



UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

External Reviewer's Report

Program Reviewed: Educational Psychology

Degrees: Ph.D. Foundations, School Psychology Strands
M.S. in Educational Psychology

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INTRODUCTION

The Educational Psychology and Higher Education (EPHE) department in the College of Education (COE) at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) serves the COE, UNLV, local, national, and international communities through programmatic, teaching, and scholarly activities, in complex and varied ways. While the purpose of this review is to evaluate two of the programs offered by EPHE, the Masters of Science (MS) and Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Educational Psychology, we found that to fully do this we needed to understand the complex context in which these programs are situated. Therefore, while our primary focus for this report is on the current status and future potential of the MS and PhD programs in Educational Psychology we also comment on related programs and commitments that faculty in this department perform when relevant to understanding the functioning and growth potential of these programs.

We were invited to review the MS and PhD programs in Educational Psychology. The MS program provides a foundational core curriculum to students interested in human learning and development. Moreover, the courses in this program are required for students pursuing the Educational Specialist (EdS) degree required for licensure in school psychology. Thus, the MS in Educational Psychology is a necessary component of the EdS. In addition the EPHE department offers is developing a Program and Policy Evaluation Certificate that students with a focus on foundations can complete through electives. Of note the MS program is offered in both traditional (face-to-face) and online formats, such that student can choose either option or a hybrid of the two that best meets their own learning needs.

The doctoral program includes two strands: the foundations strand and the school psychology strand. The educational foundations strand reflects a traditional research-focused educational psychology program that leads students to careers in higher education, research, and consulting. The primary purpose of this strand is to facilitate learning and contribute to the knowledge base describing how humans learn in school and other settings. Currently the school psychology strand is focused on preparing school psychologists for work in the Clark County School District (CCSD) or private practice. Thus, currently the primary focus of this strand seems to be on the development of practitioners who are greatly needed in this local and state community. However, there is a strong need for PhD's in school psychology who pursue an academic path as graduate programs in this area are understaffed and more researchers are needed. We discuss several salient recommendations related to the potential of this strand of the PhD later in our report.

I. Mission and Goals

The mission statement provided is for the EPHE Department as a whole and the programs under review are well situated within the context and activities articulated by this mission. In particular, these programs serve to *inform the educational process*, through targeted activities directly related to student outcomes. **Student outcomes** for the MS and PhD in educational psychology are well aligned with this goal in two key ways. First, these programs seek to develop graduates who are able to produce and consume high quality educational research for use in and by communities in P-16 (pre-kindergarten - undergraduate degrees) educational



contexts. This kind of informed community of professionals is essential to improving educational progress at local, state, and national levels. Second, these programs prepare graduates for careers that are situated in educational contexts where their knowledge and understanding of learning, motivation, development, and research methods can be employed to effect change. In particular, students in the Foundations strands of the MS and PhD are prepared to take on roles in as university faculty, educational researchers, program evaluators, and consultants. Similarly, students in the School Psychology Strand are prepared to take on roles as school psychologists in local schools. Of note, the UNLV school psychology program is the only school psychology certification in the state of Nevada. Thus, as students from this program take up this professional role in Nevada's school the department mission of informing educational progress is well met.

The mission reported is the **department** mission and therefore the connection between the programs reviewed and the department mission are seamless, such that the departmental mission seems to be well served by the programs under review. In 2014 The **College of Education** at UNLV has established a vision for the college 'Leadership - Innovation - Impact: Forging a Path to Tier 1.' The report articulates the college vision and a series of goals associated with achieving this vision. The vision is articulated as "*The College of Education will achieve prominence locally, nationally, and internationally as a leading source of significant knowledge and innovative models to inform and affect policy, practice, and research.*" The mission of the EPHE Department supports this vision through the focus on informing educational progress through innovative research and the development of graduates who will in turn impact their contexts. These two mechanisms serve the college vision by bringing attention to the COE through the scholarship of faculty and students and by helping to develop educational leaders who will go into their respective fields and impact their communities in meaningful ways.

In 2015 UNLV established a vision, mission, and goals related to achieving "top tier" status as a public university in terms of research, education, and community impact. The mission established at this time emphasized that members of the UNLV community promote "well-being and individual achievement through education, research, scholarship...foster a climate of innovation, and enrich the... communities we serve." The mission of the EPHE department and its enactment through the MS and PhD programs in Educational Psychology seem well aligned with the University's Top Tier Vision and Mission.

