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### **Leaving the Psychology Tower: Nontraditional Programs in I-O Psychology\***

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The need for programs that accommodate diverse types of students and adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of organizations has led universities with traditional I-O programs to also offer nontraditional programs. Nontraditional programs tend to attract highly heterogeneous sets of students in terms of age and academic and professional backgrounds or may be tailored for special types of students. Due to the mixed student population and high percentage of working adults, nontraditional programs tend to be more application and applied-research oriented than their traditional program counterparts.

Faculty, students, and administrators of nontraditional programs face a variety of challenges. In this column, we explore and address these challenges based on our experiences in running and teaching in such programs. We hope this column will provide the impetus for open dialogue among I-O psychologist educators regarding how to diversify educational opportunities in I-O psychology.



### **The Challenges of Nontraditional Programs**

Traditional and nontraditional programs differ in a variety of ways. Such differences can be grouped into three areas: student characteristics, demands on faculty, and organizational demands.

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\*Note: The authors of this column will be presenting information from this article at the 2006 SIOP Conference in Dallas, TX. This educational symposium will include some of the information herein along with additional details, challenges, and successes.

## ***Student Characteristics***

*Age and experience.* Nontraditional students differ significantly from traditional students with respect to age range and experience. Students represent a wide range of ages from those in their early 20s to those in their late 50s. Nontraditional students also enter programs with diverse academic (e.g., management, psychology, English, political science) and professional backgrounds (e.g., human resource professional, marketing analyst, teacher), and typically are from lower management to vice-presidential levels in their organizations.

*Extracurricular responsibilities.* The majority of students in nontraditional programs have responsibilities independent from their student life. Most students work full time and have family responsibilities including everything from raising children to caring for elderly parents. This array of nonacademic responsibilities reduces the amount and range of time nontraditional students can spend on campus.

*Expectations.* The professional background and work experiences of most students can be a great asset to students and instructors alike in that such experiences allow for a direct linkage of program content to the students' work. Older students are less willing to simply accept theoretical assumptions and instead want to be able to immediately apply what they have learned. They are less likely to be familiar with methodological and statistical concepts and thus tend to be less willing to accept a primarily research-oriented, theoretical style program.

## ***Demands on Faculty***

Faculty in nontraditional programs encounter very different demands than those in traditional programs. Prior experience in organizations, a focus on applied research, broader areas of interests, and a willingness to accept and acknowledge that students will often be more knowledgeable and experienced in certain areas are necessary to foster positive relationships with students. Students expect faculty to know organizational settings first hand and may not accept information instructors present without debate.

Faculty teaching in nontraditional programs also have to be more self-sustaining compared to their traditional program counterparts. Night and weekend teaching is typical, resulting in fewer technical, administrative, and social resources for faculty. Compressed class formats can be extremely demanding as an entire course's materials must be prepared prior to the first class session and faculty must be available to advise students in the evenings and on weekends.

During the implementation of new nontraditional programs, faculty must also promote the program and recruit students. Nontraditional education is a competitive market, and the geographic restraints of working adults further limit the radius from which to recruit students. Nontraditional programs have to demonstrate credibility quickly to garner a good reputation. Extensive community outreach is key to establishing credibility with local businesses and organizations whose employees are potential applicants. Lunch talks,

interviews, public lectures, and open-house informational meetings can be invaluable in promoting new programs. These time-consuming activities, however, are not typically rewarded highly in annual faculty evaluations, which are often based primarily on research activities.

### ***Organizational Demands***

*Focus of instruction.* The challenge for faculty in nontraditional programs is to strike a balance between the varying needs and interests of the students so that academically oriented students gain valuable practical experience and application-focused learners gain important conceptual and theoretical underpinnings for the best practices they see implemented daily.

*Student integration and cohesion.* In a typical full-time institution, students develop cohesiveness as a result of shared experiences, usually in their classes. Part-time students may have difficulty developing such relationships because they take classes with different student cohorts. Part-time students may have additional work and family commitments that prevent development of strong relationships with other students. Part-time students may also feel that they are treated differently or that faculty are not taking into account their unique situations. Students in nonthesis-option tracks often feel left out because the strong relationship formed between advisor and student in the conduct of a thesis does not typically develop for students in a nonthesis track. Furthermore, individuals returning to study after spending years away from school sometimes feel that they are in a different place than their younger counterparts.

*Integration of nontraditional into traditional I-O programs.* Given the distinct prerequisites and requirements of traditional and nontraditional programs, the integration of the two is not an easy task. Tailor-made solutions are essential. Each nontraditional program needs to be structured and organized according to the unique needs and resources of its student body and faculty.

