March 2018 Town Hall Minutes

Date: Thursday March 29th, 2018 @ 2:30p.m. Location: ITB-201

Chair: Dr. Khedri
Associate Chair: Dr. Zheng
Minute Taker: Andrew LeClair & Michael Liut
Graduate Attendees: 28+ students

Dr. Khedri’s Report

- A top priority is providing a better quality of life for graduate students, the major update that has happened since last year is there is guaranteed funding of $20,000 for every (PhD) graduate student. This is not feasible for all Master’s. This has led to a deficit within the department, but is acknowledged.
- There is funding for LICS to take over the social activities. We can expect all future social events to happen through a LICS channel.
- There have been purchases for improving the hallways in the department → the whiteboards, sofas, and the award shelf outside ITB-202. The goal is to create an identity of the department: who the graduate students, the professors, and the undergraduate students are.
- Graduate Retreat being organized to help foster a community (May 2nd), buy tickets before April 20th!
  - It is departmental funds, so for all of these events and all future events need to have involvement from graduate students so that future funding can be justified.
- Emphasis on social life and healthy living, but also producing good research.
- Trim down the courses so that we have focus, thanks to the work put in by Dr. Zheng
  - The programs will be marketed using these new courses in the future (aiming for September 2018).
- Relaxing the rigidity with the courses that must be taken for graduation by a graduate student, details will be provided by Dr. Zheng.
- The undergraduate programs have become extremely prestigious, so there is need for growth for the department → 8 new hires for faculty, so new opportunities for research.
- A position is being created to deal with the infrastructure of the offices, items they will deal with include: broken alarms, broken lights, etc.

Dr. Zheng’s Report

- Thursday April 5th will be the next Poster Presentation (record highs!)
  - Opportunity to showcase work and also interact with other graduate students and their work.
- Dr. Zheng is the department faculty representative for the Engineering Faculty’s Graduate Curriculum and Policy Committee (GCPC). If there are ever concerns regarding changes to the curriculum, they can and should be brought directly to her.
- Updates to the wording of the M.Eng program within the calendar have been approved and will be put in place for September 2018.
• Updating the courses that are offered for graduate students to be classified as one of three categories: Theory, Software Engineering, System and Applications
  ○ These updates are for the breadth-requirements that was suggested by the IQAP review of the curriculum
• This will relax the requirements for programs which are extremely rigid, or does not fit their need / timeline, and it also helps from the teaching perspective
  ○ The aim is to have supervisors guide their students on what courses would benefit their research / them as a researcher, instead of requiring the rigidity of the current required courses
• More graduate courses being offered (currently, average 15-18 courses, hope to see more as we recruit more faculty members)
• A new idea of milestones is currently being developed (still in its initial stages). The idea includes having ‘checkpoints’ along the graduate career for the student.
  ○ They are expected to be roughly an annual checkpoint, the aim is to provide guidance and significance to the committee meetings; something specific to discuss
  ○ Examples are:
    ■ By year 1 of PhD better understanding the literature and state your research topic. Mapped to milestones that will be included in your supervisory committee report so that we can generate more useful feedback
    ■ By year 3 we want to improve skills for better employability. Corresponding mechanism is the attendance of career workshops, etc.

Open Discussion

• Curriculum change:
  ○ How does it affect existing graduate students? Will it change existing milestones (such as the comprehensives)?
    ■ It only applies to incoming students
    ■ The new milestones will not change or affect the major milestones that already exist, such as the comprehensives.
    ■ However, overlap has been pointed out with the new milestones proposed and the existing comprehensives.
    ■ The proposed milestones are meant to work together with the current ones
  ○ This milestones will be extended to Master’s
  ○ For students that transfer from Master’s to PhD. It is raised on if they would need to redo the milestones?
    ■ It hasn’t been looked at, but the milestones are meant to be general enough such that they aren’t something that is ‘checked’ off. The idea, for example, technical writing skills, is something that can always be improved
● Training for TA’s is being looked at so that they needn’t repeat workshops they have already done

● Courses for developing soft skills, or seminars for tackling writing for software engineering
  ○ There does exist something similar in software engineering, SE3I03. Dr. Khedri says he believes it is something that should be the responsibility of the supervisor
  ○ It is raised what if there is no supervisor for the field. The comments or feedback is not possible. Dr. Khedri believes that you are under the supervision of someone. They should seek contact with that supervisor, and possibly can redirect the student to the right person. Going outside of the department is an option.

