Documenting Departmental Performance in Family Science

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ABSTRACT. Programs in family science have typically been housed in interdisciplinary departments combining the study of family relationships and the study of human development. While this model fits well with the academic and applied goals of the field, it makes these programs less easy to categorize than those that follow more traditional disciplinary lines. For individuals looking to document departmental performance, then, what sources of data are available? This paper will review the sources available for documenting performance and success in family science programs, with consideration given to their strengths and weaknesses as well as to how well family science as a discipline is represented in them.

Keywords: departmental performance, national, family science

The past two decades have not been a particularly kind one for higher education. Increasing emphasis by a variety of constituents on assessing student learning, rapidly increasing tuition costs, near draconian budget cuts in some systems, and an emphasis in some states on assessing faculty productivity have brought colleges and universities under a degree of scrutiny not often seen in recent times (Leveille, 2005). Given this scrutiny, there is a need for departments to be able to provide objective data that clearly establish their standing in the broader context of their field. Being able to document departmental performance in a number of areas—e.g., quality of research programs, graduation rate, employment rate, etc.—may be critical for resource allocation and, indeed, continued program survival.

This is as true for family science departments as for any other academic program—perhaps more so. From their early roots in home economics, family science programs have typically been housed in interdisciplinary departments combining the study of family relationships and the study of human development (see East & Thomson, 1984, for a history). While this model fits well with the academic and applied goals of the field, it makes these programs less easy to categorize than those that follow more traditional disciplinary lines. While there is a literature concerning documentation of departmental and faculty performance in family science, it is brief, limited, subjective,

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somewhat controversial, and dated (Adams, 1990a; Adams, 1990b; Adams, Huston, Braeger, & Goff, 1989; Burr, Schvaneveldt, J., Roleder, G., & Marshall, C., 1988; Meredith, 1990; Meredith & Abbott, 1988). For individuals looking to document individual and departmental performance, then, what sources of data are available? There are two sources of external data that are collected and/or available in a very broad fashion that can be used to evaluate departmental performance. The remainder of this paper will review these two sources, with consideration given to their strengths and weaknesses as well as to how well family science, as a discipline, is represented in them.

National Sources of Data for Departmental Evaluation

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

The first data source available is the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS. IPEDS collects data on institutions of higher education as a part of the National Center for Education Statistics, within the U.S. Department of Education. Data collected include institutional characteristics and prices, enrollment data (basic enrollment numbers as well as number and residence of first year students, ages, credit and contact hours), financial aid information, number of degree and certificate completions, first-year retention rates, graduation rates, as well as information on number and type of staff and institutional finances. The IPEDS data are collected yearly from all higher educational institutions that receive federal financial aid dollars and are an excellent, data-based source of information for parents and prospective students.

In IPEDS, information is provided based on CIP codes—Classification of Instructional Programs. These were developed by the National Center for Education Statistics as a taxonomy of major fields of study, with universities and colleges assigning programs to the relevant code (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Since 2000, CIP codes for family science and related programs have been listed under area 19, Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences, and include the following:

19.07: Human Development, Family Studies, and Related Services.
19.0701: Human Development and Family Studies, General.
19.0702: Adult Development and Aging.
19.0704: Family Systems.
19.0706: Child Development.
19.0707: Family and Community Services.
19.0708: Child Care and Support Services Management.
19.0709: Child Care Provider/Assistant.
19.0710: Developmental Services Worker.
19.0799: Human Development, Family Studies, and Related Services, Other.

While the majority of the IPEDS data are collected at the institutional level, there is a subset of information available at the level of the academic major, specifically completions/degrees awarded each year overall as well as by gender and by race/ethnicity.

These data can be broken down across the three broad levels of universities utilized in the Carnegie classification: Baccalaureate, Masters, and Doctorate-Granting. Understanding the average number of degrees awarded per year by departments at similar universities, as well as the variation in that number, allows departments to understand how their student numbers fit into the broader, national figure. The number of codes in the family science area provide a good deal of discrimination among degree programs, giving the opportunity to finely tune searches to the actual degrees offered by programs. In addition, the availability of data since the 2000 CIP code revision allows for the careful examination of trends across a period of time long enough to make meaningful statements about enrollment trends.

The IPEDS data are presented without context, however. To understand program completions, the data need to be accompanied by more detailed departmental information: How many faculty are in the program? Is the program located in a division, a department, or a school? Is family science the only academic major offered, or are there more? How many students, in total, are enrolled in the major? How many of the students who completed the program did so in four years? In five? What is the retention rate of students in these departments? Data on variables such as these would give much more meaning to the completion numbers presented in the IPEDS database, and would likely be far more informative to departmental administrators. Unfortunately, at this time there is no national database that provides such information.

The National Research Council

The second national source of external data is the assessment carried out by the National Research Council (NRC). The NRC assessment, released in 2010, represents seven years of work to design and implement a data-based assessment of research-based doctoral programs. Participation in the study was voluntary, and limited to academic fields that had produced at least five hundred Ph.D.s over the previous five years and for which at least twenty-five other doctoral programs existed for comparison purposes, and individual programs that had produced five or more Ph.D.s in the five years prior to data collection.

