

Response to 2016 Department of Immunology Graduate Program Review

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The Immunology Graduate Program Review occurred on April 28–29, 2016; the department Chair received the report of the Review Committee on June 14, 2016. We appreciate the positive comments provided by the Review Committee. The committee described our program as “one of the top Immunology programs in the country”. The committee determined that our senior faculty are renowned immunologists and our junior faculty have launched highly successful research programs that are already attracting top-notch trainees. The level of research funding in the department is extremely high, and our administrative team does an excellent job of managing our resources. The department has built a strong base for training students and postdoctoral fellows by forming substantive interactions with affiliate and adjunct faculty, most of whom are actively engaged in the teaching mission of the department. Overall, the Review Committee felt that the department was doing an excellent job in training students and postdoctoral fellows, recruiting and mentoring junior faculty and excelling in scientific research.

The Review Committee made six specific recommendations regarding our training programs. Our response to each recommendation is as follows:

1. *The Department should explore options to decrease the time to the General Exam.*

Response: We agree with this suggestion, and we have carefully considered the Review Committee’s full comments on this subject in the text of their report. The committee raised the issue of whether the Qualifying Exam required of our second year students was ultimately beneficial to our student’s progress. They recognized that the Qualifying Exam was intended to strengthen the student’s skills in designing sound research proposals; however, they expressed the concern that having a “high-stakes” exam (Qualifying Exam) before taking their General Exam delayed the student’s focus on their thesis research. The committee recognized that both faculty and students were divided in their opinion about whether the Qualifying Exam was overall a “plus” for our students, and they did not make a specific recommendation on whether it should be retained. The Review Committee’s major concern was that our students took their General Exam too late, noting that taking the General Exam earlier would allow students to read the literature relevant to their projects more thoroughly and think more deeply about their projects at an earlier stage in their training. The committee’s feedback prompted our faculty to discuss this issue at length. We recognized the benefits and drawbacks of the Qualifying Exam, and sought an alternative mechanism to teach students how to design a strong research proposal. The faculty decided to eliminate the Qualifying Exam and re-design our required course (*Central Issues in Immunology*) in a manner that taught the same principles that we hoped students would learn from taking the Qualifying Exam. We established a committee charged with the task of redesigning this course by Spring Quarter 2017, and we formally eliminated the Qualifying Exam requirement from our program. These changes enabled us to move the time frame for the General Exam earlier. Students must now take their General Exam by the end of Spring Quarter of Year 3. We hope that these changes will accomplish all of the goals of our training program and facilitate our student’s progress toward obtaining their PhD. We will monitor the outcome of these changes in requirements over the next several years.

2. *Students should form and engage their thesis committee earlier in their graduate career, during their second year.*

Response: We agree with this suggestion, as students would benefit from receiving advice from experts on their projects at an earlier time point. We modified our program requirements accordingly; students are

now required to form their thesis committee by the end of Summer Quarter of Year 2. Students must also meet with their thesis committee before taking their General Exam. Ideally, the first committee meeting will occur in Fall Quarter of the third year, but must occur no later than Winter Quarter of the third year.

3. *The Department should formalize rules surrounding the publication requirement for graduation and more clearly articulate the cases for exception.*

Response: Our program requirements clearly state that a student must have published (or have accepted for publication) at least one first-authored, peer-reviewed manuscript describing work directly related to their dissertation research before they defend their thesis. They also state that, *in rare cases*, a student may petition the department faculty (all members of the Graduate Faculty with appointments in Immunology) to defend their dissertation prior to acceptance of a first-authored paper. We believe that our guidelines for petitioning for a waiver are quite clear. A student cannot petition the department for a waiver unless they have received good critiques from a peer-reviewed journal on a first-authored manuscript. The student's petition must include the manuscript, the reviewer's critiques, a cover letter explaining the reason why they are requesting a waiver, a letter signed by the Thesis Committee Chair in support of the waiver, and a recommendation from a Thesis Committee Member other than the Chair indicating the extent to which the Committee supports the student's petition. All Committee members (except the committee Chair) must sign the second letter of recommendation. Our faculty discussed whether we wished to revise any part of this requirement. We concluded (as did the Review Committee) that the publication requirement and allowing petitions for waivers under rare circumstances are appropriate. However, we recognize that part of our criteria for evaluating a petition is subjective: the faculty's task is to assess whether the reviews of the manuscript are "good", i.e., the critiques do not describe flaws or omissions in the work so serious that they cast doubt on when the paper could be published in a respected, peer-reviewed journal (not necessarily the journal that provide the critiques). A waiver should not be granted if extensive and time-consuming revisions on the manuscript are required. Because we recognize that this evaluation is subjective, we have chosen to rely on the judgement of all of our graduate student-training faculty rather than solely on the student's thesis committee. We believe that some concern may have arisen about our process because we have failed to have an adequate discussion of petitions in some previous cases, and this *ad hoc* treatment may have led to inconsistency in approving petitions. We have now modified our Program Requirements to ensure adequate discussion of each petition. A petition will only be considered at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting and, following verbal discussion, only the faculty present at the meeting will vote on the petition. We believe that avoiding discussions by email, allowing only those faculty to vote who have had a chance to hear and respond to the views of others, and not allowing the review of a petition to be expedited will ensure the most fair and consistent process.

4. *The Department should re-engage in medical teaching.*

Response: We agree with this goal and have taken steps to achieve it. One of our Assistant Professors is now giving several lectures in the Invaders and Defenders unit, and we plan to participate in some small group sessions. This unit was planned without input from our faculty, and the outcome for the students was not ideal. We hope to have a positive impact on this block.

5. *The Department should make greater efforts to integrate postdoctoral trainees into the fabric of the Department.*

Response: We also recognize that our postdoctoral fellows do not have a strong sense of community, and we agree that they would benefit from additional forms of mentoring. We plan to explore several of the suggestions provided in the report, including providing formal feedback to postdocs who speak in our Research in Progress series, developing some workshops focused on grant-writing skills and inviting

department alumni with diverse career paths to visit the department share their experiences. To facilitate the later goal, we established a committee of two faculty members who are organizing panel discussions with some of our alumni that will occur in the Fall and Spring (beginning Fall, 2016). We hope to hold these annually. We also plan to explore the Review Committee's suggestion of engaging faculty in providing feedback to postdocs on their job talks. These are valuable ideas that we think will benefit our postdoctoral fellows.

6. *The Department's notable success in the recruitment of underrepresented students needs to be complemented with additional effort in retention. As suggested by current URM trainees, the department should establish a designated advisor for URM trainees distinct from the GPC that would serve as a direct line to resources at UW for these students.*

Response: We have taken this suggestion very seriously and have established the position of liaison for URM trainees to the department. Dr. Dan Stetson has agreed to take on this role and recently met with URM students and postdoctoral fellows. This was a very productive and energized meeting; the trainees generated many ideas for how they can work together and with other trainees to build a better community for all students and postdocs. Some of these ideas would create opportunities for all trainees to engage with each other and some may be more tailored to under-represented minorities. For example, the students discussed how the phenomenon of "Imposter Syndrome" relates to their experience as trainees in our department, and are hoping to bring this issue to a broader discussion. Dr. Gorman is also discussing with Dr. Slattery, Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education, whether it is possible and beneficial to engage trainees in the SLU campus more broadly. We will also reach out to other UW offices that focus on issue of diversity such as Go-Map to see if they can hold some of their events at SLU as the trainee number is now quite large in this community. Our trainees have found the on-campus location and mid-day timing of these events to be a barrier to their attendance.