

Unsolved problem

• UWI Mathematics Department sinks further into quagmire

**By Durrant Pate
Senior Reporter**

The Department of Mathematics and Computer Science in the Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI), is facing another management crisis.

The problem is further exacerbated by the piece-meal approach in which recommendations by various reviews of the department to deal with the problems are being implemented.

Some of these recommendations and the problems they seek to resolve date back to May 1989 when a skeleton assessment of the department by Garth A. Baker pointed to the severity of the situation and the urgent need for action.

Pretending

In a no holds-barred report, Baker complained bitterly about the state of the Mathematics Department, particularly the fact that it was being starved of quality staff.

“By maintaining such a poor mathematics section at the UWI for so long, the possibilities of exploring mathematics in the whole process of industrialisation and development in the country are almost non-existent,” the report said.

A copy of the 20-page report, which was obtained by the **Sunday Herald** stated further that, “in spite of the obvious state of affairs, the university administration still pretends to have a mathematics department, the staff pretends to teach mathematics and the students are pretending to learn mathematics.”

Continued problem

Several reviews of the department over the years have pointed to the continued crisis in management.

The latest review, completed in March 2006 by a team led by Professor Jonathan Borwein of Dalhousie University of Canada; Professor Bal Swaroop Bhatt of the UWI St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad, and Allan Lewis, Managing Director of Prime Asset Management Services, found very little cause to celebrate.

In its report to the UWI Mona administration, the review team stated that very few of the recommendations from earlier reviews have been fully or even partially implemented.

The review team said that, “much of this can be attributed to the continuing lack of senior leadership and to the fact that the division is significantly under-staffed.”

In urging the Mona campus administration to begin to overhaul the departmental structures and to repair the many defects, the review team added, “this cannot wait for reinforcements to arrive.”

A 2003 review, undertaken by Professor Wilma Bailey, Professor Ishenkumba Kahwa, Dr. Ralph Robinson and Dr. Donald Walwyn highlighted the very need for overhauling the structures in the department.

In that report, the review team observed that, “the department has almost ceased to function effectively and the mathematics section has frequently failed to carry out routine teaching and administrative responsibilities critical to curriculum development, delivery and assessment.”

They also cited the “lack of effective action from the UWI Mona Leadership and Academy as the root cause of the erosion of civility, community spirit and professional culture.”

Under-staffed

Many of these defects have not been addressed and have found themselves among the concerns raised the latest 2006 report.

Among the defects identified in the 2006 review is the glaring lack of communication between groups (senior administration, academic staff, non-academic staff and students) and “insularity by the present academic staff, who view themselves as isolated specialists”.

Pointing to shortcomings on the academic programmes, long articulated from the Baker review 17 years ago, the Borwein review team argued that the academic staff needed to enhance, augment and revitalise the undergraduate and the graduate programmes.

Some of the reasons cited are the unreasonable workload by the academic staff and the fact that the support staff feels under-employed and under-utilised.

Graduate programme

It was observed that the graduate programme, in particular, was small and understaffed and resulted in several courses suspended. The future of the programme, the review team posited, is dependent on reorganisation.

The report recommended that the department would have to hire a critical mass of quality mathematicians, a point which was made by Baker. According to the 2006 review team, “past and present graduate students are victims of the relative dysfunction within the mathematics section.”

This dysfunction, the report noted, exhibited itself in a number of former masters student, who each submitted a thesis and completed all other requirements in December 2004, not receiving their grades nor any other information about the quality of their work. As a result these students had no knowledge about their ability to graduate from their programme in Bio Statistics.

In the area of leadership, the review highlighted this as one of the most critical needs at this time, urging the administration to move expeditiously to attract a dynamic senior leader of the department.

In addition, “the administration must make it clear to any new head that he or she will have easy access to their offices and will have their full backing in new ventures or if necessary, in the face of contention.”

Even at the present moment the department is still without a head. In the interim, Dean of the Faculty of Pure and Applied Science, Dr. Ronald Young, is filling that role.

Department head

The **Sunday Herald** also received information that Dr. Jonathan Farley, Professor of Mathematics at the department, who was promised the top job is being bypassed for someone else.

Correspondence obtained by the **Sunday Herald** showed that in October 2004, the then UWI Principal, Professor Kenneth Hall, promised Professor Farley that if he took up the offer as a Professor at the UWI Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, he would be asked to assume the position of head of the department.

The letter detailed the responsibilities of the head of the department and the benefits accruing to the position including the possibility of purchasing the university house, which would be assigned to him. While confirming that he was in fact promised the position of head and after two years is yet to be confirmed, Professor Farley declined to go into details on the matter.

However, sources in the department told the **Sunday Herald** that Professor Farley was advised early last month that he was being overlooked as head of the department.

Professor Farley, who was this year named by Seed Magazine as one of the 15 people who has shaped the global conversation about science in 2005, is said to be quite peeved about the UWI not honouring its promise to make him head of the department.

There was no clear response from the Mona campus administrators about the concerns highlighted in the various reports about the concerns with the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, in particular, the mathematics section.

When contacted our reporter was referred to Professor Young, the acting head of the department and the University's registrar, Edward Falloon, who were said to be off the island.

However, acting registrar, Winston Davis, acknowledged that several reviews on the department have been done over the years. However, he was unaware of the specifics, but offered some reassurance that improvements have been made to the general situation in the department.

Caption

Professor Jonathan Farley — Was promised head of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, but is now being overlooked for the top job.