

# Program Review of the Department of Pathology

Winter 2013

*The Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) conducts reviews of academic programs that coincide with the Graduate School's Program Review process. GPSS reviews are a vital component of the final Program Report. The data collected and presented by the GPSS serves as a primary source of graduate and/or professional student feedback in the Program Review process.*

*For more information about the GPSS Program Review process or questions regarding this report, please contact [gpssex@uw.edu](mailto:gpssex@uw.edu).*

## **Review Scope and Purpose**

This review contains a summary of graduate student opinions and feelings regarding their department. It does not seek to give a general overview of the academic program or the department. The report and Catalyst survey were prepared by GPSS Special Assistant Leo Baunach and GPSS Senator Simon Johnson. For more general information regarding the academic program, faculty, courses, and research, please see the Department of Pathology Self-Study.

The Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) sponsored a Catalyst Survey for graduate students in Pathology between February 25<sup>th</sup> and March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. 17 of 24 students in the program completed the survey. Of the respondents, eight were doctoral candidates and nine were doctoral students.

Most questions used a five-point scale of 'Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor,' or 'Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.'

The purpose of this survey was to ensure the voice and opinion of the students within this program was included in the review process and thereby taken into account during the planning of the future direction of the program. A complete compilation of the data is presented in the appendix. The original survey data is available from the GPSS upon request. A focus group of Pathology students was also held to inform this report.

## **Executive Summary**

The Department of Pathology is a unique and dynamic program that offers ample opportunities for students to study a diverse array of subjects. The faculty are held in high regard, and the course load was deemed appropriate. Students hoped for continued improvement in the rotation system, particularly in regards to communication about lab funding and acceptance. Faculty mentorship and support on dissertation research is generally good. Students praised a highly committed and skilled support staff, and hoped that the move toward greater formal procedures and expanded resources would continue. The introduction of a confidential evaluation of lab experiences that goes directly to the department, not the lab supervisor, was desired. Recently admitted students are very happy with the program and their cohort has a strong sense of community. Erratic course scheduling and offerings – which is not always in the control of the Department – was the foremost barrier to success in the program.

### **I. Academic Program**

The academic standards of the Department were held in high regard. More than 88% felt that these standards were ‘very good’ or ‘excellent.’ All but one respondent felt that the program supported their research and professional goals. There was less confidence about the integration of current developments in the field, although just under half of the students felt that integration was very good. Respondents recognize that it is a difficult task to find the right level of specificity and common coursework given the wide-range of topics covered by pathology. One student said that “The program does an excellent job of integrating the very diverse research that goes on in the department,” while another believed that pre-decided specificity in coursework “doesn't allow tailoring for the specific area of interest in a VERY broad field.” Another praised the opportunities in coursework to “interact directly with leaders in the fields of aging, heart disease, stem cells, neuropathology, and cancer research among others.” Almost all students felt that the amount of coursework was appropriate to the degree.

A full 88% felt that the intellectual quality of the faculty was excellent. Students described a climate of collegiality with faculty and were happy that faculty discussed and shared their research with students. 76% rated the intellectual quality of their cohort as very good or excellent.

All students, save for 18%, agreed that the program fostered a sense of intellectual community. There was similar agreement that the program encouraged collaboration and teamwork. Junior-level students were pleased that their cohort had common classes that built a sense of intellectual and social community, and praised the introductory class that introduced them to different faculty and labs. It positively influenced decisions on rotation selection, and was enjoyed by students that already possessed a clear sense of the topics they wished to study. Course material covering the formulation of presentations and abstracts was also appreciated.

Because academia is a desired career path for many students of the program, some felt that better training and options to teach were needed. 35% felt that they had received adequate training on teaching and mentoring, 41% did not, and 24% were unsure. Students commented that

opportunities were available to teach, but that the process of obtaining them was unclear. One student chose the department because it did not have a teaching requirement. The general opinion was that more opportunities to gain experience teaching and mentoring should be made available but that the absence of mandatory TA'ing was a positive aspect of the department. Some students had overseen undergraduates in their laboratories, which is another venue of teaching and mentoring that could be further developed.

Course scheduling is the most significant barrier to academic success. Many students recounted sudden changes in time schedules, and irregular offerings of important elective or requirements like the professional seminar.

