DEPARTMENT UPDATES

From the Chair's Desk

DR. BERTRAND CLARKE

It seems only yesterday that I was writing my last column for this newsletter. It's a bit of déjà vu because I wrote about how we were updating our programs and hiring new junior people and we are still updating our programs and hiring new junior people.

Some details:

Spring 2015, we revamped the required courses for our MS and PhD programs. These new and revised courses will prepare our students for the latest needs of the statistical science and the job market. In August 2016, we will begin the actual implementation of these courses. This will make new demands on all of us, but we can do it.

Fall 2015, we revamped our examination system. Loosely, the written comprehensive exam for MS students was replaced by a 'Stat Day' presentation of a project. The written exam is now a qualifying exam primarily for PhD students. This means we won't have one written exam serving double duty for our two degree programs. This rationalization was long overdue.

Our two junior hires, Dr. Qian Zhang and Yuzhen Zhou arrived in August 2015 and have been roaring along like the proverbial house afire. They glided smoothly into their new professorially ranked jobs and within months Qi and Yuzhen were rapidly acquiring the skills junior people must acquire to be successful.

At this time of writing we have an accepted offer from Dr. Yuhang Xu who will join us in August. He fills the Statistical Prediction position that we were unable to fill last year. (Remember in my column last year I said we had three positions? We only filled two. Just as well – getting Yuhang is a bit of a coup.) We have one more position to fill and at this point we have three candidates. We may even have an option on another position. Stay tuned.

Dr. Erin Blankenship and Chris Bilder were named Fellows of the American Statistical Association (ASA). This award is limited to only 1/3 of one percent of all ASA members each year. In total, our Department now has five fellows among its faculty (four current and one retired). Dr. Blankenship received her award at the Joint Statistics Meetings in August, 2015. Her Fellow citation was "for innovation and leadership in K-12 teacher development; for excellence in teaching, training, and inspiring future teachers, teaching assistants, and statistics education researchers; and for interdisciplinary collaboration and service to the profession."

Dr. Bilder will receive his award at the Joint Statistics Meetings this August during the Fellow's recognition ceremony. His Fellow citation was "for influential contributions in categorical data analysis and group testing methods; for leadership in K-12 teacher development; for excellence in teaching, training, and inspiring future teachers, teaching assistants, and statistics education researchers; and for interdisciplinary collaboration and service to the profession." So, where do we go from here? Glad you asked. Our 'To Do' list seems to get more and more inclusive as we go along. Here are some major items:

Revamp our elective courses. My view is that now our required courses are comparable to the required courses at all the top statistical departments. So, we want to go after comparative advantage via our electives. That means we must figure out what important statistical topics we can easily offer well that other departments could only offer with great effort. Many of us have ideas, but this is going to be a group decision led by our junior people, with support from the senior people. We have some top junior people so we want their contribution to where the Department should go.

Revamp our service courses at the graduate level. This goal speaks for itself. We want to make sure that we are offering what other departments need, especially in terms of new and emerging techniques. Achieving this will be a longer process than updating our required or elective courses because we will have to coordinate with many departments—departments that have become more quantitative and so may be making new demands on us.

Build out our consulting program. Part of this will happen as we bring out our new required courses. But there's more: The Stat Help Desk will be staffed by two PhD students year round. We made one visit to the Panhandle REC and we are planning another. We are also looking for ways to be part of extension more generally. It would be good for the subject matter researchers and for our students. I remember way back when I had a job as a surveyor in statistics—doing door-to-door asking people to fill out questionnaires. There's nothing like participating in data collection to help you understand what you are really measuring.

Develop a service MS degree. The idea is that there are many people who intend to get a PhD in some field other than statistics. I don't know why people would want a PhD that wasn't in Statistics but it takes all types to make a world. We have to come up with a track so they can get a 'terminal' (unfortunate terminology, that) MS from us that will serve them well on the job market. It can't just be the same as our regular MS because it's a different audience. This is controversial but we can resolve it with some compromising here and there—without losing the intellectual foundation of our MS degree.

Critically evaluate our undergraduate offerings, maybe starting with the Statistics Minor. Let's get our existing undergrad courses in order as a prelude to starting our own major.

