



## 2017 Newsletter



**DEPARTMENT OF  
STATISTICS**

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA - LINCOLN**



# DEPARTMENT UPDATES

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

DR. BERTRAND CLARKE



One of my favorite sayings is 'When everyone thinks the same, no one is really thinking.' This reflects my view that when people of differing perspectives can pull together to make a success of something, the success will be that much greater if it incorporates a wider range of thought. This is not just diversity, or inclusivity, to use the terms that are so popular these days. It's not even philosophy. It's actually the intuition behind any number of theorems that show combining predictors or predictions gives greater accuracy than simply using any one of them. (For those of you who are intrigued by such things, the earliest reference to this phenomenon that I know is Francis Galton 1907, *Nature*, **75**, 450-1; there are many YouTube videos that also demonstrate the basic principle – search on the 'wisdom of crowds'.)

This principle is brought to mind by the last year of the Statistics Department. We started implementing the new core courses in our MS and PhD programs. These represented the best that we as a group could do. I still remember the retreat we had in which we crystalized the new core courses. All of us stuck it out to the end to get the job done; we functioned as a Department rather than a collection of individuals. Then we turned to the elective courses last academic year; we thought this was the next logical stage in updating the departmental offerings. This was a misstep – we didn't realize that it made better sense to modernize the grad service courses first so that our later

updating of the grad elective courses would be accessible to students outside statistics.

We learned and we have now completed the planning part of Stage Two – we have a blueprint for updating the grad service courses. It will take us a while to implement this blueprint. While we're doing that, we update the grad programs by redesigning our grad elective courses. That's the task for the next year – and then, of course, we will have to implement the course upgrades. That will be the third and final stage of updating our grad offerings.

That would be a challenge for any Department but 'there ain't no flies on us'. Prof. Blankenship has taken the lead on developing an online version of Stat218. Prof. Ladunga is teaching a new course on Computing for Big Data in Statistics and the Life Sciences. We've hired two new junior tenure track faculty: Reka Howard and Yuhang Xu, who introduce themselves below in this Newsletter. We are delighted to welcome them. If they are like our earlier junior hires, in a few years they will be leading the Department in ways we cannot foresee. We even have a new research track faculty member, Zheng Xu. We've also got a record number of students graduating and a record number of graduate students on external funding. As a Department I don't think we've ever been stronger or more capable.

What's next? An undergrad program? A service MS degree for people getting a PhD in some field besides Statistics? An extension arm? A co-op program to complement our consulting build-out? Who knows. All we can say with confidence is that whatever we undertake next, the result will be innovative, capitalize on our comparative advantages, and be unlike what other places can offer.

Whatever form our future takes, I am optimistic that we will again pool our combined (if not multiplied) insights to continue building what all of us hope will be one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's more important Departments.

# AWARDS

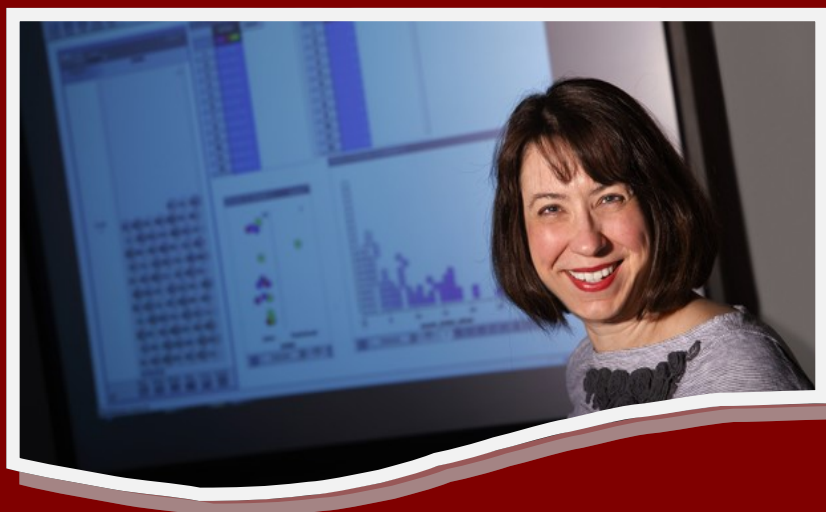
**Professor Erin Blankenship** earned one of the University of Nebraska system's most prestigious prizes, the Outstanding Teaching and Instructional Creativity Award. Through research and teaching, Blankenship is making students' classroom experience more engaging. Since joining the university in 1999, she has placed a high priority on students by improving not only her own teaching methods, but making her colleagues better teachers in the process.

