Program Improvement (PI) Goals

#1: Clarify Departmental Educational Objectives and Developmental Learning Objectives for Faculty and Students  
#2: Improve Students' Writing Performance  
#3: Improve Quality of Senior Research Projects  
#4: Reduce Plagiarism in Students' Work  
#5: Across Courses, Decrease Unintentional Redundancies and Increase Planned Generalization of Knowledge and Skills
This "annual" progress report covers the department's assessment efforts from Spring, 2006 through Spring, 2007. The program improvement (PI) goals on which we have been working originated in the department's self-study that was completed May, 2000. At that time, two program improvement goals were identified for specific focus. Then in 2003-2004, two more program improvement goals were added; and in 2004-2005, a fifth goal was identified. See the following pages for a description of each goal and the progress in each.

Program Improvement (PI) Goal 1:  
Clarify Departmental Educational Objectives and Developmental Learning Objectives for Faculty and Students

Review of Goal Rationale and Strategies:
It is considered reasonable to expect a certain level of knowledge and skill of the students enrolled in a particular course. The professors' perception was that, in upper division courses, incoming students' educational backgrounds and skill levels were often highly variable. Related to this was the apparent perception of students that they did not have to generalize knowledge and skills learned in one course to other courses.

Some strategies for accomplishing PI Goal 1 focused on the structure of the major. Prerequisites were added for a number of upper division courses, and department members agreed on the class ranks at which certain courses should be taken in order to clarify progress through the major and what knowledge and skills would be expected for what courses.

For Fall, 2007, a new handout, showing sample four-year plans for each of the tracks in psychology, was developed and readied for distribution.

Outcomes thus Far:
It is too soon to evaluate the effects of the new handout. We should have some data at the end of this academic year.

PI Goal 2:  
Improve Students' Writing Performance

Review of Goal Rationale and Strategies:
Another element in accomplishing the departmental educational objectives was to improve students' writing performance. Faculty found that most students generally performed poorly on writing assignments at any level of the program and on many dimensions, including the following:

- basic writing skills such as grammar and clear, meaningful communication;
- ability to distinguish among writing genres and choose the appropriate one for psychology assignments;
- familiarity with and use of APA writing style (scientific style of communication) and APA editorial style (formatting guidelines); and
- ability to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information from a number of sources.

Programming and Pedagogical Strategies (Inputs)
Again the department began a program of improvement by focusing first on General Psychology, so
for this course, writing assignments were developed that explicitly required basic writing skills and the APA styles.

In addition, assignments were regularized across the laboratory courses so that students would be practicing a common set of writing skills.

**Outcomes thus Far:**

**Instructors’ Impressions.** In General Psychology, students are about as poor as they've always been on their first papers, with deficiencies in all the skill areas listed in the *Rationale* section, above. By the end of the semester, however, nearly all students show improvement in writing and formatting skills.

In the upper division courses, students are better writers than they have been in the past. There are fewer instances of information organized into the wrong section in lab reports, and fewer formatting errors. These improvements are also occurring in History & Systems (PSY 111) and Senior Research (PSY 197/198). In these latter courses, however, instructors are still not seeing much analysis, critique, or evaluation in students' papers, and there are still more APA formatting errors than there should be in papers of experienced writers.

**Writing Grades.** In the General Psychology sections that use a standard grading criterion as the students get additional practice, scores on students' papers improve from the first paper assignment to the last. In one section, for instance, students' scores increased, on average, almost 2 percentage points from the second to the last assignment. A breakdown of scores by grade earned indicates that the percentage of As earned increased 13% from the second to the last assignment, while the percentage of Ds decreased 3%.

**Student Perceptions.** In the Psychology of Religion course, Spring, 2007, instruction was given regarding APA style. Graded drafts were returned to students with dictated feedback, focusing on specific good and poor points in the paper, including the appropriate use of quotations. Students reported that the feedback helped them on later assignments a great deal (4.8 on a 5 pt. scale) and that the specific feedback regarding the use of quotations was also very helpful (4.5 on a 5 pt. scale).