Our review of the self-study provided and conversations with department faculty and students suggested to us that this community of scholars and students are engaged in educational research, teaching, and service in order to do *more than* simply "inform the educational process." That is the departmental mission statement and enactment activities do not seem to fully describe the scope of goals or impact these programs have nor the range of work completed by program faculty and staff. A more cohesive mission that reflects the actual spirit of these programs may lead to better communication regarding these programs and the departments.

II. Need/Demand for Program

The need for the PhD and MS programs are consistent with the need of Colleges of Education around the country. In particular, the Foundations Strand and School Psychology Strand of the PhD program prepare leaders in educational assessment, program evaluation, learning, and

research. The faculty and program in the foundations strand have developed a national reputation in the US for the caliber of their scholarship and the quality of the preparation for their graduates. The Foundations Strand appears to have built a specialty in program evaluation that is well respected in Clark County and fills a growing need at the national level. Moreover, the foundational courses offered as part of the MS and Foundations PhD Strand serve as core and required courses for students within the College of Education and across the University. The School Psychology Strand is meeting the needs of Clark County Schools by preparing School Psychologists and individuals who are prepared for leadership positions in school districts.

There are no other School Psychology programs in the state of Nevada, therefore, the need and demand for School Psychology practitioners is even greater than it is for similar sized programs.

There is a significant shortage of School Psychology faculty in University training programs.

This is an area that is untapped by the UNLV School Psychology PhD graduates and is another potential area of impact for the future.

III. Program Resources

The program resources for teaching appear to be appropriate for meeting the instructional needs of students in the PhD and MA programs; however, the resources are insufficient for meeting advising and mentoring needs of doctoral students, particularly those in the School Psychology Strand. The full-time faculty in the College provide the greatest proportion of the teaching load in the reviewed programs. Teaching by part-time faculty makes up less than 20% of the student credit hours taught. Faculty within the College appreciate their ability to serve other units across campus by teaching multiple sections of classes to an interdisciplinary group of students; however, the additional teaching is at the expense of being able to properly advise and mentor students in their research skill development. As instructors of research methods courses, they find themselves co-advising student research projects, often outside of their own scholarly interests, as part of their teaching.

When asked about the most critical needs of the College, both graduate students and faculty unanimously stated the need for more faculty. Students expressed the need for more faculty to mentor them into academic careers, to support the program into maintaining (or gaining accreditation), and to mentor them in applying quantitative research methods in practice. Students also indicated a need for more classes offered during a semester beyond the basic core classes. One student commented that she had to take content courses as independent studies. Over-reliance on independent studies to deliver content is problematic as students miss the shared learning experience of a class and the program becomes more idiosyncratic rather than a cohesive developmental experience. Faculty identified the need for additional faculty to mentor students in order to support doctoral students writing skills and even more critically, to better match doctoral advisees to the appropriate faculty mentor. For example, the faculty indicated that some students may not have access to the dissertation chair of their choice. Rather, they may choose someone with methodological expertise, but who may not have the content expertise to support their work. As a result, it is a challenge to produce researchers and future faculty with the expertise needed to be successful in academia or the private sector. Students expressed great appreciation for faculty flexibility and willingness to accommodate their needs and interests. And we saw evidence of this supportive and collaborative effort among the faculty. However,

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this approach (faculty adapting to student needs) to mentoring doctoral students is not sustainable and is inconsistent with what is typical at Tier I Research universities.

The faculty resources of the School Psychology Program are insufficient. One full time faculty and one visiting faculty are below the minimum to sustain NASP approval for either the EdS or the PhD program. A *minimum* of three full time faculty are required with a faculty-to-student ratio of no greater than 1:12. All three full time faculty need to carry advising loads and have the ability to mentor students. Moreover, NASP requires a commitment to maintaining these faculty lines and therefore require them to be *permanent* positions. Given that the School Psychology Program will eventually seek APA accreditation, at least one of the faculty must be licensed psychologist and the full time faculty at the doctoral level must be able to mentor doctoral advisees in research. At this point in time, APA accreditation is an inaccessible goal for the program with the limited resources.

In the self-study, the question about the number of full time faculty that are available as advisors went unanswered (page 25). The size of program tables show that a total of 49 students are in the M.S and PhD programs in Educational Psychology while a total of 11 faculty are available as advisors. This ratio of faculty to student appears to be adequate as long as faculty included in this number do not have advisees from other programs.

