

**University of Washington**  
**Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee Report**  
**Date of Site Visit: May 12-13, 2005**  
**Date of Report: June 17, 2005**

Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee

Timothy A. DeRouen, Professor, Biostatistics and Dental Public Health Sciences (Chair)  
Bobbie Berkowitz, Professor, Psychosocial & Community Health  
Martina Morris, Professor, Sociology and Statistics  
Patricia Buffler, Professor, Epidemiology, University of California, Berkeley  
Jonathan Samet, Professor and Chair, Epidemiology, Johns Hopkins University

**Background**

The Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee was appointed in a letter from Acting Dean Elizabeth L. Feetham on March 23, 2005. The UW members of the Committee met with representatives of The Graduate School, the Office of the Provost, and the School of Public Health and Community Medicine on April 4, 2005, to hear the charge to the Committee. The UW members held brief meetings with Dean Pat Wahl, department chairman Scott Davis, and four faculty representatives on April 19, 2005, to get a preliminary understanding of what major issues were likely to surface in the site visit, so as to be better prepared to pursue them. The charge to the Committee was spelled out in more detail in a letter from Associate Dean Gail L. Dubrow on April 20, 2005. The site visit was held May 12-13, 2005, and this report is based on the verbal report given in the exit interview at the end of the site visit on May 13.

**Recommendation**

Based on materials reviewed and extensive interviews and discussions held, the Review Committee unanimously recommends continuation of the Program in Epidemiology for the maximum 10 year period. The remainder of the report offers a description of the Committee's view of the strengths of the Department of Epidemiology that justify the positive recommendation, as well as a discussion of issues that the Department should address as it moves forward in the next decade.

**Assessment of the Department and Program**

The overall Committee assessment of the Department of Epidemiology and its graduate program is very positive; the Department has a well deserved stature as one of the leading departments of epidemiology in the United States.

To begin with, the Committee wishes to commend the Chairman, Scott Davis, on the rapport and respect he has developed from all departmental constituencies. Invariably, the Committee heard unsolicited praise from faculty, staff, and students about Dr. Davis with emphasis on his hard work and caring approach to the chairmanship. Such unanimous and unqualified praise for a Chairman is remarkable.

Many positive aspects of the faculty were noted, particularly a high morale, and a strong sense of collegiality. The breadth of faculty interests provides enormous educational and research opportunities for students, and the extensive portfolio of funded research speaks to the quality of the faculty. Despite the challenges created by their geographical dispersion, the faculty have demonstrated a strong commitment to the graduate program, and that commitment has resulted in a very successful program.

Students in the program were observed to be bright with strong backgrounds. The reputation of the program has led to the attraction of outstanding students from across the nation, as well as from many foreign countries.

Overall, the Department of Epidemiology research and graduate programs are very competitive nationally and internationally, and enjoy the respect of peer departments. While there is no national ranking of epidemiology departments, it is clear that the UW Department of Epidemiology is among the leading departments in the U.S., especially in the areas of cancer, cardiovascular, and STD epidemiology, with emerging strengths in genetics and other infectious diseases. The quality of the Department is in no small way related to its affiliations and collaborations with other institutions in the community, such as the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Group Health Cooperative Center for Health Studies, which extend the research opportunities for students and enhance the scientific reputation of the Department.

The continued quality and prominence of the Department of Epidemiology is not without threats. Among the most serious of these threats are the lack of adequate fiscal resources and centralized space. The geographical dispersion of the faculty over multiple buildings and institutions reduces opportunities for exchange among faculty and among faculty and students. While the faculty are strongly committed to the department, the lack of shared space makes it difficult to create the community needed to ensure that the training program remains at the leading edge of epidemiological methods and research. While a new building currently in the planning stages could eventually help, the amount of additional centralized space from such a building would not solve the problem. The Department will need to continue and enhance its current efforts to provide opportunities for interaction and communication among and between faculty and students. The department recognizes this issue and acknowledges that central space for the full department is not consistent with its make-up from several large research groups. Nonetheless, scant space available is a barrier to recruitment and to the growth of new programs which may require multiple offices.

