

University of Washington Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee Report
Date of Site Visit: May 9-10, 2016
Date of Report: June 10, 2016

Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee

The Department of Epidemiology Program Review Committee was appointed in a letter from Dean David Eaton in the Spring of 2015. 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 in Fall, 2015 to hear the charge to the Committee. The charge to the Committee was spelled out in more detail in a letter from the Graduate School in February, 2016. The site visit was held May 9-10, 2016 and this report is based on the verbal report given in the exit interview at the end of the site visit on May 10, 2016.

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 committee further recommends that a report of program updates related to the areas discussed below is submitted to the Graduate School in 5 years. The remainder of the report offers a description of the Committee's view of the strengths of the Department of Epidemiology that support the positive recommendation, as well as a discussion of some 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. To begin with, the Committee wishes to commend the Chair, Dr. Victoria Holt, on the positive rapport she has developed with students, staff, and faculty. The Committee heard unsolicited praise from faculty, staff, and students about Dr. Holt with an emphasis on her hard work, dedication, and innovation. Dr. Holt has been proactive in developing and implementing a number of new initiatives to generate much needed revenue and to support faculty and students. She has done an excellent job in addressing Departmental challenges and being attentive to the needs of students. It is clear that Dr. Holt makes herself freely available to faculty, staff, and students. She has been very open to feedback and has been responsive to concerns. There was also acknowledgement that she has had to contend with significant budget constraints over the past few years.

The Department of Epidemiology research and graduate programs are highly competitive nationally and internationally. 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. The depth and breadth of faculty expertise provides enormous educational and research opportunities for students, and the extensive portfolio of funded research speaks to the success of the faculty. The faculty are engaged, thoughtful, and have a particularly strong sense of collegiality and devotion to the program. It is also clear that the quality and prominence of the Department is threatened by a lack of adequate fiscal resources.

The quality and national reputation of the Department is significantly tied to its affiliations with other research institutions in the community, including the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Group Health Cooperative Center for Health Studies. Of note, 17 of the 60 “core” Epi faculty have their primary appointments at another research institution (UW designation as “PDR” faculty). Despite the challenges created by their geographical dispersion, all faculty have worked together to create a very successful academic program. The Department will need to continue to enhance its current efforts to provide opportunities for interaction and communication among and between faculty.

Departmental staff possess a strong sense of common purpose with relatively low turnover. It is clear that they feel connected to and supported by the administration. Staff noted the importance of the new departmental social gatherings, the space changes that have created a deeper sense of community, and the retreat meetings. They are optimistic about possibilities for the future.

It is quite evident that the reputation of the program is a draw for outstanding students from across the nation and internationally. Students in the program were observed to be bright and engaged with strong backgrounds. The Department’s teaching commitment extends across Health Sciences schools at the UW. Many programs in other health science schools require or encourage trainees to pursue Master’s training in Epidemiology. The Department of Epidemiology has embraced this role. However, providing extra training and mentorship requires a great deal of faculty time and commitment. The lack of tuition recovery from educating the School of Medicine clinical and translational research trainees who participate in the epidemiology masters curriculum is putting an enormous strain on Department faculty resources. We strongly recommend that the department explore ways to recover incremental funds sufficient to cover the cost of providing this educational effort.

Like many units across campus, the department is challenged significantly by limited state support, a downturn in external funding for research, and the increasing cost of recruiting and retaining excellent faculty and students. It seems clear that the administration is doing the best they can in resource-lean times, however, without a significant infusion of dollars, it is hard to see how the Department can sustain its programs. Without more fiscal support, there is also a real danger of losing the great synergy in the Department and moving toward disengagement. The University administration should seek new means of providing incremental discretionary funding such as through a larger allocation of tuition funds and indirect cost returns to the department.

Other issues arising from the Committee’s review should be addressed in a long-term strategic planning process which the Chair has already launched.

The Review Committee was asked for more specific feedback in the six areas outlined below.