Blankenship has developed or co-developed eight courses at the university and, in 2015, "The American Statistician" published her research about modernizing undergraduate statistics curriculum. Her involvement in Math in the Middle, a National Science Foundation-sponsored math-science partnership, changed the teaching of statistics at the K-12 level and has been effective in helping teach Nebraska math educators how to engage students.

Blankenship has received many teaching honors, including Mu Sigma Rho's William D. Warde Statistics Education Award, a national honor recognizing lifetime achievement in statistics education. She is also a Fellow of the American Statistical Association.

## **Professor Erin Blankenship also received the Parents' Recognition Award**

*for making a significant difference in their student's life. The Award was presented during a Feb. 3 ceremony in the Nebraska Union. She earned this recognition through nominations made from parents of students. Presented annually, the honors provide positive feedback to faculty and staff about their work with students. They also encourage good student and faculty relationships and provide recognition in an area often overlooked in the formal rewards system. The annual recognition ceremony was organized by the Division of Student Affairs and co-sponsored by the Teaching Council and Parents Association.*





# Departmental News



**Professor Chris Bilder** received a \$1.1 million grant from the National Institutes of Health this year to fund his group testing research. Collaborators working with Chris include individuals at Clemson University, University of Iowa, University of South Carolina, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. News about this grant was featured in UNL's Nebraska Today at <http://go.unl.edu/nihstat>. With the start of this research and giving short courses for his book, Chris has been busy presenting his work at many conferences! After trips to the Niagara Falls area and Victoria, BC in 2016, Chris will be an author on at least ten presentations in 2017. Conference locations include Washington, DC; Vienna, Austria; and Glasgow, Scotland. On Tuesday at JSM this year, Chris will be giving a short course over his book.

With respect to teaching, Chris developed two new courses for the department – STAT 810 (Alpha Seminar) and STAT 850 (Computing Tools for Statisticians) – that were required for all first-year MS students to take in the fall. Students in STAT 810 learned about topics such as career paths, professional societies, ethical considerations, and how to obtain an internship. The highlight of the course was visits from three of our graduates – Michelle Quinlan, Leanne (Hicks) Marshall, and Pavel Chernyavskiy – which informed students about their jobs and provided tips for success. Students in STAT 850 received introductions to *R*, *SAS*, and *LyX*. The goal for this course was to provide students with the background needed in each software package to help achieve success in our other courses. Course websites for STAT 810 and STAT 850 are available through Chris's web portal at <http://www.chrisbilder.com>.

# Professor Stephen Kachman Presented Beef Improvement Federation Continuing Service Award

MANHATTAN, Kan. (June 15, 2016) — The Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) presented Steve Kachman, University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) statistics professor, a BIF Continuing Service Award June 15 during the group's annual meeting and symposium in Manhattan, KS.

Continuing Service Award winners have made major contributions to the BIF organization. This includes serving on the board of directors, speaking at BIF conventions, working on BIF guidelines and other behind-the-scenes activities. As BIF is a volunteer organization, it is this contribution of time and passion for the beef cattle industry that moves BIF forward.

Kachman received a bachelor's degree in microbiology from Michigan State University and a master's degree in animal breeding and genetics from the University of Illinois. He earned a doctorate in statistics at Montana State University and then completed postdoctoral work at Cornell University in animal breeding and genetics.

