

Early Days of UF Biostatistics

By Samuel Wu, John Kairalla and Babette Brumback

Biostatistics at the University of Florida traces its origins dates back to 1968 when the Department of Statistics, established in the College of Agriculture in 1962, created a dedicated unit for consulting within the Health Science Center. Early faculty members, including Drs. Jack Thornby, PV Rao, Jonathan Shuster, Randy Carter, Rose Ray, Larry Haugh, and Ronald Marks, joined under the William Mendenhall chairmanship. The first major research grant in biostatistics came in 1979 when NIH funded the Pediatric Oncology Group Statistics Office, which is still ongoing within the current department as the Children's Oncology Group Statistics and Data Center (COG). The 1980's witnessed further growth under the Richard Scheaffer chairmanship, including Myron Chang, James Boyett, Brad Pollock, Jane Pendergast, Michael Conlon, James Kempner, Cyndi Garvan, Susan McGorray, and Ralph O'Brien. Under the Ronald Randles chairmanship from 1989 to 2000, the Health Science Center faculty continued its expansion, welcoming Alan Hutson, Wendy London, Meenakshi (Mini) Devidas, Natarajan Ranjini, and Samuel Wu.

In 2001, the Department of Statistics was recognized as a unit in the College of Medicine (COM), extending its recognition to three colleges in addition to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, with a single chair (Dr. George Casella) across the three colleges. Department of Statistics in the COM was comprised of the COG and the Division of Biostatistics. The unit supported Health Science Center faculty across six colleges in the statistical design, conduct, quality assurance, analysis, and publication of their research. Several biostatistics faculty were hired during this period, including Lili Tian, Changxing Ma, Haihong Li, and Yongsong Joo.

However, the one department in three colleges structure did not last long. In 2005, the Biostatistics unit in the Health Science Center group left the Statistics Department to become a division of biostatistics in the Department of Epidemiology and Health Policy Research in the COM, chaired by Elizabeth Shenkman. Several new faculty were hired in the division, including John Kairalla, Arlene Naranjo, Jing Tian, Huaihou Chen, Yueh-Yun Chi and Keith Muller, who served as division director.

In 2006, a separate Biostatistics division was established with the creation of a new Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in the College of Public Health and Health Professions (PHHP). Faculty in the group included Babette Brumback, Mike Daniels, Ning Li, Xiaomin Lu, Amy Cantrell, and Linda Young. This group maintained close ties with the Department of Statistics, jointly establishing a PhD program in Biostatistics in 2008 and a MS program in 2009. The first class of graduate students included Zhulin He and Yanpin Wang.

In October 2010, under the guidance of Senior Vice President Dr. David Guzick, a new Department of Biostatistics was established with 12 initial faculty members comprised by joining the two divisions of Biostatistics from PHHP and COM. The department, while jointly housed in the two colleges, has daily operations and academic programs managed by PHHP. Dr. Sam Wu served as the interim chair for 2 years before Dr. Leslie Gonzalez-Rothi took over the role until a permanent chair was found. Since May 2011, Deana Nance has overseen all department business and staff operations. Another notable addition during this period included a team on infectious disease research with members Drs. Ira Longini, Eben Kenah, and Yang Yang,

In late 2012, after an extensive search, Dr. Peihua Qiu from the University of Minnesota accepted the offer of department chair and officially joined the department in July 2013 as the founding chair. Under Dr. Qiu's leadership, the department has experienced substantial growth, greatly expanded its faculty, staff and student bodies, and achieved notable recognition. This includes many senior and junior faculty hires supporting robust methodological, collaborative, and teaching missions, and including nine preeminent, teacher-scholar and AI initiative hires. Under Dr. Ira Longini's leadership, the UF Center for Statistical and Quantitative Infectious Diseases (CSQUID) was formally established in 2014. The self-funded Online MS Program registered the first batch of students in Fall 2017. Three faculty members are AAAS fellows, five faculty members are ASA fellows, and the department faculty currently proudly includes the president-elect for the American Statistical Association (Dr. Ji-Hyun Lee who directs the Division of Quantitative Sciences at the UF Health Cancer Center). In addition, in 2018 the Clinical and Translational Science Institute and the department established the Data Coordinating Center, which continues to grow under the direction of Dr. Samuel Wu.

As of November 2023, the Department has 100+ employees including 28 faculty, 6 staff, and 12 masters level biostatisticians and 36 graduate students. In the academic year 2022-2023, the department graduated 13 PhD students, 9 on-campus MS students, and 17 online MS students. Publications exceeded 150 papers with grant awards over \$9 million. Thereby ranking the department 3rd in grant funding in the PHHP and among the top one-third among departments in the COM. We are very proud to be ranked 10th in the nation among biostatistics departments at AAU public universities, according to the US News and World Report.