## **Taking on the Challenges**

### ***Existing Nontraditional Programs***

Striking a balance between meeting the needs of nontraditional students and providing a rigorous, high-quality I-O program is a major balancing act. The authors of this paper developed and work in three distinct training programs, each of them facing challenges of nontraditional programs in a unique way.

*The University of Oklahoma in Tulsa.* The MA program in Organizational Dynamics (ODYN; <http://tulsagrad.ou.edu/odyn/>) at the University of Oklahoma (OU) in Tulsa is an interdisciplinary program designed to provide working professionals with the leadership skills needed to manage people, projects, and technology. The program started in spring 2003; currently 54 students are enrolled. Students are diverse in age, background, and organizational position and represent a variety of companies including old and new economies as well as product and service-oriented companies.

*The George Washington University.* The programs in the Department of Organizational Sciences and Communication (<http://www.gwu.edu/~orgsci/index.htm>) at the George Washington University (GWU) have evolved dramatically over the past 5 years. Once a program that offered only a part-time master's degree to adult learners, Organizational Sciences now offers a full range of undergraduate and master's programs to traditional and nontraditional students as well as the doctoral degree in I-O psychology in a fairly traditional format but in an interdisciplinary department. Currently, the program serves approximately 120 undergraduate majors, 20 minors, 175 master's, and 20 doctoral students.

*The University of Nebraska in Omaha.* The I-O psychology graduate program (<http://www.unomaha.edu/psych/industrialorg.php>) at the University of Nebraska in Omaha (UNO) has two programs. One program is a 2-year, non-thesis master's program designed for students who would like to earn a terminal master's degree and who intend to go to work immediately after completion of the program. The second program is a traditional MA/PhD program. The nonthesis option attracts both full-time, traditional students as well as nontraditional students.

### ***Practical Solutions***

*Selection of students.* Criteria important in the selection of students for nontraditional programs may vary from those used in traditional programs. The ODYN program at OU assesses students' potential for program success based not only on GPA, but also work experience, interview performance, and two letters of reference, including one from someone familiar with the applicant's potential in an organizational setting. Selection of students is not based only on intellectual abilities but also on ability to contribute to class diversity in terms of profession, organizational experience, organization type, and specialty interest. At GWU, Organizational Sciences varies its admissions practices as a function of the program. Doctoral admissions are based on GPA, GRE, research experience, and fit with faculty interests. Master's-level admissions are based on work experience and grades, as well as the fit with the program's orientation. Similarly, at UNO, doctoral admission is based on more traditional measures, with a strong emphasis on research experience, whereas admission considerations for the terminal master's program may include work experience, internships, and other extracurricular activities.

*Course scheduling.* Many students in nontraditional programs work full time and have family responsibilities, thus, scheduling classes can be difficult for students and administrators alike. Although classes are typically offered year round to facilitate student progress, faculty are traditionally on 9-month contracts necessitating reliance on overload teaching assignments and adjunct faculty. Also, although some programs offer classes in just one type of format to focus efforts and resources on a particular type of student, other programs offer a variety of formats and schedules to meet the needs of more students. Such multi-format schedules increase the demands on faculty and departmental resources.

One option utilized by the Organizational Dynamics program at OU is to use a compressed format with class sessions conducted over 3 weekends. Precourse preparation, including readings and assignments, is required so that class time can be devoted to exercises and discussions. Projects or papers are due several weeks after the last class session. The compressed format works well for content-oriented classes in which the prolonged class meetings facilitate topic immersion. The 3-weekend format is too demanding, however, for the statistics and research methodology classes, which instead are spread over 6 weeks.

At GWU's Organizational Sciences Department, the strategy has been to offer a variety of course calendars and schedules to accommodate different student needs. There is a traditional "open enrollment" master's program where students take two evening classes per semester, finishing the degree in about 2½ years. There is also an accelerated master's program for Air Force and Navy officers in which students complete the program in 16 months. GWU also offers a program for experienced working professionals in which compressed, 8-week semesters enable students to complete the program in just under 11 months. The doctoral program is a traditional 5–6 year program with a traditional research focus but augmented with applied internship experiences.

At UNO, because of the relatively small number of students, scheduling issues are addressed on a case-by-case basis. Night courses are offered and when a specific student needs a class offered during a specific time frame, faculty try to be accommodating or allow for a class substitution.

