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Article Summary: The University of Nebraska produced numerous prominent psychologists, despite being a state whose population statistics should not merit such a number. This article presents the story of the growth of the Psychology Department between 1889 and 1930.

Cataloging Information:


Photographs / Images: University of Nebraska Professor Harry Kirk Wolfe, studying under William Wundt, portrait and Wundt’s laboratory in Leipzig, Germany, about 1912; the psychology laboratory located in Library Hall, built 1892 [now the College of Architecture; Hartley Burr Alexander; An instructor demonstrating the ergograph, a device for measuring muscular contraction; Appendix containing short biographies of 11 prominent Nebraska psychologists
PSYCHOLOGY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, 1889–1930

By LUDY T. BENJAMIN, JR.

On April 7, 1891, Professor Harry Kirke Wolfe sent a letter to the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska requesting the establishment of a Department of Psychology independent of the Department of Philosophy. Approximately a half century later that request finally became a reality when in 1940 the regents announced Professor Arthur Jenness as chairman of the newly formed psychology department. It might naturally be assumed that the history of psychology at a university would begin with the establishment of the academic department, but in the case of the University of Nebraska such an assumption would be wrong.

Harry Kirke Wolfe graduated with an A.B. degree from the University of Nebraska in 1880, when the university was only eleven years old. One year earlier and thousands of miles away at the University of Leipzig in Germany, Professor Wilhelm Wundt had founded a laboratory in experimental psychology. (Most psychologists today recognize Wundt’s laboratory as the formal beginning of experimental psychology.) Wolfe traveled to Germany in 1883 where three years later he and James McKeen Cattell became the first two Americans to earn their Ph.D. degrees in the “new psychology.”

In 1889 Wolfe joined the faculty at Nebraska as lecturer in philosophy. In addition to the more traditional philosophy courses, Wolfe taught general psychology, pedagogical psychology, and a course in experimental psychology with laboratory experience. This latter course marked the beginning of a psychology laboratory at Nebraska, one of the earliest in the
United States. Psychologists C. A. Ruckmick and Cattell listed it as the sixth psychology lab in this country, and C. R. Garvey placed it eighth on his list. Some sources have indicated that Nebraska's was the first experimental psychology laboratory exclusively for undergraduate students in this country and perhaps in the entire world.

While Wolfe was convinced of the importance of laboratory experience for his students, he had little success in convincing the administration. In May of 1890, Wolfe submitted to Chancellor Charles E. Bessey a summary report of activities of the philosophy department for the academic year 1889-1890. In his report he listed the equipment and library sources on hand (much of which was his own) and outlined needs for the following year:

Attention may be called to the fact that this department has received no "Equipment fund."... The work of this Dept. ought to be chiefly scientific, but lack of equipment has compelled me to make it largely literary. - I hope the scientific nature of this dept. may be recognized in the next apportionment of funds.

Professor Wolfe continued to press for equipment needs as well as library materials in psychology in his department report for the year 1890-1891:

The scientific nature of Psychology is not so generally recognized; hence I feel justified in calling attention to two points. First, the advantages offered by experimental Psychology, as a discipline in scientific methods, are not inferior to those offered by other experimental sciences. The measurement of the Quality, Quantity, and Time Relations of mental states is as inspiring and as good discipline as the determination of, say the per cent of sugar in a beet or the variation of an electric current. The exact determination of mental processes ought to be as good mental discipline as the exact determination of processes taking place in matter. Second, the study of mind is the most universally applied of all sciences. Because we learn so much about it from everyday experience is the reason, perhaps, that it only recently has become an "exact" science.

In spite of his continued requests and protests the department continued to be ignored, particularly at budget time, which seemed only to increase Wolfe's commitment. He donated most of his professional journals to the university library and influenced several other individuals connected with state education to do likewise. In addition, he persuaded one of the regents to allow him to use $80 of the department library fund to transform a basement room of University Hall into a laboratory. Much of the laboratory apparatus was built by Wolfe and his students, and some of the necessary equipment was bor-
University of Nebraska
Professor Harry Kirk Wolfe (right, below) studied under eminent
psychologist William Wundt (third from left, above) in his laboratory
in Leipzig, Germany, about 1912.
rowing from the biology and physics departments. The remaining equipment and supplies were purchased with department funds and in some cases with Wolfe's own money. In 1896, informed that his departmental account was $75.86 overdrawn, he replied to the chancellor and the Board of Regents:

