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Numbers really don't lie: Statisticians are needed

Disciplines vary, but all of them require expertise with computers and databases, professor says


By VICTOR GODINEZ / The Dallas Morning News

Dr. Richard Gunst has a bone to pick with Mark Twain.

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics," Mr. Twain wrote, claiming to quote British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.

But Dr. Gunst, who chairs the statistics department at Southern Methodist University (www.smu.edu/statistics), works hard to dispel the notion that statistics can be twisted to suit convenience.

"It is absolutely not true that you can say anything with statistics," he said. "What I tell my students is that if two people come up with different conclusions using the same data, then at least one person is wrong."



Dr. Gunst and others say there's a shortage of statisticians, professionals who

are as skilled in computers as they are in mathematics and statistical analysis.

ALLISON V. SMITH/DMN
SMU professor Dr. Richard Gunst and graduate student Jeff Spence go over a paper.

"There's always a difficulty in getting domestic students involved in very complicated disciplines," said Dr. William Smith, executive director of the American Statistical Association (www.amstat.org/careers). "All of the sciences are dealing with that."

Part of the problem is that many people don't know what statisticians do, Dr. Smith said.

"We don't have people sitting around doing data on the Mavs game," he said.

Dr. Gunst said that statisticians' work ranges from measuring car emissions to studying global warming to sifting through hundreds of thousands of radiologic images.

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"We've got people in our department who have worked with geophysicists on nuclear test ban treaty verifications from seismic data," he said.

Regardless of what field they specialize in, statisticians have to be experts with computers, Dr. Gunst said.

"The computer is our laboratory," he said. "There are so many more things we can do in terms of analyzing very complicated databases because of the computer that we couldn't do 15 years ago."

"Computational statistics is a major subdiscipline, but everything we do is computational these days," Dr. Smith added.

Universities, the government and private industry are all big employers of statisticians.

Dr. Smith estimated that there are probably 35,000 statisticians in the United States.

Salaries vary greatly, depending on the area of expertise, but a recent survey by the statistical association found that the median salary for entrants with a bachelor's degree is \$45,000.

Statisticians with doctorates start at about \$80,000.

One of the hottest employment areas is the pharmaceutical industry, which is siphoning off about one-third of the new doctoral graduates, Dr. Smith said.

Statisticians are needed to examine results from clinical trials, which drug companies must perform before medicines can go to market.

Dr. Gunst said that statisticians never experienced the surge in demand that computer programmers or network engineers did in the late 1990s – but they also weren't nearly as affected by the economic slowdown.

"Every semester, I get calls from headhunters who have job openings," he said.

E-mail vgodinez@dallasnews.com



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