Strategic Assessment for Graduate Degree Programs in Biostatistics

The graduate faculty members of Biostatistics greatly appreciate the “exemplary” assessment of our MS and PhD program in Biostatistics. The graduate program has been our very high priority and it is gratifying to see our efforts appreciated. We thank the Graduate Task Force for its assessment, which requires no response. We take this opportunity, however, to reiterate some points regarding our program.

1. In our submission to the Task Force, we identified the greatest limitation to our program as the number of faculty members in biostatistics. This was echoed in our recent, 2008, external review. The external review report noted:

   “Because the teaching responsibilities of faculty are spread fairly thin to cover service courses, MS courses, and PhD courses, some of the required PhD courses (e.g., theory of biostatistics) are taught only in alternate years. This affects the teaching of other courses which ordinarily would require the alternating-year courses as pre-requisites. E.g., it would be logical to take survival after having been introduced to likelihood methods and nonparametrics. The alternating-year configuration is dictated by practical considerations: the faculty are spread too thin to offer all required courses every year.”

2. As noted above by the external reviewers, Biostatistics faculty members teach multiple courses providing biostatistical training across the health sciences. These “service courses” are applied, rather than technical, and are not appropriate for our Biostatistics graduate students. Service courses are an important part of our mission, but they detract from teaching our own graduate students. Fortunately the Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science (SAS) in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has an excellent Statistics program. To use resources efficiently, and to avoid duplication, biostatistics graduate students take several courses from SAS. Our graduate program in Biostatistics would be incomplete without their teaching, their participation in advising students, and their service on dissertation committees. SAS and Biostatistics have different missions, but the extraordinary cooperation between the two departments at Iowa has been very helpful in our success.

3. The external report also reported:

   “This is a strong Department, highly competitive with similar departments at other Universities, doing an excellent job in recruiting and training students, and in carrying out methodological and collaborative research”.

Summary

In times of budget reductions, it is difficult to argue for additional resources. There is, however, a national shortage of biostatisticians, and our graduates, both MS and PhD, are in high demand.\footnote{1} When resources become available, we believe that investment in additional faculty with expertise in biostatistics would be strategic for the University of Iowa, and we respectfully request that this be considered in the future.

Reference