

Psychology Departments in Context

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I remember standing in the mailroom of the psychology department at Indiana University about 25 years ago, opening an envelope and then reading a letter that described a new organization to promote the science of psychology. An application for membership was included in the letter, which I dutifully filled out, thus joining what was known at the time as the American Psychological Society as a charter member. Now, 25 years later, I find myself President of that organization, which is now known as the Association for Psychological Science. While the name has changed, the basic mission of APS has not. APS exists to “promote, protect, and advance the interests of scientifically oriented psychology in research, application, teaching, and the improvement of human welfare.” Thanks largely to the efforts of many of our colleagues who assumed leadership roles and contributed in numerous ways to the organization, and also through the major efforts of a dedicated and hard-working APS staff, it is clear that APS has consistently lived up to its mission since its inception 25 years ago. This organization has made a difference.

A lot can happen over 25 years, including planned and unplanned directional shifts in one’s career that are, for the most part, not anticipated. The direction of our research can be changed by collaborations with students, colleagues, and collaborators who guide us toward new lines of inquiry and discovery. And our changing research perspective often results in broader teaching interests. The people we mentor in the laboratory have a lasting impact on us: We often establish lifelong relationships with undergraduates, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars who work in our laboratories, and their careers continue to impact and shape our careers. We sometimes change academic institutions or pursue

successful careers in psychological science outside of academia.

Our careers certainly can take us in directions that are totally unforeseen. Personally, I am certain that 25 years ago I did not anticipate spending a minute of my academic career as a university administrator, or as some of my colleagues would say, “becoming a member of the dreaded dark side.” In a moment of reflection, I recently realized that I have spent 17 of the last 25 years in administrative roles, including nine years as a department chair and eight years in college-level administrative positions. As a young assistant professor, I am very sure I did not envision this future for me, nor would many of my senior colleagues. A future in suits and ties instead of jeans and Hawaiian shirts did not seem plausible at the time.

Now my administrative duties consume virtually all of my time, and instead of conducting research or teaching classes on how the brain is involved in learning and memory, I am engaged in the various tasks that occupy a dean’s time. I spend a fair amount of time thinking about the future of academia and higher education, and more specifically, the current and future roles of the many disciplines represented in our colleges and universities, including our psychology departments. APS has about 23,500 members, and the majority of our APS colleagues have at one time or another worked in institutions of higher education or are currently students there. I believe that we collectively should be concerned about what lies in the future of higher education — this is our world.

To this end, during my year as APS President, I hope to shine a spotlight on academic scientific psychology and its place in modern higher education, and I hope to provide you with a variety of insights into this subject. A number of our psychological-scientist colleagues, who also happen to be university administrators, have agreed to contribute to the Presidential Column throughout the year, providing their views on the future of our universities and, in particular, how our psychology departments fit into that future. The topics should be far reaching and include research trends and funding climates, key partnerships inside and outside of our institutions, the movement toward interdisciplinary research and teaching, institutional and departmental organization, research funding, curricular trends, issues of assessment and accountability, and what academic psychology looks like outside of the U.S. We hope to cover the successes we have had as well as the challenges we face. I would like to start this series with a few of my own observations about psychology departments from where I currently sit.

When deans are in dark rooms with the shades pulled, they will collectively admit that psychology departments contribute significantly to the financial well-being of their institution. In much more crude terms, our psychology departments are very often “cash cows.” The reason for this label is straightforward: Psychology departments attract a huge number of majors, they teach a lot of non-majors, and they receive many NIH and NSF grants. Simply put, they are consistently on the positive side of the financial ledger, which is important for the health of the whole institution. But I know there is a lot more to psychology departments. To begin with, the research areas represented in psychology departments may be broader and incorporate more levels of analysis than any other academic unit on campus. Our departments are often home to psychological scientists who sometimes call themselves behavioral neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, social psychologists, clinical psychologists, industrial/organizational psychologists, and a variety of scholarship areas too numerous to list here. Our colleagues study virtually everything related to the human condition, from the molecular to the molar, from individuals to groups, from the basic to the applied, all combinations of these dimensions, and

many more. Psychology departments were also at the forefront of the movement toward interdisciplinary research and scholarship long before the trend became popular in academia. One of the underlying reasons the psychology major is one of the most popular majors on many campuses is that there is something for everyone within the major — our departments incorporate the entire spectrum of the liberal arts within their curricula and produce rounded, well-educated individuals who impact our world in just about any career you can imagine. Our very broad discipline is inherently interesting to many students. Wearing my totally unbiased dean's hat, I would say psychology departments are at the top of the list of departments when it comes to the range of contributions that are made to the research, teaching, and service missions of our institutions of higher education. Psychology departments are significant assets to our universities and colleges.

Throughout the year, my administrative colleagues and I will expand on this brief statement of why psychology departments are valuable and, perhaps, discuss ways in which our departments can remain valuable for many years to come as we see changes in higher education. I look forward to presenting their views to you as this year unfolds. I hope you do too!