the Dunning/Decker Science complex where faculty offices and laboratories still reside.

Courses in cognitive neuroscience, neuroscience research methods, pediatric clinical assessment and

health psychology are offered hand-in-hand with more traditional staples such as social psychology, psychopathology, and sensation & perception. Psychology is the largest major on campus serving between 80 and 90 junior-senior majors at any given time.

Faculty

Katherine Cameron
Michael Kerchner
Lauren Littlefield
Kevin McKillop
James Siemen
George Spilich

Curricula

As a department in the division of natural sciences, psychology shares general degree requirements with other laboratory sciences and so a full year of either general biology, chemistry or physics is required. At Washington College, psychology is considered a laboratory science and majors take no fewer than three laboratory courses.

The undergraduate psychology degree has several unusual features which begin with how we introduce students to the field. General Psychology is a two semester sequence. The first semester begins with neuroscience and then covers cognition and developmental. The second semester covers social and clinical. A unique feature of the sequence is that each of the four main topics is covered by a faculty member with an earned degree in that area. Although this two-semester sequence is considered one of the hardest first-year courses on campus, year after year General Psychology is the single most popular elective course on campus and is taught to a lecture hall filled to capacity.

A second unusual feature of the program is the requirement of two semesters of statistics and methodology. Students in the second class must also critique research articles in areas of their own choice.

A third interesting aspect of the program is the senior thesis requirement. Senior majors are required to conceive of and design an original research project. The results of their research are publicly defended in senior seminar and then submitted to the department in a written report which ranges from 30 to 100 pages in length.

The department encourages students to apprentice with faculty on the various research projects that occur each year, and many students work closely with several faculty members in areas as disparate as basic neuroscience and experimental social, and in addition take a clinical internship. Each year, 30 and 40 undergraduate students are co-authors with faculty members of presentations at peer-reviewed professional conferences, and faculty-student publication is not uncommon.

Degree Programs

Although the Department is small in size, it offers three distinct but complimentary curricular tracks at the undergraduate level. The main track is a traditional General Psychology program. This program is very similar to the undergraduate degree at many institutions and requires students to sample from three main areas: Biological, Applied and Experimental. Students take a total of ten courses to fulfill the

degree and earn a BA in Psychology. Approximately 40 percent chose the General option.

In addition to this traditional program there are two concentrations designed to both reflect the breadth of psychology and to provide a springboard for students designing entry to better graduate programs. The first concentration is the clinical/counseling concentration which requires students to take a total of 12 courses (4 are labs) which satisfy the department's degree requirements and in addition satisfy the clinical/counseling requirements of a mixture of biological, clinical and theory courses. The senior thesis must be approved by the clinical/counseling faculty and must have an applied slant to it. Approximately 40 percent chose the Clinical option.

The department also offers a BS concentration in behavioral neuroscience. As with the clinical concentration, this program also overlays the general degree requirements with additional coursework. BN students must take a full year of both general biology and general chemistry as well as semester of organic chemistry; they must then select their psychology coursework from a group which emphasizes the biological foundations of behavioral science. Students must take no less than eleven courses including six lab courses and are required to take Neuroscience Research Methods, a course that rotates through several faculty members and which reflects current topics and interests in the department. One semester the course might use event-related potentials to investigate implicit cognition in humans while another semester it might involve histology and investigate excitotoxin induced brain injury and spatial learning in rodents. Approximately 20 percent of our graduates chose this option.

Laboratory equipment in psychology is fairly extensive for a small school. There is a Neuroscan 64 channel topographic EEG/ERP mapper, a LC technology eye movement laboratory which tracks gaze point and duration, an e-prime equipped cognition lab, equipment for collecting physiological data such as BP, HR, GSR, skin temperature, a rodent vivarium, small animal surgery suite, a wide range of psychological tests, an Acoustic Startle Lab, a computerized lab that automatically tracks rodents movements in a maze or open field, and more. As is the custom at many schools, the original laboratory building for psychology was the building no-one else wanted. It housed within its walls a full compliment of rodents, squirrels and various avian species in addition to the actual laboratory animals. In 1989, the Department moved to smaller but more modern facilities in the newly refurbished Dunning/Decker Science center. In Spring 2003, the college breaks ground on a \$20M addition to the science center and in Fall 2004, Psychology will move into approximately 9000 square feet of newly refurbished and modern teaching and research space.

The goal of the psychology department at Washington College is simple: to provide the most modern and intensive undergraduate education in psychology possible.