We thank the committee for its efforts in meeting a difficult challenge.

We appreciate the committee’s insight in recognizing the high quality of our Actuarial Science program with an “Exemplary” rating. The high quality of our Actuarial Science program has recently been confirmed by the designation of our Department as a Center of Actuarial Excellence by the Society of Actuaries.

It is unfortunate that the committee did not show similar insight in the assessment of our Statistics program. The implication that our program is below median quality among graduate programs at the University of Iowa is absurd. As made clear in our Strategic Assessment report, our Ph.D. program is strong relative to its national peers, with very good placement of our graduates both at the MS and Ph.D. levels (recent Ph.D. placements include positions at the Mayo Clinic, Northwestern, and University of Michigan). The contrast in assessments of our program and the Biostatistics program is particularly puzzling. Historically among Statistics and Biostatistics programs the Statistics program at Iowa has been considered far stronger than the Biostatistics program. While Biostatistics has improved significantly in recent years it is now at best comparable to the Statistics program in national standing.

It is also important to note that there is a strong synergy between the Statistics and Biostatistics programs: many of our core and elective courses are taken by both Statistics and Biostatistics students, often in equal numbers, and we expect this to increase over time. Five of our faculty also hold joint appointments in Biostatistics. A similar synergy exists at the Ph.D. level with our Actuarial Science program. The Actuarial Science track in the Statistics Ph.D. was an important contributor to the designation of the Department as a Center of Actuarial Excellence.

As the committee narrative points out, and we point out in our Strategic Assessment report, the median time to degree is currently too long, and we are working hard on reducing this by starting to offer core courses every year when possible and by modifications to the advising process that encourage students to start earlier on thesis research. We believe we have made significant progress, but our success will depend heavily on whether we are able to replace our three recent and impending faculty retirements and a recent departure of an outstanding senior faculty member for another position.

The completion percentage reported in the narrative does not reflect the current situation—it is based on a cohort that entered graduate school in the previous century. Estimates based on more recent data suggest that the rate is now at least 65%, and we continue to strive to improve the number of students who persist and complete the Ph.D. degree. It is important to understand that in Statistics leaving with an MS degree does not necessarily imply failure on the part of a student or a program. Job opportunities for MS graduates are excellent, as seen by our placement results, and it is not uncommon for students enrolled in Ph.D. programs in Statistics across the nation to decide to leave with an MS degree for entirely non-academic reasons.

The committee narrative states that the high proportion of our students who are international makes funding these students difficult. This is not true. Almost all our Ph.D. students and most of our Statistics MS students are funded, either as TAs or RAs. Some TAs who are not sufficiently qualified can only be used as graders, but all who are promised support are given support, and very few Statistics applicants who are admitted without support decide to enroll.

Our Strategic Assessment report mentions that we would like to increase the number of Ph.D. students in order to improve our ability to offer courses with sufficient enrollment on a more regular basis. Given space limitations we did not give details on how these additional students would be funded, and the committee raises concerns about this. We hope to fund this increase by a combination of (i) increased retention from the MS program and corresponding slight reduction in the size of MS entry classes, (ii) reduced time to degree, and (iii) more aggressive pursuit of RA positions. There is a significant demand for our students as RAs on grants directly to our faculty and on grants to units across the university. Due to our high TA needs we have often had to turn down these opportunities. We have already stepped up our pursuit of these opportunities to address reductions in TA funds and will continue to do so. As we attract more excellent students, we are confident that we will be able to fund them.

In conclusion, the graduate program in Statistics is a very strong program with a strong national reputation, very good placement of graduates, and strong ties to other programs at the University of Iowa. We do face challenges, which we honestly and openly acknowledged in our Strategic Assessment report, but we expect to be able to meet those challenges and to continue to move forward and enhance the national standing of the Department and the University. We strongly urge the committee to reconsider its rating of the Statistics graduate program.