GPSS Report
Graduate Program Review
Public Health Genetics Program

On January 8, 2009, the University of Washington Graduate & Professional Student Senate had one GPSS Senator attend two 45-minute program review meetings with 9 Ph.D. students in the Public Health Genetics (PHG) program: 5 1st-2nd year students in one meeting, and 4 3rd-4th year students in another meeting. These students comprise the full complement of students in the Ph.D. program.

The program review was also attended by two members of a 3-member peer committee, who facilitated and asked students questions pertaining to their program. This review evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the PHG program from the perspectives of the students. This report summarizes students' feedback for the consideration in the Graduate School Council's review of the program. All students were invited through department emails.

What attracted students to the program

- The program's combination of interests, which includes legal aspects, ethics, genetics, public health and public policy concerns. It is the only Ph.D. program in Public Health Genetics in the U.S.
- Opportunities to do research.
- Students universally come to the program from some amount of lab or public health work experience, or having already attained a Masters of Public Health at another institution.
- Students enjoy the interdisciplinarity of the program, especially the faculty.
- Students receive a lot of one-on-one attention.

Concerns about knowledge of genetics

- The lack of interaction between the PHG program and Genome Sciences program. The U.W. has a world-renown Genome Sciences program, and yet there seem to be disincentives for collaboration. Access to Genome Sciences courses are very limited for PHG students, and even the weekly seminars in both programs are scheduled at the exact same time, so that neither program's students can visit the other program's seminar.
- More genetics classes, in particular more medical genetics courses. Students need to be able to "hold their own" with genetic scientists in their future careers as Public Health Geneticists.

Concerns about small cohorts and course cancellations

- Many core courses are required for Ph.D. students in the program, but an incoming cohort in a particular year may not be large enough to meet the minimum student requirement for the course to be held. Could more students participate in the core courses, including students from other disciplines or master's students in PHG?

- Having a very small cohort can feel isolating, and makes it more difficult to study for the Prelim. Exam.
- Core course progression: it is not necessarily clear which courses are required, which are recommended, and which are offered when. Ph.D. required courses are now offered every other year, and in the intervening years when not offered, the Ph.D. students take them as "independent study," which has challenges.

Concerns about content knowledge

- Struggle of breadth vs. depth: core competency in the 6 different components of the program (genetics, etc.) makes it difficult to become expert in any one component.
- Two years of core coursework required for the Prelim. Exam makes it hard to take further courses to extend knowledge in any of the program's component areas.

Other issues mentioned

- Two-advisor system seems to work satisfactorily for students.
- Students have opportunities to present at conferences.
- The case method for the Prelim. Exam is extremely rigorous and demanding, but students felt it was effective for ensuring you learned the material.

Funding

- Students wished there were more funding opportunities through TA and RAships.
- Because it's a small program, and relatively new, there are few funding opportunities.

Overview

Students in the Ph.D. program felt the program was very valuable to their career path and interests, because it is unique in the country, and because it combines law, ethics, science and social sciences. Their concerns centered around having access to the courses needed in light of small student enrollments, possible collaboration with Genome Sciences, having more genetics courses, and dealing with breadth-vs. depth content knowledge aspect of the program.