

# PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL PROGRAM ADVANCES IN NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL RANKINGS

Good standing in national rankings of graduate programs communicates much about the health of an academic program. Few rankings carry as much weight or confer as much prestige as those produced by the National Research Council. So the NRC rankings that were released last fall—the first since 1995—were met with great anticipation, particularly by the College's Department of Psychology.

Twelve programs at The University of Alabama were included in the rankings which looked at data from 5,000 doctoral programs in 62 fields at 221 institutions. Of UA's 12 ranked programs, the Department of Psychology's doctoral program came away as UA's "most improved." That program jumped from a 1995 third quartile position to a high second quartile ranking, in the 72 percentile.

According to Dr. Joe Benson, vice president of research at UA, the rankings reflect what people on campus already know – the programs here are, indeed, always improving. The rankings show a snapshot of the 2005-2006 school year, and Benson is certain the programs ranked are doing even better today than they were then. "The increase for us has been more dramatic than other institutions," he said.

The College's Departments of Chemistry and Physics and Astronomy's doctoral programs again claimed enviable positions in the first and mid-second quartile with rankings in the 76th and 68th percentile, respectively.

For the rankings, the NRC measured 20 qualities in three dimensions: faculty research activity, student support and outcomes, and diversity of the academic environment. All 12 of the UA programs were listed in the top quartile in student support and outcomes. But a result which had faculty smiling was five UA programs—mass communication, chemistry, mechanical engineering, physics and psychology—ranked among the top 25 to 40 percent in all three measures.

The College's chemistry program ranked highly in the 86th percentile for research activity, the 93rd percentile for student outcomes and in the 60th percentile for diversity of academic environment. The physics program also did well, ranking in the 56th percentile for research, 99th percentile for student support, and 83rd percentile for diversity. On all three measures, psychology stayed impressively in the top 30 percent of

all institutions with a 70th percentile position for research, 91st percentile for student support, and 84th percentile for diversity.

One of the most significant findings from the rankings for the Department of Psychology has to do with student support and outcomes. Factors included the program's financial support of students, the percentage of students who graduate from the program, and the percentage of students who graduate within six years.

According to Dr. Beverly Thorn, chair of the Department of Psychology, all students in the doctoral program are fully funded, which means that each one of its 30 highly-sought after slots a year is backed up with full financial support.

"We do hold a staunch value that we won't accept more students than we can provide support financially. The training is so individualized and intensive that I think it is important to do it this way," she said.

The program is so selective because it recruits on a mentorship basis. Students are evaluated for how they will fit into the program, not just their test scores.

Thorn knows the program is even stronger now. "We are head and shoulders above that, and that's not a feeling, we have objective data," she said.

Thorn and her colleagues have used the rankings to form a departmental strategic plan that includes increasing grant funding. The department implemented the first round in a series of grant proposal workshops. These give faculty a chance to have their grant reviewed by a committee of peers before it is submitted. Due to recent changes in many granting agencies, faculty members may only have two chances to submit a grant. The five-week workshop process is equivalent to what used to be a first submission to an agency, Thorn said. "It's very important for faculty to put in the absolute best grant proposal they can the first time around," she said.

Benson explained the rankings are more than just numbers. They have an impact on how a program continues to succeed. The higher ranked a particular program is, the easier it is to recruit both highly qualified students and highly qualified faculty and the more likely the program is to obtain external funding.

Not resting on recent laurels, Thorn divided the NRC ranked programs into two groups – peers (those ranked close to UA) and aspirational peers (those who ranked higher than UA). From this information, she was able to identify program characteristics that her faculty could modify to directly impact future success. Thorn said the preliminary comparisons and their implications are promising for the program's further progress in the NRC's next round of rankings. ●



A student is set up for an experiment in the the Department of Psychology's EEG lab, which measures a person's brain responses to certain stimuli.