

Epi Town Hall Meeting  
11.1.06

Dr. Samet opened the meeting with a few comments:

- Until one year ago, the NIH budget doubled annually allowing many grants to be funded. In the last year, it has become increasingly difficult to get funding for new grants. This reduces everyone's sense of security. Dr. Samet wants to make sure that we continue to have all the activities we've had in the past. Fortunately, he noted, we have successful faculty in the department who continue to obtain funds.
- There has been a major curriculum shift in the department this year. We are continuing to get feedback from students. The need to revamp the curriculum has been recognized for a long time.
- Recruitment- the department has been recruiting faculty for the Clinical Trials, CVD and Cancer Epi areas of concentration.

Next, Dr. Samet addressed the list of questions generated by the students in advance of the meeting:

1. Primary data collection policy: The question of what constitutes primary data is commonly asked. This is a long standing requirement in the department. The idea is that no one should leave a PhD program without collecting data. There are many different forms of data collection. Some dissertation questions may be addressable with data students can collect themselves but it may also be necessary to use existing data resources. Dr. Samet provided some examples of ways in which recent students fulfilled this requirement. The basic principle for primary data collection is that some form of new knowledge be created. Dr. Samet specified that the following are NOT primary data collection: downloading the NHANES dataset. If students have questions, they should speak with their advisors and committees.

Andrea Villanti indicated that this issue is on the agenda for Monday's curriculum committee meeting. There is a question of whether primary data collection has to be tied to the dissertation or not.

For more information about the current policy, visit:

[http://www.jhsph.edu/schoolpolicies/ppm\\_academic\\_programs\\_3.shtml](http://www.jhsph.edu/schoolpolicies/ppm_academic_programs_3.shtml)

2. Pay rate for TAs: We currently pay \$16/hour. This is an increase over last year. Dr. Samet does not think that this is less than other departments – except EHS which has a two-tiered system.

There was a question of why there is a cap on tutoring fees. Dr. Samet indicated one reason for this is to keep rates reasonable given the limitations of students' budgets!

Another question was if pay should be commensurate with experience. Dr. Samet noted that when a TA takes on more responsibilities such as being the lead TA, there is some additional compensation. In general, when students TA a course, they are all doing the same amount of work regardless of their past work experience and therefore it makes sense for equal pay for equal work.

3. Policy of submitting grant proposals to Dr. Samet 15 days in advance of the deadline: Dr. Samet reads every proposal that leaves this department. In order to avoid poor quality submitted to him at the last minute, we need this policy. Also, Dr. Samet provides comments to every single proposal and this takes time. In addition, the institution (financial office) requires considerable amounts of time. It is important for students to meet with their advisors well in advance of the deadline. Grant deadlines are always stated on applications. Take the time to get these proposals to the highest quality. Proposal writing is challenging and students need to leave themselves with ample time.

4. Issues about transition from master's student to PhD: The department rarely considers master's students who came straight from undergrad as ready for the PhD program. It is critical to have work experience. Work experience is heavily weighted when considering candidates.

Question: If you've been here for a master's, should you stay for a PhD?

Answer: It depends on what you want to do. Students should think about what they want to do and with whom they might want to work. Each school has its own characteristics and ways of doing things. The faculty in this department is well connected and can guide students towards experts. Sometimes it is good to go elsewhere to learn about different ways of thinking and doing things.

5. Post graduate opportunities: Dr. Samet is not aware any students who left here recently and who could not find jobs. Many of the more advanced students return to their former places of work but students go in many different directions. Some stay in academics and are doing well. Our graduates are all over the place. Many go into private sector such as the pharmaceutical industry and consulting. Right now, there's a "flowering" of epidemiology in health departments. It's a pretty good time to get a job in epidemiology. We should all be employable!

6. Regulations regarding working while doing one's thesis or dissertation: Officially, students are not allowed to be paid for doing their thesis. This may be related to NIH training grant requirements. The department tries to make sure that if a student is working closely with a dataset managed by your academic advisor that you have a work supervisor different from the academic advisor.

It is inappropriate for one's job assignment to be "do your dissertation". Note that students doing their dissertations at the NCI or another NIH institute are there in a training status not employee status.

Moving to more general questions:

Dr. Samet briefly discussed the future of the department. This in part lies with future of the field. Dr. Samet encourages students to look for the series of articles coming out regarding “Big Epidemiology.”

The last few minutes of the meeting were opened up to student questions. There were no responses and the meeting was adjourned.

Dr. Samet announced that we will have another town hall meeting in the spring. For those students in the 750 series, there will be another feedback session soon.