

Joy Williamson-Lott
Dean of the Graduate School
University of Washington

Dear Dean Williamson-Lott,

We are very grateful for thoughtful work done by the Graduate School and the external ten-year review committee last Spring. We appreciate their recognition of the crucial and central role that Statistics plays in a wide range of disciplines and activities across the University of Washington, and of the stature of the Statistics department as a top 10 department and an innovative leader in promoting interdisciplinary research. In this letter I offer the Department of Statistics response to the report of the review committee. This response is coming from myself, in my role as the interim Chair of the department, and was written in consultation with the Statistics Personnel Committee which consists of 5 professors: Elena Erosheva, Adrian Raftery, Werner Steutzle, Jon Wakefield and Daniela Witten.

In order to put this response in proper context let me provide some background for my role in the current leadership of Statistics. I am a Professor of Mathematics and have been at the University of Washington since 1996. My areas of research do not have significant overlap with Statistics. I came to this role through my work, as a member and then Chair, on the College of Arts & Sciences Elected Faculty Council. As you know the EFCs are advisory bodies to deans, so this brought me to work closely with Dean Robert Stacey and Natural Sciences Divisional Dean Suzanne Hawley. When the situation arose last year to seek an Interim Chair from outside the department, deans Stacey and Hawley turned to me. I accepted the position because I recognized the excellence of the Department of Statistics and the fundamental role the department plays in the landscape of the College, and I saw a space where I could offer a temporary, but crucial, contribution to the well-being of the College of Arts & Sciences. I have been working closely with the department since June 2019 and have learned a great deal over the last six months. I believe that my “outsider status” puts me a unique position to judge the strengths and weaknesses and the challenges and opportunities of the department from a relatively objective perspective. It is from this position that this response has been crafted.

Responses to particular findings

I will respond specifically to a number of the particular key findings in the report.

Page 3: *“The Statistics Department has suffered potentially crippling faculty losses and retirements due to both bad luck and internal discord.”*

The fact that the department has suffered a large number of unfortunate faculty losses is not in dispute. The four faculty members who left were significant losses for the department and the University. Citing the report: *“While some of these changes arose from factors clearly beyond the control of the department, other losses could potentially have been avoided if the climate and resources within the*



department were better.” This should be clarified. Three of the four certainly left for personal reasons that were beyond the departments control or influence. My understanding is that only for one of the four did the environment within the department play a role.

Bottom Page 3: *“The Department’s faculty needs to function better as a team.”*

The findings described in this paragraph are at odds with what I have experienced and witnessed in working very intensely with the Statistics faculty over the last six months, as the Interim Chair. The report writes: *“Even to this day, hard feelings remain among some senior faculty about the establishment of the Center for Statistics in the Social Sciences (CSSS), which occurred 20 years ago.”* This is inaccurate and misleading. It has been my observation that there is exactly one, and only one, faculty for who the establishment of CSSS, is a significant negative aspect of the departments landscape. For this isolated faculty member, everything associated with CSSS is permanently and irreparably flawed. Unfortunately, this faculty member has acted in a way that hurts the department’s environment.

In contrast to this perspective, I have observed this department repeatedly coming together and acting collectively to work for the common good of the faculty, their students and the University. One area where this has happened is with the current external search for a professor and chair. Excellent candidates, some of who are already serving as chair of leading Statistics departments, have been attracted to apply for the position due in large part to the collective strength of the faculty and students in the department. Seeing how the department has come together to host the visits by these candidates, and to openly and honestly discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their candidacy has been very encouraging to me. In these discussions, and many others, the department’s voting faculty are uniformly highly engaged. Many apparently well-functioning departments actually operate with a high degree of apathy, with many faculty ignoring department wide issues and focusing all of their attention exclusively on their own research and students. This is not the case in Statistics, where, in most issues that I have encountered - from undergraduate curriculum to graduate student progress to faculty hiring, all voting faculty are highly engaged and listen carefully to each other. The department’s voting process ensures that all faculty have an active voice in decisions. Indeed, when decisions are arrived at, to proceed in one direction, those that felt that best course was in a different direction nonetheless accept the outcome and carry on for the benefit of the department as a whole.

Page 4: *“Now is the critical, and perhaps final, opportunity to preserve and nurture this top-10 department and its contribution to world leading research and data science literacy at UW.”*

We share the review committee’s assessment that now is the crucial time to make key investments in personnel by proactively hiring new faculty in the department of Statistics. We are concluding the department’s efforts in conducting an external search for a professor and chair. Four excellent candidates were brought to the department for interviews. This past Monday, the department approved the appointment of three of them and forwarded that list, along with their recommendations, to Dean Stacey and Divisional Dean Hawley, who will now seek to appoint one of these faculty to the department to serve as the new Chair. The department is also conducting a search for an assistant professor and has collectively agreed on a very strong group of 6 candidates, 5 women and 1 man, to bring onto campus in January, 2020 for interviews.

The Deans have clearly communicated to the chair candidates their approval for a five year hiring plan which includes roughly seven positions within the next five years. The department is very grateful for the continued support of the College of Arts & Sciences as we strive to rebuild the department while maintaining our excellent research profile. We believe that the hiring plan needs to be front loaded to bring new faculty in sooner rather than later, and we expect that this will be part of the new chair's negotiations with the deans.

Page 4: *"It appears necessary to undertake an external search for the next departmental chair. Success in the chair search is not assured."*

As we have already mentioned, this search is already very advanced, and while success is certainly not assured, we note a number of reasons for optimism. It is our hope that this search is successfully concluded in the near future and the new chair, who will be a leading Statistician, can begin making long term efforts to take the department forward in a positive and proactive manner. The College has devoted many resources to this, in particular they hired the executive search firm WittKeiffer to aid our search and their work has been very valuable. The department faculty have devoted a huge amount of resources and time into making the search successful.