Faculty teaching the Foundations PhD or the School Psychology PhD did not mention their scholarly productivity and their work with students. Instead, there was discussion about service to the community (program evaluations) and contract related work that may or may not include data collection and publication. As the College moves toward the goal of become Tier 1, there will need to be more balance and time devoted to the publishing pursuits and grant productivity of the faculty. Tier 1 status is marked by faculty with outstanding research lines that can provide a training ground for students. In order to develop and maintain outstanding research faculty need to be able to pursue their own research interests and build a reputation around those scholarly activities.

Given the move away from student credit hours to “completers” as a way of accounting for faculty teaching load in the University, there appears to be some confusion about the definition of “completers.” In our interviews, it was apparent that the new funding allocation structure is a hybrid of the old ‘SCH’ (student contact/credit hours) approach and completions. In our meeting with Dr. Spencer in the Vice Provost’s office we learned that course completions are counted for individual faculty and programs (not just degree completions). Thus, faculty in the programs under review should be receiving credit for the course offerings that are interdisciplinary. However, this seemed unclear in the report and in our discussions with these faculty. Further, the new University model of developing “growth plans” is one way that the College can strategically prepare for retirements. The University is seeking the goal of Carnegie Tier I designation which means that the faculty needs to grow by another 150 research-producing faculty (rather than teaching faculty). New programs that are aligned with the Tier I metrics are the ones who will get the faculty resources. For new programs, up to 65% of the growth in tuition revenue can go back to the department for faculty lines. At the same time, the number of PhD graduates needs to double. Thus, the College has to maximize the resources based on the SCH hybrid model, including maximizing undergraduate course offerings, tracking growth in tuition revenue over

time, and aligning ALL priorities to the Tier I metrics before making any requests for resources from campus leadership.

One concern was the number of faculty resources going into teaching a popular class EPY 702 (research methods). Since 6-7 sections of the class are being offered by tenure line faculty, a different structure might allow for better use of resources while also providing more opportunities for mentoring PhD students into academic careers. For example, if one tenure line faculty teaches a doctoral seminar to several advanced PhD students who, in turn, teach the research methods course to Masters students, the courses could continue to have a wide reach across campus while also freeing up the tenure line faculty for mentoring both his/her own students as well as the seminar students. This opportunity would allow PhD students to gain teaching experience, leadership skills, and give them access to faculty mentoring in the context of a doctoral level seminar. Moreover, teaching others how to conduct and write about research may also address some of the writing challenges currently identified in the doctoral students.

IV. Retention, Progression, Completion

Since 2006, it is very clear that the PhD in Educational Psychology has grown. The number of graduates steadily increased until 2010 with a peak in 2012 of 12 graduates. Ever since the 2012; however, the number of PhD level graduates has been between 3 and 5 graduates a year--a level lower than similar sized programs around the country.

The self-study does not provide any data about the attrition of students in the Educational Psychology Programs. The graduate rate tables include some data about progression of students based on the cohort in which they enter and how long it takes to complete the degree (up to 6 years for the MS degree and 8 years for the PhD). Time-to-degree appears to be longer than other Educational Psychology programs.

With 38 students in the PhD program, one would expect around 8-9 to be graduating each year (if completing a 4 year program of study) rather than 3-5 doctoral students. However, our discussion with faculty revealed that a number of the doctoral students are part time students and are working full time jobs. Thus, the 4 year completion seems untenable for these students. The self-study did not differentiate between full and part time students in the program, which could account for the varied graduation rates. Part time doctoral students require unique support structures and opportunities for research experiences that may require creative and alternative thinking by the program faculty and administration since this students are unable to accept GA positions that are aligned with their training. Faculty also indicated that the doctoral students require significant support in developing their dissertation proposals, so a new course was added to help scaffold them to this milestone. This may shorten the degree completion timeline in the future. Additionally, the move to a three-study dissertation will also help support doctoral students in preparing for academic careers.

Graduate students indicated that one strength of the department that enhances retention of students is the availability of GA positions. The number and type of these positions provides ample opportunity for graduate students to work as GA's, apply their pre-existing professional skills for teaching and policy related work while also pursuing doctoral studies. This is a clear



strength of the Department that, if continued, will allow for not only retention of strong doctoral students, but also for recruitment of the type of PhD student that will move the College even closer to the Tier I goal.

Despite the significant losses in the number of faculty in the College, it is apparent that the department has pulled together to ensure the best possible outcomes for their students. One pattern that is also apparent is that the Master's degree in Educational Psychology has led to additional PhD students. The majority of the Master's students go on to complete the EdS degree, but some apply to the PhD program as well. This progression of students has allowed the Department to retain more students in the PhD programs.

