

Chairs' Corner – April 2011
Living With Budget Cuts

TO: UW Foundation, Deans/Chancellors, University Advancement Staff

FROM: Lyn Grinstein, Chair, UW Foundation
Howard Behar, Vice Chair, UW Foundation
Dan Evans, Immediate Past Chair, UW Foundation

Dear Friends,

This is the season of Olympia-watching. One by one, state budget proposals have emerged from the Governor, the House, and the Senate, each with its recommended appropriation for the University of Washington. Now comes the reconciliation process. No one, this year, envies the lawmakers their job of parceling out pain. And no one foresees any outcome for the UW except another double-digit cut, only partially mitigated by more double-digit tuition increases.

Below, as a footnote, you will find links to information on the big-picture facts and figures. Most of you already know that picture all too well. But the purpose of this message is to “zoom in”—to give you, in a few snapshots, a sense of what teaching and learning look like in programs poised between past budget cuts and those to come. We focus on the College of Arts and Sciences, which awards about 70 percent of UW bachelor's degrees and helps educate virtually all undergraduates.

Bob Stacey—past chairman of the history department (where his wife, Robin Stacey, still teaches) and now Divisional Dean of Arts and Humanities—is a savvy and genial veteran of UW ups and downs. From his perspective, we ask, what is the impact of the recent budget cuts?

“It is real, immediate, and serious,” he says. Matter-of-factly, he runs through a list: “We’ve basically stopped teaching introductory Spanish, and cut way back on introductory French. You can get those things elsewhere, and we have to prioritize advanced and less commonly available languages, because that’s the mission that makes us distinctive. We’ve chopped labs in half for introductory chemistry. We’re cramming more students into classes than is pedagogically sound. Almost all my department chairs now teach close to a full load. And throughout the College, we’re hugely understaffed in administration.”

Although there has been some shrinkage in College faculty, the major loss at this point has been in lecturers, graduate teaching assistants (TAs), staff, and operations dollars. (In a particularly nice irony, the communication department has eliminated office telephones.) And the cutback in TAs, especially, is changing the kind of education the College can offer.

“When I taught Introduction to Medieval History,” says Dean Stacey (winner of a Distinguished Teaching Award), “it was a course in historical arguments. It required papers and essay exams, which were all about evidence and arguments and were a really important part of the learning experience. I could do that, even though it was a lecture course, because I had TAs who did the careful reading and evaluating of the students’ written work. Each TA had two discussion sections of 25 students each.

“Now, we can budget only half as many TAs, so every TA has 100 students. And as soon as you go above 50 to 1, the whole model of assessment and evaluation has to change. It’s just a matter of available hours. If I were to teach that course today, I would have to re-conceive the whole direction—make it just an introduction to a body of information, with simpler tests to see if students have learned it. And that’s happening widely. We are getting to the point where we can longer assign serious writing in lecture classes.”

How does all this play out in the sciences? Specifically, in biology, which in any given quarter is teaching 10 percent of all UW undergraduates, and which has the University’s largest number of majors (1440, up 40 percent in two years)?

The three-quarter sequence of introductory biology classes (180, 200, 220) is the gateway not only to the biology major but to all the life sciences on campus—as well as to medical school. The first of those three courses takes all comers—no prerequisites. (There is a winnowing by grades for the second and third courses in the sequence.) “Access is really, really important to us,” says Toby Bradshaw, associate chair for undergraduate curriculum. “This is a public university.”

But, says Tom Daniel, “Budget cuts have shifted how we deliver education.” (Professor Daniel’s research on the mechanisms of insect flight won him a MacArthur Award, and he has also received both Distinguished Teaching and Distinguished Graduate Mentor awards.) “Classes are larger and lab hours fewer. There were 700 students in Biology 180 last fall, and we didn’t have funding for enough TAs to run laboratories. Medical schools require a certain number of lab hours, so we didn’t want to eliminate labs even from the introductory quarter. So we ended up having two-hour instead of three-hour labs. And even that depended on using ‘peer TAs’—specially trained undergraduates—to help out.”