Kachman began his faculty career at the UNL in what was then the Department of Biometry. He has ascended to the rank of professor, having served as the interim chair for the Department of Statistics for more than two years.

He has authored or co-authored more than 50 peer-reviewed journal articles spanning a plethora of topics and species in both plants and animals, including a manuscript in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, as well as numerous abstracts and proceedings papers.

Most critical to national cattle evaluation (NCE) are two contributions. The first is a proceedings paper from the 2008 BIF Genetic Prediction Workshop that first proposed the correlated trait approach for including genomic information into NCE, a method still used today by Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI). The second is a proof available online that shows the blending method of molecular breeding values (MBVs) and expected progeny differences (EPDs), a method also used today by the majority of other beef breed associations.

"I believe it certain that there would not exist genomic-enhanced EPDs in the U.S. beef industry without Steve Kachman," said Matt Spangler, UNL.

Other notable contributions include his extension of the Multiple Trait Derivative Free Restricted Maximum Likelihood (MTDFREML) software, short courses related to ASReml, and

the development of a haplotype-based model for genomic selection, all of which have benefited numerous graduate students and faculty members alike.

Steve continues to serve the U.S. beef cattle industry by developing and applying theory that greatly enhances the NCE and by helping to train the next generation of scientists and industry breeders.

More than 600 beef producers, academia and industry representatives were in attendance at the organization's 48th annual convention. BIF's mission is to help improve the industry by promoting greater acceptance of beef cattle performance evaluation.





# FROM BIOMETRICS CENTER TO DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS: A WALT'S-EYE-VIEW HISTORY

I was asked to write a history of the Department of Statistics at UNL. What I can offer is an overview, as best I understand it, of statistics programs beginning in the early 1950s that ultimately led to our department, combined with my personal experience of these events, a journey that started in 1979.

I joined the UNL faculty as an Assistant Professor in July, 1979. At that time, there was no Department of Statistics. On East Campus, there was the Biometrics and Information Systems Center, where I worked. The Center was part of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR). The Center's four faculty members taught statistical methods courses for graduate and undergraduate students, most of whom were majors in the disciplines that comprised IANR, and provided statistical support for IANR researchers. When I joined the Center, I was the first faculty member to have a formal research appointment with the expectation that I would do methodological research as well as consulting and teaching. On City Campus, there was the Department of Mathematics and Statistics (DMS). The Department had 35-40 faculty members with 4-6 of them being statisticians. DMS offered undergraduate general education intro stat courses, various graduate level statistics courses, an undergraduate

degree in Applied Math – essentially a math degree with a stat minor – and MS and PhD degrees in Math with the option to have a “concentration” in Statistics. Cooperation between the Biometrics Center and the DMS was intermittent and tenuous.

Attempts to form a Department of Statistics began in the early 1950s. My understanding is that Franklin Graybill had been hired and was on his way to Lincoln to be the founding chair of the new department in 1953, but things unraveled at the 11th hour. After that attempt fell though, the “Stat Lab,” which later became the Biometrics Center, was founded on East Campus led by Charlie Gardner, a Professor of Agronomy who was a highly respected statistical geneticist. Meanwhile, on City Campus, the Math Department became the Department of Mathematics and Statistics.

Over the next 50 years, there were recurring discussions about forming a stand-alone statistics department. These led to several attempts and near misses. My understanding is that I was hired after a near miss prompted IANR to decide to “go it alone” with their statistics program. Unfortunately, the Biometrics Center had no degree program and hence no graduate students in statistics. The closest we came was an occasional student in quantitative genetics who majored in Agronomy or Animal Science and

effectively minored in statistics. One student, my first PhD student whom I co-advised with Dr. Gardner, went on to be a distinguished professor in statistics at Clemson University. Another student on whose committee I served is the current Chancellor of UNL. He was my TA for a semester in Stat 802.