**Final Exam Questions.** In 2 General Psychology course sections and an upper division course, Behavioral Neuroscience (PSY 125; junior/senior level), students were asked to cite, quote, reference and summarize information (using APA style) from the first page of a journal article. Upper division students showed more correct citations, quotations, and references than lower division students did, with fewer incorrectly categorized section summaries.

**What Have We Learned and What Do We Do Next (Closing the Loop)?**

Assignments that let students practice improving their papers based on feedback from previous assignments seem to be most effective.

We're seeing some increased proficiency in the use of APA style as students move through their academic program.

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**PI Goal 3:**

**Improve Quality of Senior Research Projects**

**Review of Goal Rationale and Strategies:**

As the department worked on improving the General Psychology course, it also became clear that the students in the Senior Research course (PSY 198) were not performing at the ideal level for a well-educated psychology major.
To help improve these projects, pilot studies are strongly encouraged, and students are required to submit their projects to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and present their projects at the annual student research symposium.

Outcomes thus Far:

Students' Perceptions. Students were asked about their experiences during the 2006-2007 year. On a set of surveys that were administered after each course segment, 100% of students responded that the IRB application was realistic and helpful to complete and that multiple rough drafts were useful in developing their thinking about the project.

Participation in the Student Research Symposium. All of this year's senior research students presented at the symposium. They found the process of presenting their projects very useful (4.8 on a 5 pt. scale) for thinking and writing about their studies.

What Have We Learned and What Do We Do Next (Closing the Loop)?
Students find the requirements of the senior research course helpful and useful.

PI Goal 4:
Reduce Plagiarism in Students' Work

Plagiarism is a problem among all ranks of students. Since 2004, the department has been using the College policy on plagiarism. The primary focus is on General Psychology, although developmental steps were defined in the May, 2004, program review proposal.

Programming and Pedagogical Strategies (Inputs)
The following strategies were identified as ways to help reduce plagiarism in our courses, although not all have been implemented.
• In General Psychology, instructors:
  a) Put a standard statement about plagiarism in their syllabus (all) and discuss consequences with students
  b) Teach what plagiarism is, how students can avoid plagiarizing and how they can detect it in their own work (all)
  c) Require students to download and read the new document, and sign an agreement that they acknowledge the consequences and would abide by the policy. (some)
  d) Develop exercises in recognizing plagiarism, proper paraphrasing, and acknowledging sources properly (some)
  e) Structure assignments so as to encourage the development of good habits of note-taking, checking for plagiarism, and acknowledging sources properly (some)
  f) Provide enough assignments that students can practice developing their skills throughout the semester (all)

Assessment Strategies:
• Evaluate results of exercises in recognizing plagiarism, proper paraphrasing, and acknowledging sources properly
• Evaluate papers for presence of plagiarism (numbers of papers that are plagiarized)

Expected Outcomes:
Students demonstrate a commitment to ethical scholarship and research procedures by actively working to prevent and check their work for plagiarism.

General Psychology. Over the course of a semester, individual students should plagiarize less, and the
reviewer should detect less plagiarism.

**Outcomes thus Far:**
Writing Assignments, General Psychology. Examination of the data in a section of General Psychology in Spring, 2007, verify, as was discovered earlier, that students do need instruction in what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. At least 31% of students plagiarized on their first writing assignment. This number is significantly lower than in previous semesters (at least 72%). It is unknown whether this is specific to this General Psychology section or whether students are better informed about plagiarism.

Most instances of plagiarism would be classified as "minimal" (See definitions in Westmont's Plagiarism Policy), and when students were allowed to rewrite a plagiarized assignment, only 1 plagiarized again. By the second assignment, 8.6% plagiarized, and when allowed to rewrite the paper, only 1 person plagiarized again. On a third assignment, with no opportunity for rewriting, 20% plagiarized but only 2 were repeat offenders.