Educational mission

The committee received outstanding feedback from students on their experience in the program. Students raved about the curriculum and were enthusiastic about support from faculty. Yet, with limited faculty FTE and resources, there is a critical need for the department to reevaluate its curriculum and mentoring mission. Several courses, some longstanding, have been cut in the past

two years due to low enrollment and/or budget constraints. The committee recommends that faculty assess whether existing core courses adequately cover basic disciplinary grounding and advanced topics in epidemiologic concepts and methods. Special consideration should be given to course of emerging areas in the field and to the role of electives and new courses in the core required curriculum.

The launch of a new heavily subscribed undergraduate program is an exciting development. These new undergraduate courses are a campus-wide draw and will likely serve as a recruitment pipeline for new graduate students to Epidemiology. Faculty should assess the possible overlap between undergrad Epi courses and masters-level Epi courses so that new graduate students are not repeating content.

Suggestions/issues that should be considered by the Department include the following:

- There seems to be no significant tracking of graduates in terms of employment, research accomplishments, or perception of program strengths. Surveying alumni about program experiences, employment, and emerging trends in the field would be incredibly useful in curriculum planning and hiring of new faculty.
- Students also noted that they would like a common database of course syllabi and more access to software (e.g. SAS) which can be accomplished with virtual servers.
- An enhanced departmental web site might be used to bolster communications, especially for alerting students of informal/work-in-progress type seminars and research interests of faculty members.
- Students valued cross-departmental collaborations, though these could be further enhanced.

Faculty Engagement and Support

The faculty are doing excellent work and it is clear they are deeply committed to the Department. They sincerely want to be involved in developing a vision for the future that advances both the research and teaching missions of the Department. The junior primary faculty were enthusiastic, very engaged and feel supported. Senior faculty have historically been significant contributors to the Department and some now appear to be less engaged which could impact morale long term. The Committee suggests that the Department consider small strategic meetings between senior faculty and the Chair to give faculty a formal voice and engage them actively in problem solving. It is clear that PDR faculty are highly valued members of the faculty and their affiliations with other research institutions in the area including Fred Hutchison and Group Health extend research opportunities for faculty and students and enhance the scientific reputation of the Department. However, they appear to be disengaging at this point in time. It is critical that work is done to re-engage them and the institutions they represent (See also below regarding PDR faculty under Interactions with Partners).

Clearly, the current budget woes are very challenging for all faculty and the related cuts to classes and TAs are on their minds. Faculty and staff need more context regarding the budget issues. Though faculty and staff certainly had knowledge of budget constraints, they did not seem to have detailed information about the full budget or the fiscal implications of conducting “business as usual” in the long term.

Suggestions/issues that should be considered by the Department include the following:

- Departmental models for engaging students seem very successful and something analogous is needed to engage/re-engage faculty (both primary and non-primary PDR faculty). Faculty clearly want to be engaged in decision-making.
- Meeting regularly one-on-one in more informal venues with faculty to ensure all voices are heard.
- Acknowledge faculty achievements, particularly senior faculty. The Department might consider hosting an annual Luminary Lecture highlighting the work of a senior faculty member.
- Celebrate the achievements of students, faculty, staff and the Department as a unit.
- Though challenging in resource-lean times, it will be important to transition from a scarcity mentality to a higher positive vision of the Department and its role in the School.
- Departmental retreats have been very productive. Given the number of important issues facing the Department, it may be beneficial to have extended (2 hours, ½ day) faculty meetings to allow substantive discussion of the issues (such as research focus) in-between retreats. This could help engage both primary faculty and non-primary joint faculty on specific topics (including developing a forward looking vision)
- The department faces a challenge in communication among its members, given its size and the multiple geographic locations of faculty. New approaches to enhancing communication are called for.