## **II. Research Experience**

The majority of respondents felt that they had received a high level of training before beginning their research. Responses were positive though mixed on the research process. 34% felt that they had received fair or good advice and guidance on formulating a research topic, and 47% termed advice during this time excellent. Similarly, 28% received fair or good guidance while conducting research, and the rest felt that guidance was very good or excellent.

41% of respondents have attended a conference and presented their research. 53% had assisted in writing a grant proposal.

Students desired a more confidential process for yearly evaluations of their experience at specific labs. Currently, the lab's supervisor signs the evaluation written by the student before it is passed along to the Department. A confidential evaluation that went directly to the Department was desired to ensure candor. Along the same lines, students argued that a clearer process for conflict resolution was needed. They noted that problems within labs were uncommon, but that when issues did arise it was unclear where to go or who to consult.

## **III. Career Counseling / Job Search**

Career counseling was considered an area requiring "some improvement." Within the Department, students noted that career counseling was heavily oriented toward academia. 52% rated career counseling related to academia as good or fair. 58% rated counseling for careers outside academia as good or fair, and 12% rated it as poor. 60% rated guidance on how to search for a job as good or fair. Advice on how to prepare a resume or curriculum vitae was lacking, and 46% rated this advice as good or fair. Students were aware of career counseling resources outside the Department, but felt that these were of limited applicability for research scientists. Some students felt that connections with industry were lagging relative to other UW departments. Career-related advice varied greatly depending upon a student's Principal Investigator and committee members.

## **V. Advising**

There was a feeling among students that oversight, accountability and advising was lacking after the first year. The orientation for new students was praised that gave a useful overview of required classes for the first quarters of the program. After this, however, students felt that guidance was lacking and that oversight of student activities after the second year was scant. It was noted that mandatory advising will be implemented for the next incoming class. However, students were unsure if this would address a lack of timely information on course availability.

59% were very satisfied and 29% were satisfied with the amount of communication they had with an advisor. This likely includes contact with departmental staff and faculty advisors. Among those who had reached the stage of oral and written examinations, all but one had received adequate preparatory advice. A similar majority had received adequate guidance in selecting a faculty advisor and conducting research.

## **V. Departmental community**

The Department of Pathology comprises many sites and labs, including facilities in UW-Seattle Health Sciences, South Lake Union and Harborview Hospital. Students noted that the sense of community was good within labs, and within South Lake Union and Health Sciences. It was noted that many labs and centers had their own social and academic events. Connections between each of these facilities were lacking, and rotations to facilities including the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Harborview were found to be isolating.

Opinions were mixed in regards to expanded community-building efforts. Many students already work long and sometimes irregular hours to complete coursework, laboratory duties and research. Attendance at the biannual departmental retreats was found to be lacking, but some students were reticent to recommend additional requirements on students' time. Nevertheless, attendees of departmental retreats found the experience very rewarding and a rare time to learn about the diverse research being conducted by the rest of their cohort. Making these events actual retreats (i.e. outside of Seattle) was offered as a possible solution to increase attendance and make retreats serious events that were prioritized by students. Happy hours after the 'Path Presents' seminar, which rotates locations, was another possible solution to these challenges.

The current cohort of first and second year students has established a strong and collegial sense of community. Their happiness with the intellectual and non-intellectual aspects of the Department attest to major improvements in recent years, due in no small part to consistent hard work by support staff and faculty.

There was high approval of the Department's commitment to attracting and supporting diverse students, especially non-traditional students, including children and those that did not continue to the program immediately after their undergraduate degree. However, some noted that the faculty lacked diversity. Others praised the gender diversity of the faculty and hoped that faculty positions would remain open to women and those did not take a traditional path toward academic employment.

## **VI. Funding**

At the time of this review, federal budget sequestration is looming. Prior to this unpredictable situation, student noted that many improvements have taken place to ensure that labs only accept students if they possess adequate funding. However, communication between labs and the Department remained uneven and procedures are informal. Notwithstanding the possible sudden changes associated with sequestration, 71% of respondents felt that there was sufficient funding within labs for students to complete the research mandated by their committees. The remaining 29% did not believe their laboratories were adequately funded to complete the research requested by their advisory committees.

## **VII. General**

There were few major obstacles identified by respondents. Selecting a dissertation topic and course scheduling proved difficult for some. 94% expected to complete their degree.