The Department has done a remarkable job of using a very limited amount of state-funded faculty positions and operations funding to piece together support for this large graduate program. Insofar as it helps keep this program operational, the Committee endorses the idea of the use of pooled vacant positions for salary commitments to faculty for teaching contributions over several years, especially if this approach allows rotation of teaching responsibilities. This approach requires constant juggling and cannibalizing of positions to keep the program going, which can put the department at additional risk for the collapse of such a "house of cards". The department's teaching commitment

extends beyond its own students to its service role to the health science enterprise and the campus as part of its M.S. and M.P.H. programs. Many fellowships and training grants in other health science schools require or encourage trainees to pursue Master's training in Epidemiology as part of its program. This emphasis on Epidemiology as generic training in clinical research methodology will only increase with the N.I.H. Roadmap Initiative, as it has with recently funded institutional K30 and K12 training grants at UW. The Department of Epidemiology has willingly embraced this role, and the related demands. However, additional Master's trainees in clinical research require additional Epidemiology faculty time, especially in chairing student committees, and this burden will eventually detract from the Ph.D. program. The impact of this service role needs recognition with the provision of additional central campus or health sciences wide resources to compensate the Department for its efforts and to avoid damaging the Ph.D. program.

Other concerns arising from the Committee's review should be readily addressed in a strategic planning process that Chairman Scott Davis has advocated, and which is strongly endorsed by this committee.

### **Issues to Address to Ensure Continued Prominence**

This is a critical time in the Department's history to consider its curriculum and related issues. The curriculum as it currently stands reflects what was considered "cutting edge" in the past, but it may not adequately reflect the current breadth and depth of the existing body of knowledge in theory and methods that is needed to prepare doctoral graduates for the future in the changing, growing field of Epidemiology. The Committee was concerned that there has been no process for examining the curriculum systematically, since senior faculty, widely regarded as superb educators, have been responsible for the department's core courses and preliminary exams for years. The Committee noted that recent changes to the curriculum (e.g., a second-year seminar) were implemented at the suggestion of students, who identified a curricular gap. Often, new faculty arriving from other programs will provide the impetus for re-examining the curriculum, but an examination of the regular and research track Assistant and Associate Professors reveals that 75% of them obtained their Epidemiology training at UW, and hence they may not be advocates for change. Thus, as originally suggested by Dr. Davis, a strategic planning process that examines these curricular issues is strongly endorsed. Suggestions/issues that should be considered during this process include the following:

- Assess whether existing core courses adequately address basic disciplinary grounding in the field of epidemiology, advanced topics in epidemiologic concepts and methods and whether there are gaps in emerging areas. Consideration should be given as to whether additional/new courses should become part of the "core". Comparison might be made with curricula of peer departments.
- Consider introducing policies for rotation of responsibility for core courses; such rotation would facilitate mentoring of junior faculty by the department's more senior faculty and assure the development of the "next generation" of educators in the department. It would also provide needed slots for junior faculty as they build teaching portfolios in anticipation of promotion.

- The department has a requirement for “new data collection” which is increasingly difficult to define as epidemiological approaches diversify, nested designs are widely applied and secondary data sources are used with increasing creativity. The department should reconsider the rigidity of the original data collection requirement for the Ph.D. in this new context.
- Consider whether the curriculum as it stands adequately meets the needs of the mix of students in the program
- Consider how more students interested in academic careers can obtain guidance on how to teach and experience in teaching
- The department faces a challenge in communication among its members, given its size and multiple geographic locations. The department should assess approaches to enhancing communication, with recognition of its “virtual” nature. It might for example, examine how a departmental web site might be used to enhance communications, especially for alerting students of informal/work-in-progress type seminars in specialized areas through which they can explore research interests and identify potential faculty mentors
- Explore how the Department should relate to/collaborate with the new Department of Global Health, especially in infectious diseases
- Consider whether a leadership appointment should be made to help develop the enthusiastic but junior group of new faculty in infectious disease epidemiology.
- Consider a faculty recruitment process that maximizes the likelihood of hiring strong junior faculty who trained in other peer programs

Appropriately, Dr. Davis, as Chair, needs to lead this strategic planning process. Given his extensive research commitments and other administrative responsibilities, it is recommended that administrative mechanisms be explored - to relieve Dr. Davis of some of these responsibilities so that he can devote time to this process. Possibilities include the appointment of an Associate Chair, or creation of a departmental Executive Committee that would relieve some of the administrative burden on Dr. Davis.

### **Relationship with Interdisciplinary Units in the Department**

There are two interdisciplinary units located administratively within the Department of Epidemiology: the Nutritional Sciences Program, and the Institute for Public Health Genetics. Both units have their own degree programs, as well as a majority of faculty whose primary appointment is outside of Epidemiology. These programs are not well integrated into the Department, especially Nutritional Sciences which is physically located on the opposite end of the campus. Working relationships of these units with the Department are cordial, mainly because of the personalities of the key faculty administrators involved. However, there is potential for conflict, especially with respect to the distribution of indirect cost recovery from grants funded for faculty in those units. This seems to be a generic university-wide issue related to interdisciplinary programs, and needs to be addressed by central administration before it creates real conflict between the interdisciplinary units and their host departments.