● Is there priority to hire faculty or those areas we are lacking?
  ○ It is going to be debated at the graduate retreat
  ○ There are differing views, some believe we should spread out and cover all bases, others believe we should reach ‘critical-mass’ of a specific topic (such as AI, machine learning, or something else). Dr. Khedri believes critical-mass is the best
  ○ The current interviewees are for AI, smart systems, machine learning

● What about having graduate students sit on CAS internal committees so we can voice our concerns, feedback, and opinions prior to implementing or deciding on a change?
  ○ Dr. Khedri would like to try and bring change, he is working on it.
  ○ We will be updated to the committees that will have seats for graduate students to sit on

● Will graduate students be informed what Faculty positions we will be hiring for? What about asking undergraduates and graduates through surveys?
  ○ Undergraduates may be swayed by the media and “hot topics”, but graduate students would have the wealth of knowledge and expertise to obtain answers from them.
  ○ Graduate students play the role of having a dedicated interview to the faculty candidates
    ■ Dr. Khedri emphasized he truly does care, and takes into consideration, the review submitted by the graduate students
  ○ Graduate students will not have a say in the fields to hire faculty for

● Ranging the courses so that it is more interesting to the students who take them
  ○ Dr. Khedri’s response is that he believes the diversified background at both the undergraduate and graduate level will build a strong foundation. The topic was not further discussed

● Collaboration with other departments or faculties
  ○ Courses will most likely not change
- Encourages interdisciplinary research, but is largely done through the supervisor not the student
- Bring it to the supervisor if there is interest

- Difference between the roles of associate chair, associate advisor; issue regarding the graduate administrator
  - At a high level, associate chair is responsible for the policy aspect (curriculum, taking forms)
  - Graduate advisor takes care of the day-to-day tasks for the student, whether it be getting a specific course accepted, and providing advice
  - Regarding the administrator: Dr. Khedri says he has never been brought the case where there was misinformation

- Concern regarding the ‘prestige’ of the department
  - The size of the department is a huge factor. We are increasing the faculty to help with this
  - We need visibility. We are ranked lowly because of how countries (such as China) votes, and we are not known there. It is up to us as students to increase this by attending conferences and workshops

- A question about the frequency of seminars being low
  - There is several seminars but low attendance by graduate students
    - It is proposed that we (the graduate students) suggest the speaker so the department can invite them
    - Dr. Khedri says it is a great idea, we can go through LICS
    - Inform your supervisor of a speaker, and they may directly refer the speaker to Dr. Fei Chiang to come in for the department
  - An additional idea is proposed of having research spotlights by holding inner-departmental seminars from the professors

- What happened to the department newsletter? Can this be continued?
  - LICS is taking it over
  - Updates to come, graduates who are interested in helping or contributing with the newsletter should contact LICS (Michael Liut or Joe Guan)

- It is pointed out that the department is aiming to grow with faculty (and assumedly, graduate students and post-docs), but ITB is limited in space.
  - From now until May, Laurie and Dr. Khedri are making a plan of professor allocation
  - Possibly grabbing a floor of the tower that is being built by ABB and Thode for lab space for graduate students
  - Creating a lounge for ITB-116, grad space. Open to suggestion regarding the furniture and equipment that is there.

- Upgrade all the doors so they are NFC instead of physical lock
  - Tina and Derek will look into it
• Graduate students are stressed
  ○ Some have dependents, and cannot commit the same time that those without dependents can
  ○ The question is raised if they can put this into the funding or time that they submit
    ■ The funding cannot be changed, that is determined already by the taking the grant
    ■ With regards to time, that comes down to the students
    ■ Look into creating support for the students who do need the help
    ■ Dr. Khedri expresses interest in receiving suggestions to help make it comfortable to working

• General Inquiries
  ○ Anonymous Question Submitted: If a teaching assistant wants to view their course evaluation they may only do so through the professor. Sometimes this becomes difficult and we end up not seeing them at all. Why is this? Can an alternate process be made so that we do not have to go through the professor?
    ■ Comes from the Dean’s office, Dr. Khedri can raise it to the office and ask for it to be done.

• Office Spaces
  ○ Anonymous Question Submitted: Could we maybe get some coat hooks and boot mats in the offices and labs? It would go a long way towards keeping the floors clean, since they MAYBE get washed once a year.
    ■ It can be done. Tina will look into it.