In order to further enhance the matriculation of doctoral students in the PhD programs, we recommend more intentional efforts to select doctoral students based on their match to faculty mentors and interests. Taking an intentional approach will allow faculty more opportunity to mentor doctoral students early in the program based on shared interests. Faculty can work with their advisees on grant proposals, development of research projects, and writing publications. Mentoring can occur more naturally through advising relationships that area based on research content expertise. Further, when faculty publish and present with their doctoral students, students are more likely to graduate with publications and are more competitive applicants for faculty positions.

V. Student Outcomes

The foundations PhD graduates appear to be the graduates that have enough faculty support to pursue academic careers. The self-study shows a list of approximately 30 alumni from the Foundations PhD program who are in positions at universities, government agencies, and private sector careers. The trends in placement are unclear since the list does not reflect the year graduated or time-to-degree information.

The 8 School Psychology PhD graduates listed in the self-study accepted positions in schools, private practice, and in policy positions. None pursued academic careers despite the shortage of School Psychology faculty. This is not unusual for programs that have not been research intensive historically, but it is an area of opportunity for future growth.

The Masters in Educational psychology appears to be a feeder program for the EdS degree and the PhD program more than it is a final degree. For the few M.S. graduates that do not continue in other programs, the alumni are employed as educators, business, or in nonprofit agencies.

VI. Impact

The impact of the MS and PhD Programs can best be understood through the dual lenses of: direct program impacts and the impact of program faculty through their teaching and scholarship on the college, university, local, and national and international communities.

Direct impacts of the programs are seen in the contributions made by program graduates. The Foundations PhD is making an impact on education policy by producing district level

administrators, state education agency personnel, and policy researchers. The impact of the Foundations alumni extends beyond the state to the national level as many alumni are also in academic positions at other universities. The School Psychology strand appears to have the greatest impact on the State given the needs for school psychologists. Seventy percent (70%) of the school psychologists in the state of Nevada are from the UNLV program. Similarly, their *practice* is impacting the community by providing mental health services in the context of the training program. The MA program provides the local community with opportunities to learn about how people learn, teach, and support the diverse learning needs of children.

Within the university, the MA and PhD programs in Foundations serve the University well through its curricular offerings that cross programs, departments, and colleges at UNLV. The research methods courses are highly sought after by students across campus, so the methodological skills and insights of the faculty in Educational Psychology are making a significant impact on the training of students well beyond the College of Education. Moreover, the Educational Psychology faculty is well known in the field and the scholars in this program impact the larger field through innovative high quality research. Such research has the potential to shape the way that schools and classrooms function in meaningful ways.

Of note, all the EPY programs are making an impact that extends beyond the students enrolled in the College of Education. They are impacting the students in programs across UNLV, the development of scholarship nationally and internationally (with graduates placed in academic positions), the children and families in Nevada schools who rely on UNLV prepared school psychologists, and the scholarly community.

VII. Quality

Without evaluation data or specific benchmarks of program level goals, it is difficult to make any estimation of program quality. However, the self-study shows that the EPHE department describes program quality in terms of student learning outcomes, the rigor of the degree milestones, and the students' identification with professional identity. The Department completes regular assessment plans for the provost office and these are reviewed, vetted and approved by the faculty. These assessment plans appear to be the primary method the Department evaluates its learning outcomes; however, it is unclear what the desired outcomes are for these degree programs. No aggregated data were provided from program level assessments of learning outcomes. The decision tree and the process for the preliminary exams appears to be rigorous and meaningful to the development of doctoral students. No data were provided about the passing rates or how frequently retakes are necessary. The annual survey is one additional feedback mechanism that the programs use to analyze student progress and outcomes (an indirect indicator of program quality). The annual survey gives the programs information on academic progress, research activity, conference participation, and a self-assessment of professional identity. For example, at the time of last year's survey, approximately 30% of doctoral students were involved in research projects and 75% presented papers at AERA. To obtain a stronger sense of program quality, there should be alignment of outcome measures to the program goals, aggregated data (program level rather than course level), and regular review of the data to inform practice. Such activities should be considered as the specific degree level and strand as the outcomes for students across these programs and strands vary.

VIII. Commendations

The faculty serving the MS and PhD programs in Educational Psychology have a strong and impressive record of scholarship as well as a deep and considerable dedication to the learning and future potential of their students. The commitment is clearly present as indicated by the student descriptions of how faculty are flexible and willing to mentor even when their interests are not perfectly aligned.