Things began to change when the Biometrics Center had an academic program review in 1985, and DMS had their review a year or two later. Both reviews were critical of statistics at UNL. To oversimplify, both reviews said UNL had everything in place to have a strong statistics program, but Biometrics on its own had an incomplete program (no academic component and one-dimensional on the applied side), DMS on its own was also incomplete (one-dimensional on the theoretical and mathematical side), and there were no viable mechanisms in place to enable the two units to complement one another. This prompted renewed discussions of forming a department. While these did not lead to forming the department, they did lead the Department of Mathematics and Statistics to form a semi-autonomous Division of Statistics, while at the same time IANR made a commitment to strengthening its statistics program. Dave Marx was hired as the new head of Biometrics in 1989. Linda Young and Steve

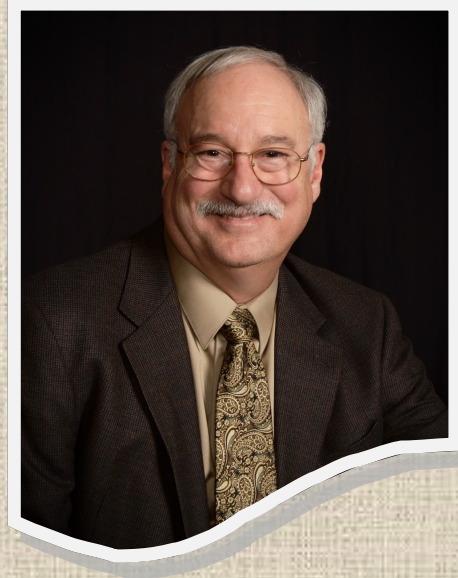


Kachman joined the faculty shortly thereafter, and in 1991, the Biometrics Center became the Department of Biometry with a Master's degree program. By 1994 Biometry had seven faculty members. Dave pushed for renewed discussion about a Department of Statistics, and in the mid 1990s we came very close. Meanwhile, the Biometry department succeeded in building a respected and successful MS program. In addition, Biometry and DMS faculty began to serve on each other's graduate committees.

I became chair of Biometry in 2001. About that time, the Division of Statistics lost its three senior statistics faculty members – one to retirement, two through resignation. One of their junior statistics faculty members also decided to leave. The Division interviewed several candidates, made five offers all of which were turned down. My first act as Biometry chair was to sit down with Jim Lewis, the Math department chair, and discuss how to deal with the Division of Statistics' personnel crisis. We agreed that it would be easier to hire new statistics faculty if they knew that statisticians, not mathematicians, were responsible for the promotion and tenure process. At this time, the College of Arts and Sciences had a new Dean, Richard Hoffmann, a biological scientist by training, who had come to UNL from Iowa State. Dean Hoffmann, Ag Research Division Dean Darrell Nelson and College of Agriculture Dean Steve Waller proved to be the ideal deans to promote statistics. Jim Lewis proved to be a "hero of statistics" during this period by lending his strong support to merging Biometry and the Division of Statistics into a single, stand-alone department. By December the stars aligned and we decided to make one more attempt to

form a statistics department, to be jointly administered by IANR and the College of Arts & Sciences. At that time, there were seven Biometry faculty members. Dean Hoffmann agreed to a goal of matching this with an equal number of statistics faculty with Arts & Sciences appointments. In 2002, I became interim director of the Division of Statistics as well as Biometry head. In July 2003, the Department of Statistics formally came into existence. The former Department of Mathematics and Statistics became the Department of Mathematics, with Jim Lewis continuing as chair. Over the next three years, with Dean Hoffmann's support, we hired five new faculty members with Arts & Science appointments to the department. In 2005, renovation of Hardin Hall was completed, and we finally had a department, a home, and a functioning MS and PhD program. We were on our way. In 2005, we had an academic program review. Our main issue was addressing the inevitable growing pains of having a new department – building a cohesive and mutually supportive culture, being clear about our mission and priorities, making sure that the IANR and Arts & Sciences administrations were on the same page and not at cross-purposes, getting our budget in order and reflective of new realities. Over the next two years, we effectively addressed most of the issues raised at the academic program review.