Balancing Research and Educational Missions

The majority of faculty, particularly new hires, feel well-supported and believe that the emphasis on research and support for grants is very good. Several faculty expressed concern about the amount of focus being put on supporting research (staff and time) with less support for teaching (fewer TAs, less funding for teaching). We believe communicating information about the related funding mechanisms would help them understand this shift. In addition, faculty expressed some concern about larger class sizes (which increase revenue and, at the same time, increase demands for mentorship) without more supports for teaching. Not surprisingly, faculty are feeling pressure about balancing the growing demands with the need to engage in funded research. In this context, the ability to have non-primary joint faculty share mentoring load is important and could be eased by some amount of support for mentoring.

The launch of a new, heavily subscribed undergraduate program is an exciting development. However, it is important to note that in spite of there being new incremental funds for this program, additional strains will be placed on the faculty for teaching. To their credit, there is a wide cross-section of the department engaged in undergraduate teaching including senior faculty.

Suggestions/issues that should be considered by the Department include the following:

- To recognize and support increased mentoring demands, there might be a small percent of FTE in quarters that are research intensive or modest annual contributions to discretionary budget.

- Some students did indicate that more information about RAs would be very helpful, including current information about how many students have RAs and what their employment track record has been
- The Department might consider forming an advisory board to provide ongoing advice and input to the Department (internal advisory board made up of leadership of local and regional partners, external advisory board of leadership of peer academic units across the country).

Fiscal Climate

A primary emphasis on Activity-Based Budgeting (ABB) as fiscal support has had a negative effect on morale with a feeling that the primary driver of Departmental planning is budget, see comments on faculty engagement (key will be having a bigger higher order vision). Careful consideration is critically needed to assess whether the ABB should be applicable down to the department level. While the ABB model might work at a higher level of aggregation beyond the individual academic departments, it appears to be straining the Department of Epidemiology's ability to grow and be innovative in exploring new research and educational approaches. There is no real margin in which to launch new initiatives the Department is forced to have a defensive posture when it comes to innovation in their missions. ABB also does not account for mentoring efforts. Epidemiology could use some help in making strategic decisions under ABB that align with the greater university mission. In addition, the Chair could benefit from being with other leadership (both inside and outside of SPH) who can share ideas, visions, and opportunities to build off of other program's shared needs or leverage resources from other partners.

Moreover, every single faculty needs to have a better understanding of the budget realities. There is a clear understanding that dollars are tight and difficult choices must be made. Yet, there is also frustration about the cuts to classes and TA support. The sense of the Review Committee is that while the faculty and students understand funding is tight, they have limited understanding of funding sources for the Department. In particular, they need more information as to how various educational programs contribute to revenue and the implications this has for the number of classes offered and minimum class sizes (particularly how undergraduate courses with large enrollments could help subsidize graduate level courses with smaller enrollments). Funding of RAs for students was raised as an issue and as was the importance of training grants and research grants outside Epi held by non-primary joint faculty was raised multiple times. Though administration has been transparent about budget issues, sitting down with faculty and going over budget options again is highly recommended.

The idea of an online program is being explored by leadership and PCE. An online option has the potential to increase revenue significantly but more information is need about feasibility, the potential applicant pool, and cost to run versus potential income generated. The committee recommends continued exploration of a self-sustaining program as an option. Developing the program will take time and resources up-front but the payoff could be significant. PCE has excellent resources and modelling tools to help with this since they share in risk. Engaging with them soon will quickly help determine viability of this. Of note per current PCE policy, PCE programs are self-sustaining and revenues need to be reinvested in the program and shouldn't subsidize other programs.

Suggestions/issues that should be considered by the Department include the following:

- It would be helpful to generate a matrix to model class expenses and revenues (for each class what is enrollment each year last few years, breakdown of undergraduate departmental major, undergraduate non-major, graduate departmental major, graduate non-major, projected/estimated ABB revenue based on enrollment, projected cost for faculty (using 4% per credit and typical faculty salary), projected cost for other resources (eg. instructional techs, TAs)
- Summative data on all revenue streams and expenses (more granular than in the self study could help engage faculty in shared problem solving.
- Develop, share and apply policies for starting up a new course, moving a course to less than annual offering.
- Develop clear policies about the minimum number of students required to be enrolled in a course, and the number of students needed for TA support (this may look quite different across different types of courses).
- The School's' Advancement team should work intensively with the Department on fundraising. Endowed professorships, getting a donor to fund scholarships, and traineeships (which might include course costs and faculty FTE) are options. Training grants are a boost to the program and attract students. Though they take up faculty and staff time, they also provide significant rewards. Working with other units across campus on training grants may be a great option.
- Leadership, faculty and students all raised concerns about the “siloing” of courses as well as the overlap across courses in MPH curriculum within and across Departments. These overlaps should be looked at from pedagogic and fiscal points of view.