**What Have We Learned and What Do We Do Next (Closing the Loop)?**
The department supports the existence of an explicit, clear policy on plagiarism, but the data show that this is not sufficient. Knowing about plagiarism isn't enough to help students avoid plagiarism, as shown by the fact that many students plagiarize on their first assignment, even after being instructed. The evidence suggests that three things seem to reduce (and, together, perhaps even eliminate) plagiarism:

- Repeated practice in avoiding plagiarism throughout a course for which the policy is consistently applied; and
- Explicit teaching and re-teaching on the topic (rather than simply expecting that they will read and learn it).

During the 2006-2007 academic year, some department members used the services of turnitin.com to evaluate its plagiarism-checking abilities again. This service continues to be a time-saver for the summary of APA formatting and helpful in picking up instances of student-to-student plagiarism, and is still less helpful in checking plagiarism in the summaries of journal articles because not all of these are contained in turnitin.com's database. Student reviewers were again used this year but their work was somewhat variable both within and across student papers. So the search for more efficient ways of checking for plagiarism continues since this task is an important part of the process of teaching students how not to plagiarize.

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**PI Goal 5: Across Courses, Decrease Unintentional Redundancies and Increase Planned Generalization of Knowledge and Skills**

**General Rationale:**
As the department continued with its overall educational objective of producing well-prepared, well-educated students, it turned its attention more intentionally to upper division courses. Experimental Psychology (PSY 013), a sophomore-level course, is the foundation course for 2 of the other 4 laboratory courses as well for Senior Research (PSY 197/198). Social Psychology (PSY 122) is also a sophomore-level course. Since there is no explicit course sequencing between the two, some students will take Experimental Psychology before taking Social Psychology and some will take Social Psychology before taking Experimental Psychology.

**Experimental Psychology**

**Programming and Pedagogical Strategies (Inputs):**
In Spring, 2007, students presented the first draft of their research proposal 2 weeks earlier than in Spring, 2006, and 2 months earlier than in previous terms. This was done to give students more time to think carefully about and discuss their projects, change the project if necessary, and read the relevant literature.
About 1 month into the semester, students from the Capstone Senior Research in Psychology (PSY 198) presented their projects to the Experimental Psychology students. These presentations served as examples of how to develop a research idea and present the data that were found.

**Assessment Strategies:**
- Students' perceptions as assessed on a questionnaire given during the final exam period

**Expected Outcomes:**
Students should find that the project can be completed in the time frame given and the presentations given by the senior research students are useful as models of the research process.

**Outcomes thus Far:**
For the most part, students found that the project was doable in one semester (4.5 on a 5 pt. scale). Some commented that they didn't have enough time but that it was their own fault for not getting started on the project. They also found it helpful to begin work on their projects early in the semester (4.5 on a 5 pt. scale). Finally, they found it helpful to have the senior research students present their projects to the class (4.0 on a 5 pt. scale).

### Social Psychology Programming and Pedagogical Strategies (Inputs):
The instructor developed a writing project, a research proposal, that was designed to further students' knowledge who had had Experimental Psychology and prepare those who had not had Experimental Psychology.

**Assessment Strategies:**
- Quality of research ideas and questions in senior research (grades, instructors' judgment)
- Student perceptions of the usefulness of the project

**Expected Outcomes:**
Both students who have taken Experimental and those who have not should find the project useful in furthering their knowledge about research proposal writing.

**Outcomes thus Far:**
Students who had already taken Experimental Psychology believed quite strongly (4.4 on a 5 pt. scale) that the research proposal was of higher quality than it would have been if they had not already taken Experimental. Students who had not taken Experimental believed that their research proposals would be of higher quality in Experimental, given their experience in Social Psychology (4.1 on a 5 pt. scale).