

Assessment Grant Final Report

2009-2010

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I. Project Description and Purpose

We gave the ETS Major Field Test to a sample of upper-division psychology majors. This is a standardized test of psychology knowledge designed primarily for outcomes assessment and is one of the direct measures listed on our department's current SOAP. We had given this test in the Spring 2000 semester and learned some useful things from it. Among them were that our students performed about the same overall as a national sample from a variety of institutions. They also performed relatively well in the areas of methodology and statistics but performed relatively poorly in the areas of sensory and physiological psychology. Our goal this time around was to see again how our students performed compared to a national sample—and to a smaller sample of peer institutions—to identify areas in which they perform especially well or especially poorly, and to look for other patterns that might suggest ways to improve our program. We ended up testing 92 students in two sections of Psych 182 (History and Systems of Psychology)—the closest thing we have to a capstone course—in late April 2010.

II. Project Findings

Comparison to the National Sample

Compared to the national sample, our students were much more likely to report being Hispanic (37% vs. 3%), much less likely to report be White (38% vs. 76%), less likely to report that English was their best language (79% vs. 92%), and more likely to report being transfer students (57% vs. 32%).

Table 1 shows our students' mean total score, mean for each of four sub-scores, and mean for each of six "assessment indicators." (The assessment indicators are more specific than the sub-scores, are considered less reliable, and are reported only at the group level.) Table 1 also shows the means and standard deviations for the 322 institutions that have used the test in the past five years, along with

our students' collective z scores and approximate percentile ranks. Overall, our students scored at about the 25th percentile of the national sample, which was somewhat disappointing

		CSUF	National Sample			
		<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>Percentile</i>
	Total Score	152	156.0	8.8	-0.45	25
Sub-Scores	Learning & Cognition	52	55.8	8.2	-0.46	30
	Perception & Physiology	53	56.7	8.2	-0.45	30
	Clinical & Personality	50	56.0	7.0	-0.86	10
	Developmental & Social	54	55.7	7.8	-0.22	35
Assessment Indicators	Memory and Thinking	47	48.5	9.1	-0.16	40
	Sensory and Physiology	34	38.8	9.2	-0.52	27
	Developmental	46	46.9	8.2	-0.11	40
	Clinical and Abnormal	58	65.9	7.8	-1.01	10
	Social	59	61.6	9.6	-0.27	32
	Statistics and Methods	49	53.2	9.4	-0.45	27

Table 1. Our students compared to the national sample on the total score, four sub-scores, and six assessment indicators.

Figure 1 presents a more detailed look at our students' total scores. Specifically, it shows the percentage of our students who scored in each decile of the national sample. It is notable that close to 10% of our students scored in the top decile—suggesting that our best students are as knowledgeable as the best students nationally. However, about 20% of our students scored in the bottom decile—suggesting that we have more than our share of particularly low scoring students.

