

Response to the Report of the

Department of Statistics Program Review

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We fully agree with the review committee's assessment of our Department, in particular with the sense of urgency expressed in the executive summary:

It is a source of enormous concern to the review committee, therefore, that the current situation of the Department of Statistics is precarious. Extreme opportunity is coupled with extreme vulnerability. Among the key issues that concern the review committee are faculty retention, space, and critical mass....

Unfortunately there is new evidence that the review committee's "enormous concern" is entirely justified: The department has just lost its only Associate Professor, David Madigan, to AT&T Research. Madigan was an outstanding faculty member, winner of a University Distinguished Teaching Award, a productive and versatile researcher with high visibility and research collaborations all over campus, and a major contributor to the department and the university. His salary, however, was nowhere near his market value. In the process of shopping for an outside offer – apparently the only realistic way to remedy the situation - he became keenly aware that there were excellent employment options for him outside the University of Washington, positions that would carry less administrative burden, leave more time for research, would be less stressful, and much better compensated. After the university successfully countered an offer from Bell Communications Research last June, Madigan finally succumbed to an even better offer from AT&T Research. He leaves a huge gap.

The Madigan episode confirms the review committee's assessment that **the status quo is not sustainable:**

Extreme opportunity is coupled with extreme vulnerability, yielding two possible futures: the bright future, in which the University of Washington makes relatively modest additional investments in the Department of Statistics and is able to capitalize on the department's outstanding accomplishments and to utilize its collaborative culture to strengthen and transform a wide variety of important disciplines, and the dark future, in which the momentum of the university's past investments and the department's past accomplishments is lost, and we fail to seize the opportunities for leadership with which we are presented,

We can only hope that the University will follow through on the main recommendations of the report, addressing the key issues of faculty retention, space, and critical mass. While the past cannot be undone, this could at least prevent further bloodletting and allow us to realize the bright future so eloquently described in the report.

Responses to “Additional Findings and Recommendations”

TA versus RA support. The report suggests that “the culture of the department discourages TAing after the first year” (page 9, paragraph 2). This is not so much by choice as by necessity. Many of our incoming students have a very limited Statistics background and are therefore not well qualified for RA positions. We support them as TAs for our large undergraduate service courses. This pretty much uses up our TA slots. We would dearly love to have two additional TA positions for our two most popular graduate sequences, Theoretical Statistics (Stat 581/582/583) and Applied Statistics (Stat 570/571/572), both of which serve Biostatistics as well as Statistics graduate students. This would not only improve the courses, but would also open up TA opportunities for more advanced students. The VIGRE grant mentioned in the report calls for creation of six mixed TA/RA positions. However, it does not increase the total amount of TA support (only the RA portion of the positions is funded by NSF), and therefore does not fundamentally address the problem.

Early mentoring of graduate students. Every incoming graduate student is assigned a faculty adviser who is supposed to meet with his advisees regularly. This has proven ineffective. It seems that students are too shy to initiate meetings, and faculty tend to be too busy to do so. We are working with the graduate student representative to design a better system. The frequency of social gatherings involving faculty and students has decreased in the past five years. We are trying to reverse this process. For example, the graduate students have started monthly wine-and-cheese parties on Friday afternoons, which will increase the amount of social interaction between faculty and students, especially students in their early years and MS students who do not (yet) have thesis advisers.

Continuity in service courses We have tried to achieve continuity by designating a faculty member as course coordinator for each of our three large undergraduate service courses. This has only been a qualified success. As pointed out in the self study, meaningful improvement of the service courses will require dedication of additional resources, specifically a lecturer position.

Research funding The proposed Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences should open up opportunities to diversify our research funding.