*Applied program focus.* Nontraditional programs tend to have a substantial practical application component. Especially for adult learners, learning is most effective if students are actively engaged in the process and if the course's concepts relate to students' lives and work experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In many courses of the ODYN program, a team-based learning approach (Michaelson, Bauman Knight, & Fink, 2004) is employed. Faculty capitalize on students' experiences by designing stimulating and effective learning situations that allow for benchmarking and contribute real-life examples from the business community. In these exercises, students learn from each other, their experiences, or their study of relevant materials rather than from traditional lecture methods (Fink, 2003). At UNO, the applied focus for the terminal master's program is further demonstrated with a required internship.

*Student integration and cohesion.* Our experiences show that students in nontraditional programs like organizational dynamics and the organizational sciences military cohorts can be very cohesive. Students develop communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) and are proud to be alumni of the programs. Even though nontraditional students spend less time together and have more work and family obligations compared to traditional students, their shared experiences are intense, and they develop relationships that extend beyond the program, including hiring and giving professional advice to each other.

*Integration of programs.* At GWU, the OSC department was formed by the merger of an undergraduate major, a program offering several different mas-

ter's degrees, and the I-O psychology program, which left the Psychology Department to join the newly formed department. As this merger was just formalized earlier this year, the faculty is currently working on integrating programs and curricula across the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral level. In addition, the department is starting to offer combined master's and doctoral sections. These combined courses were developed to prepare master's students who later may pursue doctoral study and to capitalize on faculty expertise across programs.

At UNO, full-time students from both the PhD and terminal master's program take the same courses during the first year. Having common courses allows for better integration of the two programs. In addition, because the first 18 hours of the two programs are identical, students sometimes request to switch programs. Integration is also created by an I-O student organization that sponsors monthly get-togethers that support assimilation between programs and between generations of students.

One of the motivating factors for starting the Organizational Dynamics program at OU in Tulsa was to provide new research opportunities for students at OU's main campus in Norman. The distance between the two campuses and differences in curriculum, however, have hindered integration of the programs and the students so far.

### ***Program Evolution***

Programs evolve with time and adapt to students, faculty needs, and changes in external environments. The programs described in this paper have changed substantially since their inception. For instance, the I-O Psychology program at UNO has existed for over 30 years. Originally designed to attract working adults from the Omaha area, it has evolved into a more traditional program. Currently, the program at UNO has about 35 students, representing a combination of both full-time and part-time students, and returning adult learners. The unique blending is very challenging and presents some unique difficulties and opportunities.

Existing since April 2003, the Organizational Dynamics program recently admitted its first two full-time students out of the need for program faculty research support. Located on a satellite campus, the program did not have adequate research resources to meet faculty needs whose research productivity requirements for tenure are similar to those of traditional programs. Due to their full-time employment and lessened research requirements, the non-traditional students are less motivated to become involved in faculty research.

The I-O Psychology PhD program in the OSC Department at George Washington has been around for more than 60 years, being one of the oldest in the country. The Organizational Sciences master's program has a 20-plus year history. Bringing these programs together under a new, interdisciplinary departmental umbrella has proceeded relatively smoothly, thanks to the



shared research interests and existing relationships among the faculty. The result is a doctoral program that is benefiting from an infusion of interdisciplinary talent and focus while maintaining its psychology roots, and a master's program that is gaining additional research emphasis, academic orientation, and courses that it would not have been able to offer by itself.

### ***Program Evaluation***

All the programs described in this article follow the *SIOP Guidelines of Education and Training at the Master's Level in Industrial-Organizational Psychology* (<http://www.siop.org/guidelines.htm>). Despite the difficulties in assessing the success of academic programs, efforts should be made to find empirical evidence for positive learning effects. For example, the ODYN program, with its focus on developing students' leadership skills, plans to assess these skills with a standardized instrument (Leadership & Management Assessment System: LAMAS; Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000) on an annual basis. Collecting these data would add empirical and more objective evidence in addition to the more anecdotal and rather unsystematical gathering of positive effects such as promotions, changing jobs, or pursuing new careers. Exchanging and comparing these objective data with other programs would also allow comparing the effects between traditional and nontraditional programs.

### **Summary**

In this column, we identified characteristics of and solutions implemented in different nontraditional programs. The demand for these programs will continue to grow due to increasing competitive pressures on employees and the trend for lifelong learning. Nontraditional programs provide unique opportunities both for the faculty and for the students. Continued experimentation with mechanisms that best integrate nontraditional and traditional programs, as well as develop the students and faculty involved, is essential to their continued success.

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