I do not consider these expenses as a "deficit" even in the technical use of the term. I am personally responsible for them and if the University doesn't wish to buy the articles from me when it is able to do so I shall preserve the remains as "heirlooms" in my family treasure house, and the record thereof in the archives of the tribe. As long as I work thirty five hours (35) per week with my students I shall provide any needed inexpensive article for my work without reference to the condition of my departmental fund. 7

Thus through whatever means were available, Wolfe kept the psychology program and the accompanying laboratory going. In 1891 nineteen students were enrolled and by 1893 the number had increased to seventy-three. Principally this was due to Wolfe's popularity. As a teacher he was demanding, and his classes had a reputation of being "notoriously difficult," yet students flocked to his courses. 8 Hartley B. Alexander, one of his students who was to become chairman of the philosophy department at Nebraska, described Wolfe as a teacher:

There are few qualities which a teacher should possess which he did not own in exalted measure: keeness and kindness, unfailling humor and patience and generosity of soul, and the power to inspire, all these were his; and he was loved by those under his influence as few men are loved. 9

Another of his students, Walter B. Pillsbury, wrote:

He was an indefatigable worker, but gave so many courses and spent so much energy on them that he had no time for publication. Wolfe's influence was exerted personally as well as in the classroom. He was always available for conversation, as he usually sat in the room where the reference works were. . . . His viewpoint in psychology was liberal. He was more anxious that his students should think than that they should hold any particular point of view. He was a firm believer in experimentation, and made a session a week a requirement for each student in the elementary course. 10

But in the spring of 1897, Wolfe's position at Nebraska came to a sudden end. The Board of Regents informed him that he was being discharged because of "intermeddling," non-cooperation with other faculty, and "general charges." Unable to discover the basis for the charges, Wolfe found it difficult to defend himself. When word of his dismissal spread, students circulated petitions calling for his retention. A mass meeting in the chapel at night resulted in an overflow crowd which spent much of its time jeering the chancellor. 11 All was to no avail as Wolfe was forced to leave. Although he had numerous offers from other
universities, he elected to remain in Nebraska for five years as superintendent of the South Omaha public school system and for three years as principal of Lincoln High School.

Wolfe's replacement at the University of Nebraska was Albert Ross Hill, a Canadian, who had received his Ph.D. at Cornell in 1895. Although trained in philosophy, Hill was also interested in psychology and added two new courses to the curriculum—social psychology and mental pathology. While not as committed to the experimental side of psychology as Wolfe had been, he nevertheless continued the existence of the psychology laboratory. Three years later Hill was joined by Thaddeus Lincoln Bolton, who had studied under G. Stanley Hall at Clark University (Hall founded the American Psychological Association and the American Journal of Psychology, the first psychological journal published in this country).\(^{12}\) Bolton taught most of the psychology courses while Hill taught philosophy and social psychology. In addition, Bolton added two courses, one in animal psychology, the other in child psychology.

In 1904 the department underwent important changes when Hill left to take a position at the University of Missouri.\(^{13}\) He was replaced by Ferdinand C. French, a philosophy-psychology professor from Colgate. A few years earlier French had published a reply in Psychological Review to an article by Wolfe which had stressed the benefits of a psychology laboratory at the undergraduate level.\(^{14}\) French argued that as a discipline psychology was not well enough established to be offered to undergraduates as a laboratory science. He felt that these students would be investing a great deal of time in techniques that were of questionable value. In short he felt it would detract from the liberal education which college students should pursue.\(^{15}\)

While French continued Hill's assignments, Bolton maintained the psychology portion of the curriculum. That same year his title was changed from assistant professor of philosophy to professor of psychology, marking the first time the word "psychology" appeared in any faculty member's official title at Nebraska. When Bolton first arrived at Nebraska, the philosophy department was in Library Hall,\(^{16}\) a building that department had occupied since 1896, two years after its construction. No portion of the building had been designed with
psychology in mind, and facilities for psychological research were for the most part unsuitable. In 1904 this problem appeared to be solved. A new physics building was to be constructed and seven rooms were to be assigned to psychology for lecture and laboratory. An article which appeared in *Science* told of new facilities at twelve universities and included the following description proposed for Nebraska: “The department is to have seven rooms, 2,400 feet of floor space, on the upper floor of the new physics building, now being constructed. At present it has four rooms.”

In December of 1904, Bolton sent a letter to the building committee of the Board of Regents outlining special needs of the department such as a small sink and hood in one room, “supplied with all the various forms of gas available in the building as well as with compressed air.” One room was to have a specially finished wall which would be used for “special experiments upon color vision and the eye’s movements.” Two months later, however, the Board of Regents met and reassigned the “psychology rooms” to the physics department. They agreed to establish the laboratory in the basement of the new administration building. Bolton protested vehemently, stating that the proposed facilities in the administration building would be less suitable than the present conditions in Library Hall. The board accepted Bolton’s arguments, and the psychology lab remained in Library Hall for the next fifteen years.

