

December 9, 2022

RE: Response to 10 year review committee report, Fall 2022

Dear Colleagues:

The Astronomy department thanks the committee for their time and effort on behalf of both the department and university in participating in the 10 year review process. We also very much appreciate the deep and thoughtful assessment of our programs, and the detailed and thorough suggestions contained in the recommendations.

As mentioned in our self-study document, and reiterated in the committee report, UW Astronomy is one of the top Astronomy departments in the country. Our faculty have leadership roles in several major national and international research programs, including the Vera Rubin Observatory (which will carry out the LSST survey beginning in 2025), current and future space telescopes including JWST and the Roman Observatory, and NSF and NASA initiatives in Astrobiology and Data Science (where our faculty also play leading roles within the University). Additionally, within the past five years, our faculty have served in leadership roles providing service to the University as Chair of the Faculty Senate, Divisional Dean of Natural Sciences, Director of eScience, Director of the Astrobiology Program, and Associate Vice Provost for Data Science. With only fourteen tenure-track faculty members, two of whom are on extended research leave, and this impressive record of scholarly leadership and university service, it is no wonder that the department is feeling stressed to carry out the significant day-to-day service functions required within academia (e.g. numerous committees, mentoring, advising) along with our classroom teaching and research.

The goal of any top scientific research department, including ours, is to actively participate in national and international scholarly leadership roles. We appreciate that the committee has recognized our outsized contributions in these areas. Moreover, we broadly agree with the recommendations in the report for significant internal work, and wish we had the time and personnel available to deal with these issues. Toward this end, we very much appreciate that the College has authorized two tenure-track hires this year to replace our two retirements. However, the newly hired assistant professors will not be able to immediately take on the significant service burdens that are currently weighing us down. Therefore, an essential part of our strategic plan (as recommended in the report) will be a thoughtful consideration of the growth of our faculty that is needed to address this overriding issue of not having enough people to carry out department functions and university service while continuing to serve in our national

leadership roles. Additionally, we must continue to provide high-quality education for undergraduates in our general education classes (where our SCH have increased significantly in the past ten years), our undergraduate majors (which have tripled in the past ten years) and our graduate students (who consistently obtain prize postdocs and become leaders in the field of Astronomy, as well as increasingly being employed in industry, particularly in data-science fields).

With that context, our response to the recommendations in the committee report follows.

1. Creation of Written Policies, Job Descriptions, Review Criteria

The committee is absolutely correct that the significant growth in the department, particularly in the areas of undergraduate majors (tripled in the past 10 years) and postdocs/research scientists, means that older and often informal policies are no longer sufficient, and need to be updated and clarified. Furthermore, we consider our excellent staff and their dedication to their work to be a significant asset within the Astronomy department. They are driving much of the excellence in Astronomy that was recognized by the committee. We are optimistic that with our new department administrator starting this year, we will be able to address various organizational issues identified in the report so that job descriptions match the work that the staff is already successfully carrying out. We appreciate the detailed list of specific recommendations that will help guide us in considering new and updated department policies.

2. Strategic Planning

The faculty held a very well-attended and informative two day retreat during the self-study process in Spring 2022. As this was the first opportunity for all of us to be together in person since Fall 2019, due to the global pandemic, an essential part of the retreat focused on reconnection and community building. The retreat was extremely valuable and led to deep and broad thinking about where we wish to focus as a department in the future. Unfortunately, with only two days, we were not able to complete a thoughtful and comprehensive strategic plan at that time, but this is a high priority for us in the near future.

3. Leadership

Our current chair is halfway through the second year of his 2-year appointment. The department will need a new chair to start during Summer, 2023. We are happy that the chair search process has started so that we can identify who the next chair will be.

4. Strategic diversity, equity and inclusion plan

As the committee report notes, our faculty is quite diverse in gender, but less so in BIPOC

Astronomy Department

University of Washington

Box 351580 Seattle, WA 98195 (206) 543-2588 FAX: (206)685-0403

representation. There are two important things to note here. First, we have not been authorized to hire tenure-track positions for eight years. This is due to our demographics, since we had no retirements during that time. Presumably we can agree that it is not possible to make progress on the makeup of the faculty if we are not able to hire any faculty. Second, our current hiring process (for the two tenure-track hires that we are authorized to make this year) uses anonymized applications and requires a formal DEI statement, as recommended by the committee. We feel that we are actually ahead of the curve in our hiring practices, and we will see how this works out in the coming months.

5. Workloads

As described above, service workloads are at an all-time high across the department. We need more people in order to make progress in this area. One important area where we could immediately benefit is for the College to provide state support for one or both of the teaching faculty who are currently being paid from department funds. This would allow those funds to be repurposed for additional staff support to address workload issues especially in administering the undergraduate program, developing written departmental policies and handbooks that are publicly available, and in providing additional administrative support for departmental committees.

6. Undergraduate education

A point of clarification is that we no longer have a research requirement in the astronomy major as of two years ago; nonetheless, we are struggling with a huge demand for undergraduate research opportunities relative to available positions. In light of the huge growth in undergraduate majors that we have experienced in the past several years, we consider it a priority to revisit the undergraduate curriculum in order to continue to provide a rigorous, world-class education to all of our majors. As we continue in this work, we will need to carefully consider the workload issues mentioned above.

7. Graduate education

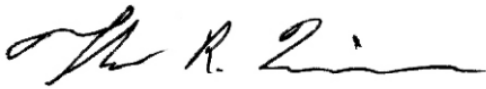
Our graduate population is actually 30 students (not 25 as written in the report), which is approximately 5 students per year for the six years that is typical for earning a PhD. Admitting additional graduate students has been a topic of discussion for many years. It carries additional faculty workload and department commitments that we have not been able to make given the limited size of the faculty and uncertainty in department funding. This will certainly be a part of

our long term strategic planning discussion. The committee report has already enabled worthwhile discussion between the faculty and graduate students on pay scales, committees, and transparency of communication. We look forward to continuing this community building which has also suffered during the pandemic.

8. Private funding

We agree that further work is needed to develop the scientific rationale and cost structure for access to a large telescope, and that it will be beneficial to work with Advancement as this document is developed. We also agree that a postdoctoral fellowship program that builds on the success of DiRAC and also benefits the entire department is a high priority target for fundraising.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. R. Quinn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thomas Quinn
Professor and Chair
Department of Astronomy
University of Washington