1. Learning goals assessed in AY 2010-2011.

In AY 2009-2010 the Department of Psychology assessed our students’ analytic, communication and explanatory skills as delineated in our 2005-2006 Self Study. In our Assessment Plan outlined in the 2005-2006 Self Study, we identified several content-centered learning objectives at the program level. During the previous academic year we assessed our student’s “Analytic and Communication … Skills”, as well as their ability to explain behavior, cognition and emotion in both psychological and theoretical terms. This year (2010-11) we again evaluated student’s communication and explanatory skills. Our assessment procedure was a continuation and near replication of last year’s assessment process. We wanted to extend our assessment of written communication skills over a two year period of time and evaluate an additional group of students in order to generate a reliable and solidly based set of conclusions, conclusions that could be used to make necessary changes in our curriculum.

2. Methods used to assess the above learning goals and findings.

As noted above, this year we addressed written communication skills in particular. We did this by assessing the final paper required of students in our capstone course PSYC 107, “Controversial Issues in Psychology.” This paper is a five page paper on a topic considered to be controversial in the field of Psychology. Fifteen papers were randomly and assessed by a committee consisting of the Professors John Tamblyn, Larry Meyers and Kelly Cotter. The papers were evaluated according to American Association of Universities and Colleges LEAP format, in particular the Written Communication Value Rubric (see Attachment). The basic learning objective categories evaluated for the papers as designated in the Value Rubric are as follows: “Context of and Purpose for Writing”, “Content Development”, “Genre and Disciplinary Conventions”, “Sources and Evidence” and “Control of Syntax and Mechanics”. Each category was evaluated on a four point scale: “Benchmark” 1 point “, “Milestones”, 2 or 3 points, and, Capstone”, 4 points, where the scale essentially ranges from adequate or barely adequate(1) to excellent(4).

PSYC 107, Controversial Issues in Psychology, is a capstone course in Psychology major. The emphasis is on critical analysis of issues and the presentation of arguments on both sides of controversial issues. The general format of the class is a discussion/debate format. Satisfactory completion of Psych 8, a lower division methods course, and PSYC 101, an upper division methods course, are prerequisites. Thus, the class consists primarily of first semester or graduating seniors. According to the course syllabus, students are expected to:

1. “Identify argument structure in Psychological controversies.”

2. “Evaluate the argument once it has been identified by applying rules of logic to evidence and identifying the validity of evidence”

3. “Stating verbally and /or in writing your own position by stating the position and presenting support for the position.”

The final paper is on a topic considered to be controversial in the field of Psychology e.g. controversies concerning attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, compulsory treatment of
anorexia nervosa, freedom of marriage for homosexual couples and controversies concerning sexual addiction. The paper is should include a discussion of the issue based on research in the field. Students are expected to use APA format and style. Each member of the assessment committee independently rated the papers on each learning objective in the value rubric. The Committee then discussed their ratings in those instances wherein substantial disagreement occurred. Reliability statistics were computed on the post-discussion ratings.

We computed the intraclass correlations for each of the learning objective scales; these ranged from .692 to .899. The mean rating for each of the learning objectives were as follows: Purpose, 2.88; Content Development, 3.00; Genre and Disciplinary Conventions, 3.01; Evidence, 3.24; Syntax, 2.96.

The value rubric Milestone score of 2.88 was attained for Purpose. Milestone level 3 indicates that the students demonstrate “adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) …. ” We think that this score of 2.88 indicates that the students in the Fall 107 class did approach an “adequate consideration of context, audience and purpose” for writing, although their average score indicates that room for improvement remains. Milestone level 3 (3.00) was attained for Content Development which indicates that the students used appropriate, relevant and compelling content to develop their ideas. A score of 3.01 was attained for Genre. A score of 3.01 this category indicates that our students demonstrated a consistent use of conventions important for psychological writing. We evaluated this category primarily in terms of student’s use of APA format. A score of 3.24 for Sources and Evidence indicates that our students did in fact use “credible and/or relevant” sources to support their ideas. Finally, a score of 2.96 on Syntax indicates that our students generally conveyed their ideas in a straightforward way and with clarity.

The average scores for the two capstone sections of PSYC 107 offered in Sp. 2010 and 2011 respectively are as follows: Purpose, 2.97; Content, 2.92; Genre, 2.72; Evidence, 2.92; and Syntax, 2.84.

3. Anticipated Program Changes.
The Assessment Committee agrees that, based on the present evidence, our seniors have attained a level of writing ability appropriate for undergraduate seniors when judged according to the AACU criteria. These findings will be presented to the Department Curriculum Committee. However, even in light of these positive findings, we do recommend that the Curriculum Committee discuss ways of providing additional instruction in writing and especially instruction in writing according the APA format.

4. Other Assessment Activities and Future Assessment Activities.
The Department Curriculum Committee is now in the process of modifying the specific text of the AACU Value Rubrics in order to make them more applicable to the field of psychology. The first draft will be completed by the start of the Fall 2011 semester. At that time, departmental input will be incorporated into the final draft which will be submitted for department approval and adoption by the end of the Fall 2011 semester. Finally, during the next academic year the Psychology Department will consider a major revision to its requirements for the undergraduate major as the subject of focused inquiry for our self-study. For example, the department will reconsider our category structure and lab requirements.