Diversity

Some concerns were raised that Epidemiology was not being proactive with respect to diversity efforts. The recent creation of an Epidemiology Diversity Committee with faculty/staff/student representation is promising. The Committee suggests that the Diversity Committee works on its current priorities:

- 1) Strengthening diversity within the Department’s curricula
- 2) Developing and implementing recruitment policies
- 3) Developing and implementing initiatives for mentoring and recruitment of URM faculty, staff, and students
- 4) Working to create and sustain a welcoming climate
- 5) Developing and implementing activities for professional development of faculty and staff related to diversity issues.

Towards these ends, we suggest that all faculty and staff engage in diversity training and that diversity is an area of priority in future retreats. The Department should also have representatives on campus wide initiatives related to equity.

Fostering Relationships with Off Campus Partners

Faculty at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center (Fred Hutch), Group Health and other outside UW sites are absolutely critical to the Department's reputation and strength. While they do not run grants through the Department, these faculty have been quite successful in securing training grants for students. They also provide significant mentorship for students, serve on departmental committees, and teach in areas different from primary UW faculty. That said, a number of the non-primary joint faculty feel disenfranchised and are at risk of becoming disengaged. It will be important to keep them feeling supported and involved. This will likely include recognizing and rewarding their unique contributions. The reviewers heard examples of why grants or parts of grants were run from an off-site entity but it is unclear if there are different models that might bring indirects to the UW (eg. splitting grants between UW and another organization). It may be that trying to get indirects from non-primary joint faculty without a significant quid pro quo is unrealistic but developing clearer guidelines related to indirects is needed and might help alleviate some faculty concerns.

Given the current financial restraints, it will be challenging to prioritize linkages with external city, county, and state agencies at this time. Some thoughts might be given to how to leverage collaborations with these government agencies to jointly go after new extramural research funding.

Suggestions/issues that should be considered by the Department include the following:

- Covering the gap between actual salary and NIH cap is complicated for non-primary joint faculty and warrants written clarification on the policy with the relevant partners. Any agreement should factor in the annual maximum salary cap for teaching since this de facto creates a funding gap or a cost share for teaching.
- The Committee suggests separating teaching assignments and resources (eg. TAs) from research collaboration/mentorship discussions with non-primary joint faculty. The ability to fund FTE for teaching and TAs is relevant for all faculty whether primary or joint but expectations around grant submission, indirects and administrative support for grants apply mainly to primary faculty.
- Relatedly, it is important that changes in available resources are discussed with all faculty. Primary core faculty have higher Departmental expectations and, thus, more resources provided by the Department (eg. 5% FTE, space). Historically, there were more resources for non-primary faculty and creative solutions for support and a recalibration of expectations is necessary.
- There should be a clear articulation of the implication of joint appointments for epidemiology faculty affiliated with outside organizations.

Summary

Overall, the committee assessment of the Department is very positive. The Department has an excellent reputation at the national and internal levels, attracting highly competitive students, faculty, and staff. Departmental faculty and staff are productive and deeply committed to the Department. The Department Chair, Victoria Holt, has done an excellent job of implementing new, creative initiatives in a resource-lean time. The administration is

doing the best they can with limited resources, yet, without more fiscal support, there is also a very real danger of the Department being unable to sustain its programs. The committee strongly encourages the University administration to assist the Department in seeking new means of support. Additional issues raised in this report should be addressed in a long-term strategic planning process which the Chair has already launched.