

On May 3, 2005, the University of Washington Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) President's Assistant II (PAII) met with fifteen graduate students in the Physiology and Biophysics graduate program. The first session included eight students in their early years of the PhD program. The second session included seven students in the later stages of their graduate studies in the program. These sessions started with the PAII observing meetings with the graduate students in program and the University of Washington Graduate School's visiting committee. Following these meetings, the PAII met with the students in another room without the committee. The purpose of these meetings and observed sessions was to help the GPSS evaluate the strengths and weakness of the Physiology and Biophysics graduate program based on the opinions of the participating students. The aim of this report is to present the views of graduate students in that program to the University of Washington Graduate School, which is currently conducting a ten-year review of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics.

### PROGRAM STRENGTHS

So far this academic year, the PAII has not observed so many intellectually, professionally and personally satisfied graduate students as those found in the Physiology and Biophysics graduate program. Graduate students in Physiology and Biophysics graduate readily sang the praises of their program. Noted aspects included:

- The program apparently welcomes student involvement in all levels of the program, including uncommon level of committee involvement (e.g., admissions, hiring, guest speakers and curriculum development).
- Students felt that they had ready access to the program's entire set of affiliated faculty, either via email, phone or office walk-in. No student expressed dissatisfaction with the level of communication in the department; students only complained about communication with faculty in other programs and departments.
- Students described the intellectual atmosphere as open and not competitive.
- The program makes an effort to build a sense of social and academic community. At the lab level, there are quarterly "lab nights" (i.e., labs go out for dinner or drinks) and lab-based journal clubs. On a departmental level, there is a yearly retreat

### PROGRAM WEAKNESSES

The Physiology and Biophysics had very few weaknesses with respect to its graduate program. Graduate students' concerns were limited to the following minor points:

- Students seemed only vaguely aware of conflict management mechanisms, either internally to the department or externally (e.g., Office of the Ombudsman), although most

reported not knowing of a single situation where recourse to these means has been necessary or warranted. For example, if a student developed a conflict with their Primary Investigator or members of their dissertation committee, they were not sure who they could turn to, although they felt strongly that the program's chair or director would treat them fairly in such a case.

- Students felt that they were not getting enough speaking opportunities, which are currently limited to three rotation talks and lab-based journal clubs (i.e., presenting papers to other lab-mates). Additionally, students noted a lack of funding for travel to conferences where they could develop speaking skills by presenting papers or sitting on panels.
- Students also complained about a lack of teacher training and opportunities. As most students were pursuing an academic-research career path, developing teaching skills is very important to them, yet the only substantive feedback they received is from student evaluations at the end of the quarter. Students would appreciate a teaching methods course.
- Some newer students complained about difficulties getting into labs after their first year. Although the 2004 class was large, which created difficulties in matching students with their research interests, most students noted that even if a student does not get into the lab of their choice, this does not change their funding. Other students felt that the Neurobiology students received unfair priority in lab placement, reflecting a larger bias in the program towards students in the Neurobiology program.

## CONCLUSION

During the reviews of the Physiology and Biophysics graduate program, it became clear that students overwhelmingly supported for the program. This is no doubt in part due to the generous funding that students receive from day one through the quarter they receive their PhD, which is a model most graduate students at the University of Washington would envy. In a graduate program as positive as Physiology and Biophysics, one could easily overlook areas where the program could round out its otherwise superb academic and professional training (i.e., in the areas of speaking and teaching). The GPSS hopes that the Physiology and Biophysics graduate program will continue its excellent work and recognize areas for improvement.

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