Data were collected on twenty variables, with evaluations based on fourteen of them grouped into three areas: "Research Activity" (publications per faculty member, citations per publication, percent of faculty with grants, number of awards per faculty member), "Student Support and Outcomes" (percent of first year graduate students with full support, percent completing the degree within six years, time to degree of full-and part-time students, percent of students in academic positions, and whether or not the program collects outcome data), and "Diversity of the Academic Environment" (Percent of non-Asian minority faculty and students, percent of female faculty and students, and percent of international students).

These data were used to calculate rankings in each area, as well as two overall rankings, one based on faculty ratings of important program characteristics and one based on faculty ratings of representative programs. In addition, data were collected but not used in producing rankings on a variety of other variables, among them: number of

faculty, number of assistant professors, number of tenured faculty, number of students enrolled, average annual first year enrollment, percent of students with a variety of funding types, and a number of student activities offered by the department, college, or university.

The NRC database does not have a category for "family science" or "human development and family science" programs. There are, however, twelve family science doctoral programs listed. Of those twelve, five are listed in the database with Psychology programs: Auburn University, University of Texas at Austin, University of Georgia, University of Maryland at College Park, and Pennsylvania State University. The other seven programs are listed with Sociology Programs: Iowa State University, University of Connecticut, University of Delaware, University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, Utah State University, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (where programs are listed in the NRC is an institutional decision). The National Council on Family Relations database shows fifty-three departments offering doctoral degrees in family science/studies, with forty-one of them housed in family science, human development and family science or similar departments. The programs represented in the NRC data, then, represent 29% of the forty-one programs listed by the NCFR.

For family science programs, using the NRC data is problematic. Comparisons with psychology or sociology programs are complicated. Three different disciplines—with different sub-disciplines, potentially different research traditions, types of students, access to resources, academic goals, and often housed in different colleges depending on campus—makes for an apples to oranges comparison. Combining family science with either psychology or sociology ignores the fact that family science departments, in addition to having a rich intellectual history apart from these other disciplines, also has a strong tradition of application that may not be as typically found in many of the traditional social science disciplines (Ganong, Coleman, & Demo, 1995). Finally, the NRC report was clearly designed to be an evaluation of output in research-oriented doctoral programs, with an emphasis on variables that could be easily quantified and excluding more process-oriented variables. While this is certainly understandable, it produces a data set that is much like the IPEDS dataset in that it ignores many important outcomes that matter to departments in the "real world" of academia.

Recommendations

Both of these sources provide important and informative data that departments can use to document productivity in the face of ever increasing demands from parents, administrators, and legislatures. Yet both fall short of providing a comprehensive evaluation of departmental productivity. How might this situation be remedied?

First, chairs of family science departments and their deans should consider lobbying for inclusion of these programs as a separate category in the NRC database. Based on the inclusion criteria for academic fields—i.e., graduated at least 500 degrees in the last five years, with programs in at least twenty-five universities producing at least three Ph.D.s in the last three years—as well as the long and rich history of the field,

family science qualifies for its own category in the taxonomy. Only the creation of such a category will allow for an accurate documentation of departmental performance in the field, as it is assessed by the NRC.

While some departments might consider petitioning their university for inclusion under either the sociology of psychology taxonomies for NRC reporting, such a step should be taken with caution. While the inclusion of more family science programs could be helpful in that their data could be extracted to provide a "pure" family science database, independent of psychology and sociology programs, such inclusion could also serve to weaken the perception of family science as a separate field and lead to the kind of apples and oranges comparison mentioned earlier—comparisons that family science might benefit from, but that also might be detrimental.

A better option might be for the National Council on Family Relations to take a "clearinghouse" role, soliciting, compiling, and storing NRC-type data from family science programs on a yearly basis and making it available to those universities participating in the NCFR program. This would potentially provide a "cleaner" accounting of performance in family science programs, and would be appropriate given the organization's prominent role in the field. It would also allow for the expansion of data collected beyond the narrow confines of that defined by both the IPEDS and the NRC. It could include the kinds of contextual and outcome data that truly capture the productivity and impact of family science programs -- on the field, on our students, and on our communities. While some of these data are likely to be program specific a number are likely to be of broader interest. For example, the following areas may have wider relevance: the assessment of crucial family science content learned in our classes; various opportunities for service learning; public service provided by our faculty; integration and contributions of our graduates in their professions; the number of our majors employed in and outside the family field; the number of students who struggle to find employment; the number of students who apply to graduate school, and the type of programs to which they apply, their acceptance rate, and their completion rate.

In summary, documenting performance in academic programs has become increasingly important to a variety of constituents. While there are sources of national data available, they are limited in scope and in their usefulness. Family science departments should carefully consider how these sources might be used, as well as investigate the possibility of a partnership with the NCFR that would result in more applicable data for future use.

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