And then there are a whole host of things we are doing that we mustn't stop doing... Recruiting the best students to our programs that we can. Mentoring and otherwise advising our junior people. Helping to get our Department more recognition. Some of this is the usual thing: Professional service with journals, conferences, speaking opportunities etc. Some of this is new: More engagement with the broader community, ensuring that we identify the 21st century trends early and get to the front of the queue.

When I reflect on all the new things we're trying to do I keep asking myself what we can stop doing so we will have the time, energy, and other resources to do all the new things we have to do so we can march smartly into the 21st century. I'm confident answers will emerge. Once you've got good people, the rest follows.
Allan L. McCutcheon passed away on Tuesday, May 2, 2016. Allan was a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Statistics, Cifron Chair of Survey Science, founding director of the Gallup Research Center, and founding chair of the Survey Research and Methodology doctoral program at UNL. In addition, he was the Senior Statistician of the National Weather Storm Forecasting Center, which conducts exit polls and calls for the presidential elections for ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News, and the Associated Press. Allan received numerous honors and awards, including the rank of Fellow in both the American Statistical Association and the Royal Statistical Society. He had served on numerous advisory panels related to survey research including the National Science Foundation’s panel on the “Future of Survey Research.” He educated a generation of students and treated them as family. Allan greatly enjoyed traveling around the world and was also a devoted “foodie” – exploring new dishes in restaurants and in the kitchen. To help relieve the stress of his professional commitments, Allan engaged in an appropriate hobby — juggling. After taking up the hobby long time ago to improve his hand-eye coordination, he later found it very helpful to release the shear fun of it, indulging the neighborhood children with an occasional show while he practiced tossing balls and clubs in the air. His wife added to the spectacle of his routine when she bought him a unicycle for his birthday. “She said if I learned to ride the unicycle, I’d have to buy a bear costume” he laughed. Allan was a wonderful colleague and will be greatly missed by the many people whose lives were enriched by knowing him.

When I came to the University of Nebraska in April of 1989, it was to start a Department of Biometry with a Master’s Program. When I arrived there were already four faculty in the center, not including Dr. Charles C. Gardner who headed it up. I was allowed two new faculty positions as well as some programming positions. Obviously, the developing of a new department and program was successful. However, it was apparent from the start that other departments had ways to obtain additional funding which we did not. Researchers in other departments were not, at that time, encouraged to put statistical faculty on their grants. Hence we needed to find a way to “enhance” our financial outlook.

I had worked for US/AID for several years on a project in Rwanda. At that time US/AID had a summer program for international students on US/AID fellowships which allowed them to attend a US/AID sanctioned summer program. Thus, we developed a three week summer statistics program for which the Department was paid several thousand dollars (I think) per student who attended. We had between ten and twenty students attend per year. Most of our faculty participated in the teaching which involved mostly field plot designs and analysis and regression analysis. We spend two weeks in the classroom and the final week went for a “field trip”. We were all tired of being cooped up in a classroom during the summer anyway!

For the “field trip” we usually went to Gudmundsen Ranch in the sandhills of Nebraska. This ranch is part of the UNL Extension program which contributes to the research through the Gudmundsen Ranch Sandhills Laboratory. From there we went to view Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Having some extra time on our hands at the end of the week, we then arrived at Deadwood, South Dakota about 7:00pm. You may recall, Deadwood is very tourist oriented and there are plenty of ways to gamble your money away. I started, the first year, by giving each student, two rolls of quarters (about twenty dollars) to “spend” however they chose. Within thirty minutes, I had students coming back asking for more money since they had lost all the money that they originally had been given. Then next year, I gave out only about half of the quarters to begin with, and then gave them less each time they ran out of money and thus lasted until time to head back to the motel.

One of the most interesting things which I participated in as Head of Biometry was a trip to a Morocco with all of the other IANR department heads. Nebraska was the lead institution in the MAC project which funded the trip. It was interesting in that as soon as the researchers learned that I was a statistician, I was separated from the other department heads and met privately with each researcher to help with analysis of data and experimental design. Of course, then, I missed it as I had to phone everyone else to get to, but I still had a great experience.