The next part of this history gets rather personal. In 2008, the department had weathered its first five years. In the early years, Dean Hoffmann had called our department a "fragile experiment." By 2008 we were a thriving department – not perfect but no longer fragile. 2008 was also the year Oliver Schabenberger and I were invited to



teach the featured two-day workshop at the Joint Statistical meetings, I was invited by CRC Press to write a textbook on GLMMs, and I was inducted as an ASA Fellow. JSM was in Denver. After the meetings, my family joined me for a week of alpine hiking near Aspen. In August, 2008, everything had come together, and life was good – real good. That feeling was very short-lived. On the way home, I realized that with Deans Hoffmann and Nelson no longer on the scene, and having led the department through its beginning years, the idea of continuing to be department chair was profoundly depressing. Being department chair means putting your own ego and aspirations on hold, putting everybody else in the department's needs ahead of your own, and, yes, spending a great deal of your time cleaning up other people's messes. After seven years of this, I was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. It was time to pass the baton. It took two more years before I was finally able to down in June 2010. When, in early July, my son said it was the first time he had seen me happy, other than when we were in the mountains, since he was nine years old (which was in 2001), I knew I had made the right decision.



# A MESSAGE FROM VISITING SCHOLAR TIMO HURME, NATURAL RESOURCES INSTITUTE FINLAND (LUKE)

As I am writing this, I am starting the last two weeks of my visit here at UNL Statistics. Altogether, my visit here has been for two months for March and April 2017 as a visiting scholar and guest of Professor Walter Stroup. I come from Finland where I work as a Group manager for 12 statisticians in the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke). Our Institute conducts research in renewable natural resources and sustainable food production. To put it more concretely, we have numerous research projects going on in different areas within agriculture, forestry, game, and fisheries. Altogether, we have about 25 people with degrees in statistics: about half of our statisticians work as researchers in individual research teams focused on one domain area, and 12 statisticians work in our group as general statisticians working on various research projects and domain areas. Luke has long traditions as a research institute, even though it was established very recently in 2015. Luke was merged from four separate research institutes: MTT Agrifood Research Finland, Finnish Forest Research Institute (Metla), Finnish Game and Fisheries Research Institute (RKTL) and Information Centre of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Tike). Personally, the merger brought new challenges for me, because I was given a supervising position in the statistics group that was formed along with the merger. This new role was one motivation for me to visit UNL, because I wanted to get to know how similar groups are organized and managed in other well-established institutes. Also, the close contact that UNL Statistics has to agricultural and

natural resources research is something very similar to what we have in Luke. In addition, UNL's Department of Statistics was formed by a merger, so we have that in common as well.

Specifically, it was my earlier contact with Walt Stroup that led me to UNL. It was back in 2012 that I invited Walt to give a workshop on Generalized Linear Mixed Models in Turku, Finland for the Finnish Society of Biostatistics, where I was the president at the time. During this visit I came to realize that UNL and our institute have many common interests, especially the agricultural applications of statistics, and I am glad we were able to arrange the visit here.

My visit at UNL has been very fruitful in many ways. There are two main results: First, I have learned quite much about GLMMs through both classes and seminars I have attended and also thru discussions with Walt. I had already studied the area as well as applied the methods, and this was an ideal time to patch up some loose ends. Of course, lot more remains to be learned! Second, I have had many good discussions for example with the faculty of UNL in Lincoln, UNMC Biostatistics in Omaha, Kansas State University Statistics and Colorado State University Statistics. These discussions have given me numerous ideas on how to develop for example the consultation and training that we give in our institute. And I am sure



more ideas are to emerge as it takes time for everything to sink in and become processed into real solutions. Some concrete ideas for future collaboration have also emerged.

During the last two weeks I still have ahead of me the Conference on Applied Statistics in Agriculture in the end of April in Manhattan, Kansas. I am really looking forward for this conference, because it is spot-on for the work we are doing in Luke. I have had my eye on the conference for a long time and it is very nice to be able to combine it with my visit at UNL. I am looking forward to meeting more new people in Manhattan! Earlier, I also attended SAS Global Forum in Orlando, Florida, which was also a very nice experience.