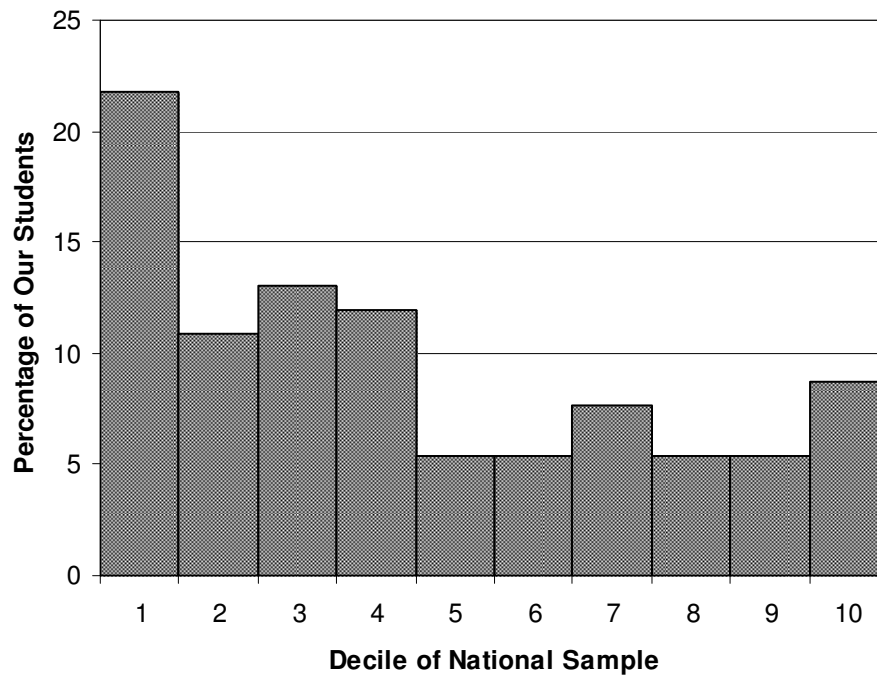


Figure 1. Our students compared to the national sample on the total score, four sub-scores, and six assessment indicators.

Performance Relative to Peer Institutions

We have requested comparative data from twelve public, master’s granting institutions with enrollment of greater than ten thousand. We will submit an addendum to this report when we have these data. Our expectation is that our students will be near the median—and possibly above it—compared to this sample of peer institutions.

Relative Strengths and Weaknesses

The sub-scores and assessment indicators allow us to see whether there are areas in which our student are scoring better or worse. The most notable feature of the data here is their relatively poor performance in the areas of clinical and abnormal psychology. This was surprising to many of the faculty because so many of our students are interested in pursuing careers in these fields and almost all of them take Psych 166: Abnormal Psychology. However, this result is consistent with some concerns that we

have had about the effectiveness of Psych 166, which is usually taught in large sections by adjunct faculty (not necessarily research trained) and is not restricted to psychology majors. This can be contrasted with their relatively good performance in the developmental and social areas, where the relevant courses are generally taught by full-time (research trained) faculty and are restricted to psychology majors.

Comparison to Previous Results

The last time we gave the test, our students were much closer to the overall mean of the other institutions. They were relatively strong in measurement and statistics now they score about the same in those areas as they do overall. They were relatively weak in sensory and physiological psychology but, again, now score about the same in those areas as they do overall. And, again, they are now relatively weak in clinical and abnormal psychology. It seems likely that much of the change from 2000 (when our students were near the median overall) reflects changes in the national sample. It increased from 138 institutions to 322—many of which seem to be smaller and more selective. To some extent, we will resolve this issue when we have the comparative data from the peer institutions.

III. How Are We Using the Findings?

Our general approach to using such findings is as follows. The Department's Undergraduate analyzes and discusses the data—coming up with tentative recommendations to take to the entire faculty. The entire faculty discusses the results, suggests additional analyses and recommendations, and (if necessary) votes on any proposed changes to the program. The recommendations are implemented by the Undergraduate Committee or by individual faculty members as necessary.

We will be unable to present the results to the entire faculty until the Fall semester. In the meantime, however, the Undergraduate Committee has discussed the results and identified the following priorities.

- Find ways to identify students who are not learning or retaining basic information so that we can help them. This will require additional and more detailed analyses of the data to see what factors are most closely related to especially poor performance on the test.

- Create additional opportunities for students to learn basic facts and theories and to practice what they are learning. This might involve encouraging faculty to include more review in upper-division courses. It might also involve creating educational posters (e.g., on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) to replace some of the research posters that hang in our hallways.
- Consider changes to our program in the areas of clinical and abnormal psychology. Among the possibilities are converting our current abnormal psychology course to a lower division GE course and increasing our upper-division offerings in these areas.

IV. What problems did you encounter and how were they resolved?

One problem we encountered was that the test is a two hour test and it was not immediately clear when we would give it or how we would motivate our students to take it seriously. We decided to give in the Psych 182 class and, after consulting with ETS, to give the first half of it one week and the second half the next week. The instructor of Psych 182 also awarded points in that course for being present on both days and taking the test, and the vast majority of students did so. Of course, it is hard to say how seriously they took the test, but we have no reason to think that they took it less seriously than students at other institutions take it.

A second problem we encountered was that the national sample may not be very comparable to our own students—making it difficult to interpret our students' performance compared to that national sample. We will resolve this in part by comparing our students to sample of more similar peer institutions. We can also deal with this problem by focusing more on our own students' relative performance on different sub-scores and assessment indicators and trying to find ways to bring their performance in their worst areas up to the level of their performance in their best areas.