Lastly, one cold and blustery January day, I got a call from Dr. Larry Nelson from North Carolina State University. He wanted to know if I would like to be one of two main speakers at IBS (International Biometric Society) conference in Trinidad. I actually thought he was teasing, but he was on the level. The other speaker was C.R. Rao, I think most of you have heard of him. Then I was invited to take a long collaboration with CARDI (Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institution). However, this is enough for one newsletter, more later!

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HONORING DAVID MARX

BY DR. WALT STROUP

Dave Marx refined in June, 2015. He served the Department from 1995 until his retirement. Without Dave, there would be no Department of Statistics. With this article, we honor Dave and his service to the University and to the statistics discipline. When Dave retired in 1999, there was only a Biometrics Center with four faculty members. We did a little research, but mostly consulted and taught a few service courses. There was no Department and no degree program as we know it today. Within two years of his arrival, through Dave’s hard work, there was a Department of Biometry, Linda Young and Steve Kachman had joined our faculty, and the M.S program in Biometry was created. The Biometry Department established itself as a thriving applied statistics program, producing dozens of successful M.S graduates. In just a few years, the Department that Dave led grew from an idea to an essential component of what became the Department of Statistics in 2003. Shortly after the formation of the Biometry Department, Dave succeeded in hiring Carol Golway to join our faculty. While Carol and Linda later found new opportunities to pursue, each left a lasting, indelible and positive legacy to the benefit of statistics at the University of Nebraska.

As Department Head, Dave dramatically improved statistics’ impact on research at UNL, spearheaded efforts to involve the Department in international programs in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, was instrumental in revitalizing the Nebraska Chapter of the American Statistical Association, and, in general, energized the statistics discipline in the state of Nebraska. Through his efforts, we came very close the creating the Statistics Department in the 1990s, and those efforts set the stage for what would occur a few years later.

As a person, Dave set precedents that helped make our Department a uniquely great place to work. When Dave came to UNL, his family consisted of three teenage or pre-teenage children. Without ever shirking his departmental responsibilities, he made clear that his family came first. If there was a soccer game or track meet involving one of his kids, he’d be there. He encouraged us to do the same. When I became Department Chair, Dave’s example made it easier for me to reserve priority time for my son, who was 8 then and 17 when I stepped down. When we faced dilemmas in faculty meeting, Dave always made it simple: “This decision isn’t that hard. What’s best for the students?” While the Statistics Department was formed and we added a PhD program, Dave had a run of highly successful PhD students. His former students will attest that Dave was a terrific advisor, one that the Department will sorely miss. In addition, I know that while I served as department chair, Dave’s counsel and advice was absolutely essential. I don’t have the words to express the gratitude for the wisdom, support, and encouragement he gave me during that period. Once he stepped down as Chair, Dave became by far and away the Department’s most versatile and effective consultant, collaborator and ambassador for statistics on the UNL campus.

It’s only been a few months, but we already miss Dave tremendously. All I can say is thank you Dave. You have been a tremendous colleague, a good friend, and we wish you only the best!
Ryan Danczak was born and raised in Marshfield, Wisconsin. He attended Winona State University from 2010-2014 and received a Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics and Math Education. After graduating, he accepted a teaching position at Hudson High School in Hudson, Wisconsin. In 2015, Ryan accepted a fellowship offer from the Statistics Department at UNL to pursue a Master’s Degree starting in the Fall of 2015. During free time, Ryan enjoys playing sports and spending time with his family.

Jessica Hauschild grew up in Andover, Kansas. She attended Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina, KS, where she received a Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics with minors in Computer Programming and Physics. Starting in August of 2015, Jessica began graduate school at UNL in the Department of Statistics. She is interested in going into industry following graduation. Some of her hobbies include watching TV (The Big Bang Theory is the favorite currently), reading, and volunteering at her parents’ respective workplaces.

Jinyu Li graduated from the Imperial College London in 2014. She pursues a Ph.D. in Statistics and serves as a Research Assistant in Dr. Douekova’s laboratory. Jinyu’s research interest is survey methodology and applications of statistics in public health. Applying statistics to benefit other people and improve their lives in the future is the most fulfilling thing she could imagine. In her free time, Jinyu loves travelling and exploring. Taking an adventure is also on the top of her bucket list.

