



2011

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Recommended Citation

Wallace, Sherry, "Psychology Celebrates 50 Years" (2011). *News and Events*. Paper 1632.
<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1632>

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Psychology Celebrates 50 Years

Oct. 3, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The study of psychology has always had a place at Illinois Wesleyan.

On a shelf in the office of Interim Dean of Students Roger Schnaitter sat a small, black book bound by a spine cracked with age. Yellowing pages revealed the 1871 textbook, titled *Psychology, or The Science of Mind*, was written by the Rev. Oliver Munsell, second president of Illinois Wesleyan. “The teaching of psychology goes a long way into our history,” said Schnaitter. Like the science itself, psychology at IWU evolved over the last 162 years, only finding a permanent home on campus 50 years ago.



Psychology students gather for class in the basement of Stevenson Hall.

This year at **Homecoming**, the Psychology Department will honor those 50 years, and also pay tribute to a lost member of the faculty. On Saturday, Oct. 22, the Psychology Department will hold a 50th anniversary reception at 4:30 p.m. in the lobby of the Center for Natural Science Learning and Research (201 E. Beecher St., Bloomington). The event will also include a tribute to Professor of Psychology Jim Dougan, who died unexpectedly last year.

Early days

Known as the “the relation between the brain and the mind,” psychology was first taught at Illinois Wesleyan as an extension of philosophy or “metaphysics,” which meant exploring the nature of the world and humanity. The duty of teaching the sole psychology course generally went to the president of the University.



Illinois Wesleyan's first chair of the Psychology Department Roger Ulrich.

“Psychology was considered an extension of philosophy and religion in the early days at IWU,” said Schnaitter. The president’s class drifted between the religion and philosophy departments for several decades. By the early 1900s, the study of child development was taking hold, and for the first time psychology was taught by a non-president — J.C. Zeller, a professor of philosophy and sociology. The solitary psychology course weaved its way into the expanded department known as Philosophy, Education and Religion. By 1950, more psychology classes made their way into the curriculum, but still helmed by only one professor housed in the new Philosophy and Psychology Department. And there the classes remained until 1961.

It is a science

Where a psychology department is housed varies across college campuses, said current Psychology Department Chair Joe Williams. “In some universities, psychology is housed in the social sciences. In others, it is placed in the longer-established sciences with biology, chemistry and physics.”

From the very beginning, Illinois Wesleyan’s department was aligned firmly in the field of science. “We feel our methodology fits in with the natural sciences, focusing on the principles of scientific research design,” said Williams, who teaches courses

in neuroscience. That belief stems directly from the founding members of the Psychology Department and its first chair, Roger Ulrich.

“Ulrich was a Skinnerian,” said Schnaitter, referring to the work of B.F. Skinner, a famed behavioral psychologist. “He believed psychology is the science of the behavior of organisms. It wasn’t about psychotherapy with people lying on a couch and talking about neuroses and dreams. So, he thought the only place that modern psychology can rightfully be placed is in the natural sciences.”

Housed with a lab and classrooms in the basement of Stevenson Hall, Ulrich and two other faculty members – professors Thomas Stachnik and John Mabry – led students in a quest for the science of the mind beginning in 1961. “A lot of those early classes were taking ideas from the rat lab and applying them to the human condition,” said Schnaitter, who at the time was studying psychology at the University of Minnesota. Ulrich, Stachnik and Mabry were prolific scholars, even publishing the textbook Schnaitter used in one of his graduate psychology courses. “For Ulrich, the idea that psychology is a science was infused to the very core of the department,” said Schnaitter.



Students study rat behavior for psychology class.

Branching out

Schnaitter came to Illinois Wesleyan in 1969. By that time, all three of the original members of the Psychology Department had left for other schools, but the concept of Skinnerianism prevailed, he said. “The roots set by Ulrich and his behaviorist colleagues ran very deep, and the curriculum in psychology was all behavior analysis,” he said. “It was not your typical psychology program with theories of personality, abnormal psychology and counseling psych – none of those things were taught here.”

That slowly began to change when Schnaitter assumed the chairmanship in 1972. As professors moved on, he began to hire those who studied a broader field of psychology, including clinical psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology and physiological psychology in the form of neuroscience. The greater the variety of classes offered, the more students the department gained. By the late 1970s, there were three faculty members teaching 35 to 40 students majoring in psychology. Today the department has seven tenure-line faculty members and two full-time visiting professors who teach around 170 students with psychology majors. “The department is a very broad-based program with virtually every subset of psychology represented. Students can develop a program that takes them in distinctly different directions,” said Schnaitter.

The Legacy of Jim Dougan

Even with the evolution of the department, the connection to those early days remained through the lone behavioral psychologist, Jim Dougan. “In many ways, Jim carried the torch that was lit by Roger Ulrich,” said Schnaitter. “From 1990 until his death, he was our behaviorist, our rat-lab psychologist. And he had a charisma all his own.”



*The late Professor of Psychology
Jim Dougan*

Nicknamed “the Hippie Professor” Dougan was known for his upfront personality, his love of politics, music and behavioral psychology. Dougan’s sudden death last year shocked the campus. Students made tie-dye shirts with “Hippie Professor” emblazoned on the front in his honor.

With Dougan’s passing, some felt severed from the roots Ulrich created. “When we lost Dr. Dougan, we lost a great link to the history and tradition of the department,” said Williams. Schnaitter urges the Illinois Wesleyan community to understand that those roots remain. “One of the things that has carried through from those Ulrich days is psychology as a science, the idea that students should be pursuing research,” he said. “That idea is still strong.”

According to Williams, no matter the winding path taken by the evolution of psychology, those who pursue the field hope to find the same thing – an awareness of what connects us all. “Psychology touches upon all aspects of the human experience,” he said. “It’s something to which everyone can relate – the desire to understand our own behaviors and the behavior of those around us.”

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