My family has also been with me on this visit to Lincoln, my wife Saija and my two sons Topi and Otto. In addition to the obvious professional benefits of the trip, it has also been a very good experience for our entire family. We were able to see the vast prairies as well as the Atlantic beaches in Florida and the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. My sons are aged 6 and 4, and I am sure they will also benefit from all the big and small experiences that they have had during the visit. Already, I am sure that they have an obvious motivation to study more of the English language as it becomes current for them in school in Finland.

I am very grateful for the Department of Statistics and Professor Walt Stroup for the opportunity to visit UNL. I am also grateful for Walt about all the hospitality and all the connections and opportunities he has helped me to obtain! Also, I would like to thank Professor Kent Eskridge and Professor Kathy Hanford for their valuable help, as well as everybody else whom I have come to contact with!

Thank you all for welcoming me and I hope I see you again, perhaps even in Finland!





# WELCOME NEW FACULTY MEMBERS

## DR. REKA HOWARD



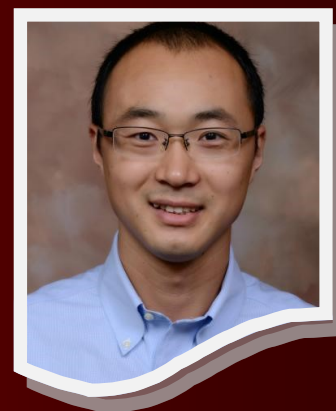
**Dr. Reka Howard** received her PhD in Statistics and Plant Breeding from Iowa State University. She is originally from Hungary but lived in Iowa for 14 years with her husband and family before moving to Lincoln.

She started working in the department as an Assistant Professor last August. Dr. Howard's research interests are in developing new statistical methods that improve plant breeding. More specifically, she is interested in developing models for phenotype prediction using marker and environmental information that account for the genotype by environmental interaction, and the use of response surface methodology to optimize strategies in plant breeding. She has experience in curriculum development, and enjoys teaching and getting to know her students.

## DR. YUHANG XU

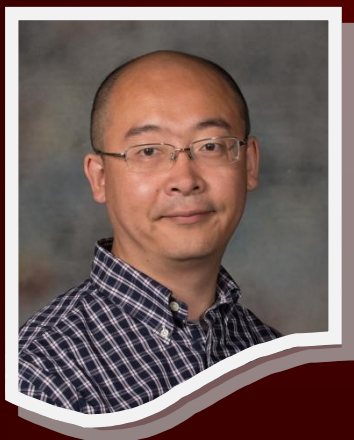
**Dr. Yuhang Xu** joined the Department in August 2016. Yuhang was born and brought up in Wuhu, which is a beautiful city sitting on the southeast bank of the Yangtze River of China. He received his Bachelor's degree in Mathematics from East China University of Science and Technology in 2007 and Master's degree in Statistics from East China Normal University in 2010. After that, he came to US and earned his Ph.D. in Statistics from the Department of Statistics at Iowa State University in 2016.

Yuhang has a broad interest in statistics, including functional/longitudinal data analysis, survival analysis, nonparametric and semiparametric statistics, measurement error, feature screening, etc. Currently, he is working on some cutting-edge topics in functional data analysis and applications of modern statistical methods in plant phenotyping.



## DR. ZHENG XU

**Dr. Zheng Xu** joined the Department in August 2016. He received a PhD in Statistics and Economics at Iowa State University in 2012. Then spent three and a half years in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a postdoc. He received his Bachelor's degree in Fudan University and Master's degree in Illinois State University. His hometown is Daqing, the biggest petroleum city in China.