Johnna Soller is originally from Walden, Colorado. She attended the University of Northern Colorado where she received a Bachelor’s degree in Applied Mathematics with an emphasis in Statistics and a minor in Business Administration. In August of 2015, Johnna started her graduate career at UNL in the Department of Statistics under the advising of Dr. Kachman. She is particularly interested in statistical applications in agriculture. Her pastimes include hunting, fishing, participating in any kind of sport, and spending time with her family on their ranch.

Yuzhen’s primary research interests lie in developing theories and tools to allow prediction and inference about large and multivariate spatial and spatial temporal datasets. For example, he seeks a modeling framework that incorporates disparate sources and types of spatially indexed data and propagates sources of uncertainty through to predictions.
MINORITY HEALTH INITIATIVE

On February 12th, 2016, RYAN DANZCAK and JOY JINYYU LI (students from Dr. Julia Soulakova’s research team, pictured at the New Students’ section) attended the 2016 Minority Health Initiative Retreat in Nebraska, Nevada. They were impressed by the keynote speaker Dr. David Choe, an epidemiologist who studies health disparities and the implications experienced by minorities. A particular focus of his research is discrimination, a qualitatively unique form of stress that has been connected with reduced mental well-being, damaging health activities and indicators of chronic disease risk. This retreat provided them a first-hand exposure to the current minority health challenges being researched. The retreat had an open forum for discussion on future plans for improving minority health in the United States. Being in a room surrounded with experts in the field of minority health was an invaluable learning experience. Ryan and Joy would highly recommend other Statistics students to attend similar retreats and seminars related to their particular area of interest.

The First Year has been Fantastic. It’s been interesting to meet with various coaches, trainers and department heads to learn what types of data they collect, how they’ve used that data in the past, and how I can help to take things a step further. I look for-...
Congratulations on everybody's hard work during the 2015-16 academic year! We hope that you were able to manage your education, research and other duties and activities in a productive way. We got a number of outstanding applications for the Graduate Fellowship this year. The Committee has worked very hard to determine the recipient of the fellowship.

Our congratulations go to DOLA PATHAK (pictured)! Dola has shown her long-term commitment to Statistics through her PhD research activities and outstanding performance in the 900-level courses. Dola’s name will be added to the plaque displayed in the main office later this year. Our congratulations also go to those students who applied for the fellowship but did not receive it. Thank you for providing us an opportunity to learn more about your research interests and academic achievements. Our senior students, CYRILLE NIZOUA and MARIINA PITUKHINA, received a travel award to attend the 2016 JSM and present their research activities.

Congratulations to the recipients of the 2016 JSM Travel Awards! Whether your plans for the summer are to study for an exam, work on your research, or take a break, we wish you a very productive summer and hope to hear from you next year!

RONNIE D. GREEN NAMED NEW CHANCELLOR

University of Nebraska President Hank Bounds announced that following a national search, he has named Ronnie D. Green the next chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Green’s appointment is subject to approval by the Board of Regents of its May 25 meeting.

"Under Chancellor Perlman’s leadership, and thanks to the efforts of talented faculty, staff and students, UNL is experiencing impressive momentum. Ronnie Green is that leader. He has a deep understanding of and commitment to the mission of a land-grant university. He recognizes UNL’s potential to reach an even higher level of excellence. And the feedback I’ve received from across our campus is that Ronnie is the right person to build on that momentum," Bounds said.

Reporting to the NU president, the UNL chancellor is an independent, cabinet-level position. The chancellor is the chief executive officer of the campus, which serves more than 25,000 students in nine academic colleges, employs more than 12,000 faculty and staff, and has an operating budget of more than $1.2 billion and research expenditures of more than $275 million, and includes a nationally prominent Division I athletics program.

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Source: UNL
TABLE OF CONTENTS

From the Chair 1-2
Department of Statistics History 3
Honoring Dave Marx 4
Welcome New Students 5-6
Welcome New Faculty 6
Research News 7
Student News 8
Campus News 9
Thank You 10
Support the Department 10