

On March 31, 2005, the University of Washington Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) President's Assistant II (PAII) met with four graduate students in the Interdisciplinary Neurobiology and Behavioral Science Program from 12:30PM to 1:30PM. All students in the program were invited to the meeting with the PAII. The purpose of this meeting was to help the GPSS evaluate the strengths and weakness of that program from the perspective of its graduate students. The aim of this report is to represent the views of graduate students in that program to the Graduate Council of the University of Washington's Graduate School, which is currently conducting its ten-year review of the Interdisciplinary Neurobiology and Behavioral Science's graduate program. The students that attended the meeting with the PAII ranged from first year students to those that have recently taken their general exams. In addition, the PAII observed three other meetings with graduate students in program and the University of Washington Graduate School's visiting team that same day. In these meetings with the visiting team, twelve students attended; one of these students also attended the meeting with the PAII. These additional meetings allowed the PAII to hear views from students ranging from first year students to those in their fifth, sixth, seventh years, and some who have taken their general exams.

PROGRAM STRENGTHS

The overall impression given by the students was very positive. The students highlighted the following features of the program:

- A core group of the affiliated faculty members show real dedication to the graduate students in the program, the program's sense of community and the quality of the graduate program itself. One student said that these faculty members seem to really value the graduate students in the program and their work. Students are satisfied with the level of communication with faculty members, especially those described by all groups as the dedicated core faculty of the program.
- Students in the program are receiving a satisfactory level of professional training, especially for those on an academic career track. Working in research labs is the major element of the students' work, which often leads to publication, conference papers and posters, as well as the substance of their actual dissertation. Furthermore, opportunities to be a teaching assistant (TA) or a course instructor, and thereby gain critical academic and professional skills, are available, although one student felt that they are not frequent enough and another claimed there is a paucity of opportunities to learn and practice speaking skills generally. (Balancing lab work and teaching assignments can be difficult, though, according to one student, who complained that the priority on lab work takes away from teaching time.) Students' priority access to over fifteen other departments means

that they have little trouble meeting requirements and finding courses relevant to their interests.

- The student-organized (it was previously faculty organized) journal club and corresponding seminars have allowed students to study topics they feel are most relevant to them, although there are several problems with the journal club raised by all the students interviewed (see below).
- Students are generally well funded through fellowships, research assistantships and other opportunities; because of this, students felt that the distribution of funding is fair.
- While there are still some problems (see below), students from all years recognize that the program has gone to some lengths to make course and degree requirements clear, and to increase both student and faculty accountability in this regard (e.g., required annual progress reports from the students).

PROGRAM WEAKNESSES

While graduate students seemed generally pleased with the program, there were several areas where they see room for improvement. These include the following major points:

- While efforts have been made to clarify degree requirements, more advanced students still feel uncertain about the time when they should commence the final stages of their degree, especially the initiation of dissertation writing. One student said that you move into the final stages and dissertation writing “when you feel like it,” while another claimed that the general wisdom is that you begin writing a dissertation once you have a post-doctoral position lined up. One student suggested that this problem results from the infrequency of an average student’s committee meetings, which are apparently mandated once per year following the passing of the general exam. Newer students expressed different concerns, although they also characterized the process by which they would obtain their degree as “not ideal,” far from “step by step,” and, according to one student, basically without guidelines. Newer students also had problems with the first-year core courses (500 series), which they variously described as superfluous, uninformative and often repetitive. Some students complained that one introductory course amounted to little more than a forum for faculty to advertise their labs and recruit potential research assistants.
- All of the students participating in the review were deeply concerned with the state of the program’s journal club. As noted above, faculty members previously

organized the journal club until students took over the club four or five years ago. Students wanted to remove faculty from the planning so that the topics covered would better conform to their needs and interests. Once a week students meet to discuss a journal article; they then attend a lecture the following week by the article's author, where faculty are more present. The students' major concerns were that attendance to the journal club is poor and that a faculty member does not attend the journal club to guide students through the reading. While attendance is ostensibly mandatory to the journal club, attendance is not recorded, unlike the corresponding seminar where attendance is reportedly taken. Students participating in the review complained that very few students now come to the journal club, and that it is mostly first and second year students in attendance, although far from a majority from those years. One student said that this was a result of a general lack of student accountability, whereas another student claimed that the journal club is largely perceived as a "waste of time" because the discussion are not faculty supervised, and therefore lacking in seriousness and expertise. Another student said that the problem is a result of students caring more about lab work than any other aspect of their education, but another student responded to this by claiming that the nature of lab work often means missing important events because, for example, an experiment needs to be constantly monitored. The general feeling among students is that they would like to see improvements in the journal club, which could help rebuild a sense of departmental community while furthering their academic training.

- Regarding the program's sense of community, most of the students participating in the review felt that the program could be doing more to build convivial relations among students and faculty. While most students praised the efforts of the dedicated core faculty to build the program's community, the students complained that after their first and second years, most students become so engrossed in lab work that all sense of community is lost, even among students in the same year. For example, students noted that the program's yearly retreat is held on the University of Washington's campus, if at all, yet other programs often go to places far from campus (e.g., Leavenworth). For this reason, students felt like the program does not take the retreat seriously. Students also cited the journal club's poor attendance as a sign of the program's diminishing sense of community. One student complained that other students' attitude, starting in their second and third years, is to treat their lab work as their "job" and to ignore the other aspects of their academic training or program requirements. For those students who work in labs far from campus, this situation is even more exacerbated. One student described working at off campus labs as "academically isolating." (The lack of a shuttle to the VA hospital also means that students must either own a car or endure a long bus ride.)

- The most serious issue raised by the students participating in the review was an issue of the programs capacity to handle faculty-student disputes or other serious conflicts. The first problem is that the students seemed unaware of their options if a serious conflict should arise. One example that students seemed concerned about is changing labs if tension develops between the faculty supervisor (primary investigator) and student research assistants. While some students think it is possible to change labs if the situation becomes intolerable, even late in their research phase (e.g., after the third year), others assumed it is impossible. Most students seem to have assumed that the director of the program is the go-to person if there is conflict with a faculty member, yet some students expressed reservations about the program director's willingness to take a student's side in a conflict. One student, however, felt very certain that the director would support a student in a conflict with a faculty member. This is not to say that there is a lot of faculty-student conflict in the program. One third-year student claimed that he had never heard of any conflict, so if there was any, it must have been dealt with quietly.

Despite these difficulties, the impression given by the students in attendance was overall very positive. The first three concerns raised under Program Weaknesses (the program's requirements, the journal club and the program's sense of community) are obviously either already being address by the program or could be easily addressed through more open dialog between students and faculty. The last point, regarding conflict within the program, will require more serious consideration. The GPSS hopes that the Interdisciplinary Neurobiology and Behavioral Science Program will work with students to clarify and strengthen the procedures and processes of conflict resolution in the program.

(This report was prepared by Jacob Mundy, GPSS Presidential Assistant II.)