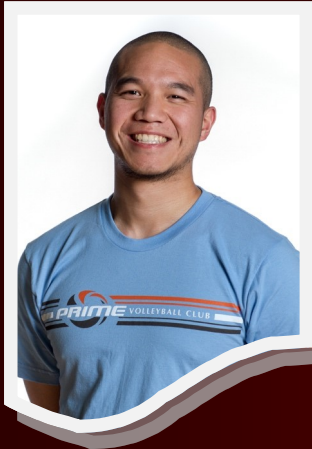
Zheng has worked in many areas in statistics, ranging from bioinformatics, statistical genetics and machine learning to financial statistics, econometrics, non-parametric statistics, and agricultural statistics. His current research interests are integrative data analysis and statistical methods for human diseases and biological system. He is also interested in interdisciplinary research with mathematics, computer science, biology, economics, etc.

After work, Zheng enjoys occasionally running, hiking, swimming, bicycling, reading books and watching TV episodes and films.



# STUDENT NEWS

## Words from our featured Alumnus, Nathan Ngo



After completing the Statistics Master's program at UNL, I was hired as an assistant volleyball coach at the University of Portland. I continued to manage team performance data using Data Volley software as I was doing with the volleyball program at UNL. In addition, I also had increased responsibility from a coaching aspect as far as finding ways to use the data we had gathered to assist in our student-athletes' learning process and making better informed decisions tactically. University of Portland Volleyball finished the 2014 season 7-23, a 7-win improvement from the previous year, and two seasons later, finish tied for 3rd place in their conference while landing their head coach, Brent Crouch, WCC Coach of the Year honors. At the end of that 2014 season, the USA Men's National Team called, asking if I would be interested in joining their staff as the technical coordinator, mainly managing video and statistical breakdown similar to my role at Nebraska. I accepted the position and have been a part of the staff since January of 2015. In two seasons with

the Men's National Team, we have achieved a 3rd place finish in the annual World League tournament in 2015, a 1st place finish at the 2015 World Cup in Japan which qualified us for the 2016 Rio Olympics, and Bronze Medal finish in the Olympics last summer. I will stay on with the Men's National Team staff through this quadrennial and will continue to improve upon our ability to visualize and utilize the data we gather to help the team improve and hopefully bring home more hardware!

## Graduate Student Association

We have a record number of graduating PhD students. Between December 2016 and August 2017, a record of seven PhD were/will be awarded to our students

The Statistics Graduate Student Association hosted its *3rd Annual March Madness competition* this year. With a record 20 entries, members of the department and their families competed for prizes by choosing basketball teams for a ballot at the beginning of the tournament. After breaking a five-way tie, 1st place (and a \$20 Amazon gift card) was awarded to Micah Marvin. Dr. Bilder and Dr. Stroup took 2nd place and split a \$10 UNL Dairy Store gift card.



The **STAT GSA** was hosting another *Cultural Potluck* this spring, where graduate students, faculty, and staff brought dishes from their native country to share with the department. This wonderful event offers an opportunity to celebrate the diversity in the Statistics department, and has been a huge success for the past three semesters. The STAT GSA will also be hosting their *Spring Bowling Outing* on the last day of classes. All graduate students are welcome to a fun evening of free bowling to relax a little bit before finals and to celebrate the end of the academic year. Next fall, the STAT GSA will once again sell UNL Statistics Department apparel and thermoses.



# THANK YOU!

The next time you are in Lincoln, please stop by the Department for a visit! We also encourage you to give a seminar (we promise not to ask tough questions!) about what you think is important for a statistics graduate student to learn and participate in as a student.

If your company or organization is looking to hire new statistics graduates, please email us and we would be happy to distribute an announcement to the graduate students.

Our successes are due to the alumni and friends of the Department of Statistics. Private support is vital to ensure a vibrant future for our department because state support for UNL continues to decrease. Please consider making a donation to the Department of Statistics Development Fund (01088740) at the University of Nebraska Foundation. All funds go toward the support of students and faculty in the department. For example, we use these funds to support student trips to conferences, to recruit students, and to provide recognition of faculty and students.

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**Yes, I/we would like to support the Department of Statistics Development Fund.**

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