In 1906 the university’s new chancellor, Benjamin Andrews, asked Wolfe to return to the university, although with French and Bolton in the philosophy department there was no place for him. Consequently Wolfe was offered a position in the education department as professor of educational psychology. Three years later when Bolton left for the University of Montana, Wolfe was made professor of philosophy and department chairman. French resigned his position in 1910 to return to Colgate. He was replaced by Hartley B. Alexander who had received his Ph.D. degree in philosophy from Columbia in 1901. Alexander was born in Lincoln, earned his A.B. degree from Nebraska in 1897, and as an undergraduate had been a laboratory assistant for Wolfe. Although not a psychologist, he did teach several courses in that area of the department.

In 1911 as enrollment in the university and in the psychology
The psychology laboratory was located in Library Hall (built 1892) on the Nebraska U. campus. Today the building houses the College of Architecture. In 1975 the structure was entered in the National Register of Historic Places. (Inset) Hartley Burr Alexander, chairman of the psychology-philosophy department, 1918-1927. . . (Below) An instructor demonstrating the ergograph, a device for measuring muscular contraction. (Courtesy, Archives of the History of American Psychology)
classes increased, psychologist Winifred Hyde was added to the faculty. She was a 1900 graduate of Nebraska and had taken her doctorate at Jena University in Germany, the first woman to receive a Ph.D. from that institution. She and Wolfe taught the psychology courses while Alexander and E. L. Hinman were responsible for the traditional philosophy courses. Wolfe's last year at the university had been a stormy one during which he and several other professors were accused of being disloyal to the United States, then at war with Germany. Although he was vindicated in the hearings which took place in June of 1918, the ordeal apparently placed a great strain on him. A month later while on vacation in Wyoming he died of a heart attack.

Alexander was made professor of philosophy and chairman of the department. Winifred Hyde became the second professor of psychology in the school's history, and former alumnus Rufus C. Bentley was hired to carry some of the load in psychology. Like Alexander and Hyde, Bentley had been a laboratory assistant under Wolfe in his undergraduate days.

Hartley Alexander continued as departmental chairman until 1927 when he left to take a position in philosophy at the newly opened Scripps College in Claremont, California. He was an extremely popular professor among students as well as faculty. When news spread of his decision to leave Nebraska, the university administration was deluged with telegrams and letters urging that steps be taken to retain him.

As a student and a teacher Alexander had demonstrated excellence in diverse areas. While an undergraduate at Nebraska he was editor of the student newspaper and a frequent writer of poems, editorials, and other treatises which he submitted for publication elsewhere. As a student he had belonged to a somewhat radical and irreverent group called the "Club of Cranks." Alexander's specialty in the group was as expert crank on the "transmigration of souls." This group opposed compulsory drill, the wearing of academic regalia at commencement exercises, and the establishment of the Greek letter social fraternities on campus. They also opposed the beginning of the Phi Beta Kappa society on the grounds that it was an "aristocracy of the intellect."19

Alexander's publications were mostly in philosophy and included many books, monographs, and articles. In 1920 he was
elected president of the American Philosophical Association. Philosophy was not his only interest. He also published books of poetry, an opera, and several musicals, including one performed in 1916 called "The Gate City," a pageant of Lincoln, Nebraska. He became an authority on Nebraska Indians. In 1922 he supplied inscriptions and symbolism used for the soon-to-be-constructed Nebraska State Capitol. (Later he provided a similar service for the Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Building in Philadelphia, the Los Angeles Public Library, the Rockefeller Center in New York, the Oregon State Capitol, and the Century of Progress Exposition of Chicago.) During Alexander's chairmanship the Social Sciences Building was completed in 1920 and housed the philosophy department (and later the psychology department) until 1968. Apparently the building contained no special facilities for psychology. Had Wolfe or Bolton, or perhaps even Hyde, been chairman at the time the situation for experimental psychology might have been different.