Page 4 (bottom): *"In spite of the need to retain hiring flexibility for the future chair, faculty count is so low relative to current teaching demands that two recruitments need to be made in the next academic year, one potentially above the rank of assistant professor."*

We agree with this point. Indeed, of the three names that were forwarded to Deans for the Professor and Chair position, the department expressed a great deal of support for the idea that one of them be hired as a professor after one of the other two are hired as a professor and chair. My revised 5 year hiring plan will list an open rank search (assuming that this second professor position is not filled this year) for three positions; 1 at the rank of associate or full professor, and 2 at the rank of assistant professor. The hiring of new faculty needs to be front loaded in the 5 year plan in order to address the very diminished and insufficient faculty size with respect to both teaching and service.

Page 5: *"The Department should follow up on the findings of the recent CERSE climate study"*

Last Summer, I identified new leadership for the departments Diversity Committee, which is now led by Assistant Professor Alex Luedtke. Professor Luedtke has played an active role in organizing the faculty and students in discussions and actions aimed at improving the climate in the department and addressing issues of equity. The department held, under Luedtke's leadership, our first Town Hall Meeting on Diversity in early November. This was attended by a wide range of students and faculty, including myself, and the director of PhD admissions. We are in the process of putting many of the suggestions from this meeting into place. Alex and I have also been actively engaged in discussions, along with other Mathematical Sciences departments (Mathematics and Applied Mathematics) and Biostatistics (in the School of Public Health) with the leadership of *The National Alliance for Doctoral Studies in the Mathematical Sciences* (<https://mathalliance.org>), "Math Alliance" for short). A number of us have already joined the Math Alliance as faculty mentors and we some have attended the *Field of Dreams* conference this past November. In the future, I can easily envision UW becoming a regional hub for the Math Alliance and playing a significant role in the primary goal of the alliance namely that

“every underrepresented or underserved American student with the talent and the ambition has the opportunity to earn a doctoral degree in a mathematical science.”

We have already taken a number of actions meant to improve the climate of the department from the perspective of the student body.

- 1) I have created an annual budget for all student focused activity and increased the department's expenditures on these activities (by leveraging my Chair Funds with the department's discretionary budget). These annual budget expenditures have been communicated to the graduate student GSRs and the leadership of the undergraduate student organization as well as their faculty advisors, and a structure was set in place so that this level of funding should continue on a yearly basis.
- 2) We paid the registration fees for any interested female identifying students to attend the *2019 Women in Statistics and Data Science Conference* which took place October 3-5 in Bellevue, WA. About 7 students took advantage of this opportunity.
- 3) In collaboration with faculty from Biostatistics, we gave both undergraduate and graduate Statistics students the opportunity to attend (with their registration fees paid) the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) which was held in Seattle, WA, February 13-16, 2020.
- 4) With financial and logistical support from the department and myself, the undergraduate Statistics and Probability Association (SPA) and a number of Statistics PhD students have launched a Directed Reading Program (DRP): <https://spa-drp.github.io>. One of the explicit goals of the DRP is to encourage undergraduates from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds to explore statistics.
- 5) Graduate student input was an explicit part of our search and evaluation of the candidates for the professor and chair position. The same will be true for our assistant professor search.

Many of these actions all also speak to the comment on page 6 of the report: “The department should make more funds available for student-organized social activities”.

Page 5: *“Potential to expand the undergraduate major”*

We agree that this is a significant opportunity and challenge for the department and this has been one of the focal points in our search for a new chair. We believe that each of the three approved candidates given to the deans would make this a focus of their tenure as chair if they accept the position.

Page 5 (bottom): *“Instructor and acting assistant professor career paths and mentoring”*

The committee apparently did not realize that the instructors that they met with, which were competitively hired and are on multi-year contracts, are *part-time* lecturers and therefore do not have access to *“taking advantage of the appointment ladder available to faculty in the instructor stream at UW”*. This Autumn the department requested, and was granted, a search for a full-time Senior Lecturer. A number of our part-time lecturers wish to remain part-time for personal and professional reasons, but at least one of them would be a strong candidate for this position. Likewise, our acting assistant professor is currently one of the candidates for our tenure-track assistant professor position.

Page 6: *“Future interim report and full review: Given the extensive challenges faced by the Department, the committee recommends it submit a three-year interim report.”*

I would respectfully suggest that if this year’s external search for a professor and chair is successful, then a three-year interim report would be counterproductive. This would require that the new chair devote extensive energy during their second year at UW to writing an interim report. We all understand that for someone coming from outside the University, there will be a steep learning curve. Most of their first year will be devoted to learning how the department and the UW functions. Year 2 should be devoted to their beginning to implementing their vision for positive change. The three-year interim report would be a distraction and an obstacle for progress.

I would instead suggest a 5 year interim report. This would take place in the fourth year of the new chair’s term and be a useful milestone for them to reflect on their progress and express a plan for the future trajectory of the department.

Summary

It has been a tremendous honor to work with the faculty, students and staff of the Statistics Department over the last 6 months. This is a vibrant and excellent department which is poised to position itself solidly in the group of the top 5 Statistics departments in the country, if not the world. The climate in the department is vastly improved from where it was when the external committee visited last Spring and the department is in the midst of a strong upswing which I predict will be long and sustained. The University of Washington and the College of Arts & Sciences should be proud of this department and expect great things from it, it’s faculty and it’s students, in the years to come.

Sincerely Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dante Pelland". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the last letter.

Interim Chair Statistics
Professor of Mathematics