IX. Recommendations

The Educational Psychology faculty need to spend some time identifying a cohesive identity for the Department. The faculty are strongly encouraged to consider these questions:

1. What content expertise do ALL graduates consistently receive with a PhD from this program?
2. What is a common thread of research among the faculty within the program?
3. What makes this program stand apart from other Educational Psychology programs?
4. What will students gain from coming to work with UNLV faculty that they cannot gain elsewhere?
5. How do faculty research collaborations fit together in the program in terms of breadth and depth of knowledge construction?

The answers to these questions can inform not only how the programs are marketed to the community, but will also shape the types of students that are attracted to the programs in EPY. Prospective students will be attracted to the research projects and the opportunity to become experts in a content area within Educational Psychology. Further, as the cohesive identity is identified, faculty searches can be strategically focused on finding faculty with research content specialties that complement, rather than duplicate, the work of current faculty. This will reduce the need to shape hiring decisions around faculty that can teach specific courses.

In addition to these framing questions we have offered some specific recommendations throughout the report that we repeat here for emphasis:

- The faculty should develop a more cohesive mission statement at either the program or department level that reflects the actual spirit of these programs and the work of the faculty and students which may lead to better communication regarding these programs and the departments.
- The current approach to mentoring doctoral students with faculty adapting to student interests is not sustainable in the long term and is inconsistent with what is typical at Tier I Research universities. Faculty should develop a strategic plan for the recruitment, selection, and placement of new doctoral students who can be well supported by the expertise and interest of the current faculty.
- Tenured faculty seem to be stretched by the demands of teaching research methods courses as a service to programs across the university. While this is a significant contribution to the community it limits their ability to offer courses in their areas of scholarly expertise, which in turn could serve to develop student interest in these areas

and develop a foundation for substantive and productive scholarly activities. Program faculty and administration should consider different structures for course delivery that might allow for better use of faculty resources while also providing more opportunities for mentoring PhD students into academic careers. We offered one potential suggestion, having a cohort of doctoral students teach the MA course under the guidance of a faculty member. However, other structures might be considered based on the specifics of these programs.

- Part time doctoral students require unique support structures and opportunities for research experiences. Given the perception that many of your students are part time then we suggest that faculty consider creative and alternative ways to facilitate the educational experience for these students. It should also be noted that as other programs have moved to Tier 1, research focused status, they have made concerted efforts to decrease the number of part time students accepted into their programs. As part of the long term planning for these programs, the College, and the University, conversations should be held about the nature of the doctoral work that is needed to achieve the stated goal of Tier 1 status.
- To obtain a stronger sense of program quality, there should be alignment of outcome measures to the program goals, aggregated data (program level rather than course level), and regular review of the data to inform practice. Such activities should be considered as the specific degree level and strand as the outcomes for students across these programs and strands vary.
- Given the scarcity of doctoral programs in school psychology that have a research focus within the US this is clearly an area for growth that should be pursued.

As the university pursues the goal of Carnegie Tier I status, a renewed focus on mentoring doctoral students in research, teaching, grant generation, and scholarly production is critical. To ensure that EPY faculty lines are available to move the needle in that direction, careful attention will need to be paid in marketing all that the faculty do in these scholarly activities. Educational Psychology PhD programs (both strands) have the opportunity to demonstrate a path to Tier I. The national recognition is already there for the caliber of individual faculty scholarship. Thus, compiling regular data on the unit as a whole in the context of the cohesive identity and an increase in graduation rate is going to provide the programs access to the resources needed to continue on the path to success.

X. Final Statements

The Educational Psychology Programs (MA and PhD) offered by the College of Education at UNLV are making substantive progress to achieving the University's goal of Tier 1 Status. Program faculty are internationally renowned for their scholarly activities and expertise across a variety of salient and highly relevant topics in Educational Psychology. The program graduates from the foundations strand of the PhD are finding employment in colleges and universities internationally, and graduates in the school psychology strand are serving the immediate needs of schools and communities in Nevada.

The recession, reorganization of the College, the attrition of several faculty, and the loss of others has affected the programs under review in salient ways. However, these challenges also

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seem to have provided a context in which the current faculty came together in collaborative and supportive ways to provide high quality learning experiences for their students. Of note one student remarked “The faculty here teach you to think independently for yourself. I wasn’t ready for that in my first year, but now in my third, I’m ready.” Facilitating the development of independent thought is the foundations to any meaningful educational endeavor, and the programs reviewed in this report seem to be achieving this goal.