Curriculum updates

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Hi everyone,
I am writing to provide updates on some exciting modifications to our program curriculum. These are based on the feedback from our townhall meetings as well as one on one meetings with some students who followed up after their townhalls to offer additional insights and ideas. I subsequently had extensive discussions with the associate directors of the program (Marion and Jun for admissions; Lu and Ivan for curriculum) to find creative ways to incorporate the many diverse, and often divergent, opinions and ideas I heard at the townhalls. We decided to focus initially on shared themes that emerged from students in different years in their graduate career: to make coursework simpler, more transparent, and free up flexible time for research and other activities. The modifications listed below represent those with universal consensus during our discussions.

1) We will provide a list of pre-approved classes that students can choose from to fulfill their advanced elective requirements. If you prefer to take a class not on this list, you will work with Kalai and Pardip to provide a brief scientific rationale as to why this class is important for your graduate work. These classes have to be offered at graduate level.

2) The Statistics elective requirement can now be met by taking a 100 level or higher class offered by the Department of Statistics. This is based on our current understanding of NIH requirements for formal training in statistical methodology. Students should take a class that is most suitable for their thesis research, and we expect that this will be done in consultation with the PI or thesis committee.

3) Journal club will now only be required for second and third year students, and it will be offered in the Winter and Quarter quarters. This will enable students to focus more time on their thesis project, and in the case of the second years, their quals. This will also free up first year students to engage more deeply with their lab rotations and ongoing core modules.

4) As one of you put it to me, teach more hours or teach less content in the cores. It is difficult to stretch out core teaching any further because the modules pretty much fill up the academic year. Accordingly, Lu and Ivan have reached out to core module directors and requested significant content-trimming for their respective modules. We hope this promotes a focused discussion of key concepts and unanswered questions in the field and reduces outside-class commitments to keep up with coursework.

5) Incoming first year students will be required to take two advanced elective classes and a class in statistics in years 2-4 in the program. This is a net reduction of one advanced elective class from the current requirements.

6) In recognition of the many advantages of fostering interactions between more senior students in the program and those just starting out, we are now encouraging students in all years to participate as student reps for activities of their choice. In keeping with our tradition, these reps will be recognized for their service with financial compensation.

As you can see from these modifications to the curriculum, we have been mindful not to impose additional requirements or to make radical changes for students already in the program. Any additional details regarding the new curriculum will be incorporated in the new student handbook for our program. I will of course provide updates if and when more modifications are rolled out.
In closing, thank you all for your enthusiasm, support, and feedback in making our program stronger and accessible. We hope, in the coming years, to think of ways to incorporate your feedback on the curriculum that would take a longer time to implement. I will have additional townhalls to discuss such ideas and to allow more feedback and creative input. Our curriculum is an ever evolving infrastructure that strives to balance regulatory mandates with programmatic aspirations and, most importantly, the needs and desires of our students who are the next generation of scientific and thought leaders. It is most definitely your curriculum and program, so please keep providing your input.

Sincerely,
Nirao

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