Nevertheless psychology continued to grow. Hinman replaced Alexander as chairman in 1928, and in that same year Winifred Hyde resigned to be married. She was replaced by her former student J. P. Guilford, who received B.A. and M.A. degrees at Nebraska and a Ph.D. in psychology at Cornell. For the next twelve years he was the dominating force in psychology at the University of Nebraska, where he greatly modified the curriculum to reflect the contemporary state of psychology. He added courses in perception, learning and memory, attention and action, and psychometrics (an area of psychology which studies the measurement of psychological variables such as intelligence and personality). In the area of psychometrics, Guilford earned an international reputation and his *Psychometric Methods*, first published in 1936 and later revised, is still considered one of the most authoritative works in the field.

He would undoubtedly have been the first chairman of the psychology department when it was officially established in 1940 had he not chosen to take a position at the University of Southern California. The chairmanship went to Arthur Jenness, who had joined the faculty at Nebraska in 1931. Officially the psychology department with six full-time faculty members had begun. Unofficially it had begun fifty years earlier with Harry K. Wolfe.
As mentioned earlier, Wolfe’s efforts established the Nebraska psychology laboratory as one of the earliest in this country. That accomplishment alone would reserve a special place for Nebraska in the history of American psychology. Yet the real measure of any academic department is the quality and quantity of students it encourages to pursue excellence in its area of study. In that regard the University of Nebraska holds a unique place. For example, the University of Nebraska has had six undergraduates elected to the office of president of the American Psychological Association (APA). In all, a total of fifty-nine colleges and universities have contributed to the eighty-one men and women who have occupied that prestigious office. The only school that rivals Nebraska is the University of California with four APA presidents to its credit. Of the six APA presidents from Nebraska, three of them were Wolfe’s students, while the other three studied under Bolton, Hyde, and Guilford.

Nebraska contributed other prominent psychologists as well. In a 1921 study by Samuel Fernberger of 377 APA members, Nebraska was third on the list of institutions “where psychologists received their first inspiration for psychology.” In a later study of 616 APA members, Nebraska still ranked third. Based on the size of the university and the population of the state, Nebraska’s early contribution to the ranks of psychology far exceeded what would have been predicted. Eleven of the more prominent of these early psychologists from Nebraska are listed in the appendix to this article with a brief indication of their significance. All completed undergraduate work at the University of Nebraska prior to 1930 and are principally responsible for Nebraska’s outstanding contribution to the development of psychology.

Why were there so many prominent psychologists from a state whose population statistics should not merit such a number? There is no simple answer, however a major factor had to be the quality of instructors in psychology in those early years. In biographical material available on Wolfe, Bolton, Hyde, and Guilford they are all described as “inspirational teachers.” That inspiration was evidenced in the significant number of psychologists from the Nebraska laboratory who have contributed not only to the development of psychology but to the progress of humanity.
APPENDIX

Harry Kirke Wolfe (1858-1918), A.B., Nebraska, 1880 — Wolfe was born in Illinois but grew up on a farm near Lincoln, Nebraska. He was the first American to receive a doctorate at Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig. His psychology laboratory at Nebraska was one of the earliest in this country (perhaps the first undergraduate psychology lab in the world). He was one of the thirty-one charter members of the American Psychological Association and was influential in the establishment of the first psychology journal in this country, the American Journal of Psychology. He published numerous important articles in the field of educational psychology. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was the inordinate number of great students he influenced to pursue a career in psychology.

Walter B. Pillsbury (1872-1960), A.B., Nebraska, 1892 — Pillsbury received his Ph.D. degree from Cornell University in 1896. In 1910 he was elected president of the American Psychological Association. He served as a cooperating editor on the American Journal of Psychology for sixty-four years. Most of his professional career was spent at the University of Michigan as director of the psychology laboratory and chairman of the department from 1929 until his retirement in 1942. He was the first American to publish a textbook on the history of psychology. In 1933 he received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of Nebraska.

Madison Bentley (1870-1955), B.A., Nebraska, 1895 — Bentley, born in Clinton, Iowa, was reared on a farm in Butler County, Nebraska. He earned his Ph.D. degree from Cornell University in 1899 and spent most of his academic years at Cornell and the University of Illinois. In 1925 he was elected president of the American Psychological Association. He was cooperating editor of the American Journal of Psychology for twenty-three years and co-editor for another twenty-four years. A prolific writer, he published over 170 articles. In 1935 he received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of Nebraska.

Frederick Kuhlman (1876-1941), B.A., Nebraska, 1899 — Kuhlmann was born in Davenport, Iowa, and after graduation from Nebraska earned his doctorate from Clark University. He was an outstanding researcher in mental retardation, publishing numerous articles in that area. He was one of the pioneers in the United States in measurement of intelligence. For the last twenty years of his life he was director of the Department of Public Institutions for Minnesota.