Professors Bradshaw and Daniel are both currently teaching upper-level lab courses—Molecular Methods, with 50 students, and Biomechanics, with 60—that are far larger than they should be. “These classes are really apprenticeships, with one-on-one instruction,” says Professor Bradshaw. “They’re hugely labor intensive, and it’s really a challenge to know and help so many students.”

Under these conditions, should faculty cut back on research and focus on teaching? Professor Daniel rejects the distinction. “Research *is* education,” he says. His lab is “a huge mentoring chain,” with students from post-docs to undergraduates. “I meet with

individuals one-on-one all day long. If you eliminate research, you are compromising the full dimension of learning. Students need to learn how to address unknowns.”

Professor Daniel holds the Joan and Richard Komen Endowed Chair in Biology. The added resources from the endowment have been “nothing short of transformative,” he says, in helping him compensate for the budget cuts. For example, the endowment pays for an additional graduate TA and a peer TA in his Biomechanics course, “so I can push that course to the extremes.”

He has even used endowment funds to help lure a new faculty recruit, Michael Dickinson, from Cal Tech and to set up the Dickinson lab—where Professor Daniel delights in showing off two nifty new wind tunnels for studying moths in flight. “This basic research on insect vision and flight control,” says Professor Bradshaw, “could, without too great a stretch, inform us on how to design small, autonomous, flying robots.” And he points out that Professor Dickinson holds the Ben Hall Endowed Chair, named for the legendary UW genetics and biology professor whose own basic research on yeast led to a vaccine for Hepatitis B—and to the patent which now funds Professor Dickinson’s Chair.

None of these conversations, it should be said, was either angry or despairing. These are upbeat people who are used to rolling up their sleeves and getting on with the job. Each pointed to ways in which austerity has pushed them and their colleagues into valuable innovations. Their dedication to their students, their work, and the University of Washington comes through loud and clear. “The public university,” says Professor Bradshaw, “is one of the brilliant concepts of our country. There’s no place I’d rather be than here.” (This despite the fact that his was the lab destroyed by the fire-bombing at the Center for Urban Horticulture a few years ago.)

But there is a shared conviction, expressed in different ways, that the current state of affairs is not sustainable for the long term, and that the University is at a kind of crossroads.

“The experience for biology undergraduates is still good,” says Professor Bradshaw. “But the faculty, which so far has let classes grow, is now stretched very thin. We’re wrestling with how to continue. More cuts will translate directly into fewer students in the major. It’s a choice between access and quality.”

Dean Stacey, contemplating the likely steep rise in tuition, sees another “Hobson’s choice”: that between maintaining quality and sustaining the current broad demographics of the student body, which higher tuition is likely to erode even with higher financial aid. “But we don’t have the option,” he says, “of being a low-cost provider of undergraduate education *and* a high-quality research institution. To remain the latter, we have to have high-cost and high-quality undergraduate education, which means investing a significant part of the rising tuition in undergraduate learning. Over the next couple of years, we’ll make really fundamental decisions about what the future of this university will be.”

Whatever the outcome of current state budget negotiations, these issues will remain on the table.

Lyn, Howard, and Dan

For context, see:

http://engage.washington.edu/site/MessageViewer?em_id=54594.0&dlv_id=59067

http://www.washington.edu/admin/pb/home/pdf/state-bgt-process/UW-Letter_2011-13-Higher-Education-Biennial-Budget-Reduction-Scenarios.pdf

http://www.washington.edu/admin/pb/home/pdf/briefs/House-2011-13-Operating-Budget-Brief_4-5-11.pdf

http://www.washington.edu/admin/pb/home/pdf/briefs/Comparing-the-Senate-Chair-Budget-and-the-House-Engrossed-Budget_4-13-11.pdf

Looking Back

- **Contributions July 1, 2010 through March 31, 2011, total \$246,741,675.**
- The **March 2011 Report of Contributions** is attached and contains fundraising details.

Looking Ahead

- **Friday, April 29, 2011**, UW Foundation Board of Directors Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting, Walker-Ames Room, Kane Hall.
- **Friday, September 9, 2011**, Joint Meeting of UW Foundation Board of Directors and UWAA Board of Trustees, 8:00 a.m. coffee; 8:30-11:30 a.m. meeting.