Harry Levi Hollingworth (1880-1956), B.A., Nebraska, 1906 — Hollingworth was born in Dewitt, Nebraska. After earning his Ph.D. degree from Columbia in 1909, he spent the rest of his life in the psychology department at Barnard College. In 1927 he was elected president of the APA. He published twenty-five books and over 100 articles, principally in the area of applied psychology. He received an honorary LL.D. degree from Nebraska in 1937. The present psychology laboratory at Barnard College is named after him.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886-1939), B.A., Nebraska, 1906 — Leta Stetter was born on a farm in Dawes County, Nebraska, near Chadron. She married Harry Hollingworth shortly after their graduation from Nebraska. After receiving her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1916 she continued on the faculty of Columbia Teachers College as professor of education and psychology until her death. Her publications were many, numbering more than 100. Most dealt with the psychology and education of highly intelligent and gifted children on whom she was a recognized national authority. Both she and her husband received honorary LL.D. degrees from Nebraska.

Edwin Ray Guthrie (1886-1959), B.A., Nebraska, 1907 — Guthrie, born in Lincoln, Nebraska, was a student at Lincoln High School when Wolfe was principal. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1912. His entire academic
career was spent at the University of Washington, first in the philosophy department, then in the psychology department, and finally as dean of the graduate school. He was a major theoretician in the area of learning and the leading proponent for the role of contiguity in learning. In 1945 he received two honors, being elected president of APA and receiving an honorary LL.D. from the University of Nebraska. Just one year before his death, he received the highest honor which the American Psychological Association can bestow, its Gold Medal Award.

Frederick H. Lund (1894-1965), B.A., Nebraska, 1921 — Lund received his doctorate from Columbia in 1925 after studying under the famous physiologist/psychologist, Walter B. Cannon. For twenty-nine years he was professor of psychology and head of the department at Temple University. He published many articles, most of which dealt with emotion. His reputation was greatest among educators, since he devoted much of his research to emotional adjustment problems in the classroom.

Joy P. Guilford (1897— ), B.A., Nebraska, 1922 — Guilford was born in Marquette, Nebraska, and completed both his B.A. and M.A. degrees in psychology at Nebraska. He earned the Ph.D. degree from Cornell University in 1927 after which he returned to Nebraska as a faculty member. In 1950 he was elected president of the APA. He has published more than twenty books and over 230 scientific articles, usually concerning intelligence and personality. He is the author of a major temperament scale and a three-dimensional model for the structure of intelligence. In addition he is considered a pioneer in the field of research on creativity. The University of Nebraska awarded him an honorary LL.D. in 1952, and in 1964 the APA presented him with its Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award.

Arthur T. Jersild (1902— ), B.A., Nebraska, 1924 — Jersild earned his doctorate from Columbia University in 1927. He is a prolific writer in the field of adolescence and is the author of a major text in that area. Of all his research efforts, his best known are the classic studies on childhood fears. Since 1930 he has been on the faculty at Columbia University. In 1962, he received an honorary LL.D. from the University of Nebraska.

Joseph McVicker Hunt (1906— ), B.A., Nebraska, 1929 — Hunt was born in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. After receiving his first two degrees at Nebraska, he went to Cornell University where he received his Ph.D. in 1933. In 1952 he became the sixth Nebraska graduate to be elected president of the American Psychological Association. He is author of many publications including two works of truly major significance—a two-volume work entitled Personality and the Behavior Disorders and Intelligence and Experience, published in 1961. The research described in the latter was a major impetus to the birth of intervention programs such as Project Head Start for children from environmentally disadvantaged areas. In 1967 he received an honorary doctor of science degree from the University of Nebraska.

NOTES

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1. Board of Regents papers, University of Nebraska Archives.
2. University of Nebraska Catalog, 1889.


5. Board of Regents papers, University of Nebraska Archives.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


11. Board of Regents papers; 1897 issue of the *Hesperian*, NU student publication, University of Nebraska Archives.

12. Wolfe was a charter member of the American Psychological Association when it was founded in 1892 and one of the individuals associated with the beginning of the *American Journal of Psychology*.

13. In 1908 Hill became president of the University of Missouri, a position he held until 1921. In 1934 he ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Kansas City, Missouri.


16. This building is still standing on the Nebraska campus although it is now known as Architecture Hall.


18. Chancellor’s papers, University of Nebraska Archives.


21. This building is still in use, although it is now known as the College of Business Administration building.

22. In addition to Jenness, the others were Donald Dysinger, William E. Walton, Wilbur S. Gregory, Roger W. Russell, and Charles M. Harsh.
