



ENDOCRINOLOGY AND REPRODUCTIVE PHYSIOLOGY PROGRAM

Marking 50 Years of Graduate Education

by Tiffany Bachmann

The word innovation most accurately describes the vision held by University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty members E.S. Gordon (of the Department of Medicine), R.K. Meyer (zoology), L.E. Casida (genetics) and W.H. McShann (zoochemistry) when, on January 15, 1959, they wrote John Willard, dean of the Graduate School, and formally proposed the creation of an interdepartmental, interdisciplinary graduate training program in endocrinology and reproductive physiology.

The letter stated “that a major objective of this proposal is to integrate the program of study in such a manner as to use the courses, personnel and facilities already in the Colleges, without the organization of a ‘Department of Endocrinology.’”

While Willard initially was skeptical that such an unusual administrative structure would work on a department-oriented campus, he couldn’t deny that the founders made a compelling case for support. And so, the graduate program in Endocrinology and Reproductive Physiology (ERP) was granted degree status by the UW System Board of Regents and admitted its first students in the fall of 1959.

Today, 50 years later, ERP—which provides trainees an in-depth understanding of pregnancy, fertility, infertility and related reproductive

hormones—remains a shining example of a broad-based interdepartmental degree-granting program. Current faculty affiliated with the program represent a spectrum of disciplines, from obstetrics/gynecology to comparative biosciences and pediatrics to veterinary sciences.

With training at both the master’s and doctoral levels, the program produces graduates who typically pursue careers in basic, clinical and technical areas of endocrinology and reproductive physiology.

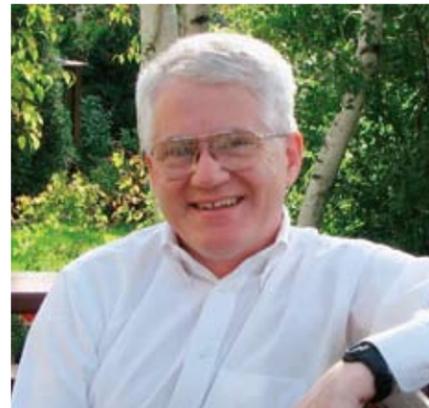
Program leaders recently have reached out to physician trainees as well, providing them opportunities for structured graduate degree training in their fellowship years.

The current ERP director, Ian Bird, PhD, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH), assesses the program as it reaches this milestone.

“This is a wonderful time in which to reflect on and celebrate our program’s past, present and future,” says Bird. “There is so much to be proud of and even more to accomplish.”

A half century ago, Roland K. Meyer, PhD, served as the first ERP director from 1959 to 1968. At his retirement party, he reflected on his career, which included training 78 PhD students and publishing 290 articles.

“The most rewarding aspect is seeing [students] learn to the point where



Ian Bird, ERP’s sixth and current director, says that after 50 years there is much to be proud of and even more to accomplish.

they have the confidence to develop their own programs and can make important contributions as teachers and researchers,” he said.

Under Meyer, the program attained several grants from the Ford Foundation to support pre- and postdoctoral trainees. Early graduates of the program went on to attain prominent positions in academia and industry.

Leadership of the ERP program was transferred to Meyer’s colleague Richard C. Wolf, PhD, of the Department of Physiology, in 1968, who then served as director until 1986. The program continued to grow and remain a leader in the reproductive sciences, with additional National Institutes of Health (NIH) training grants supporting both pre- and postdoctoral students. Faculty

membership also continued to grow during Wolf’s tenure.

Students described Wolf as “a workhorse scientist who fully appreciated the enduring value of carefully obtained data. He was also widely respected as a mentor who viewed and treated his graduate students as colleagues.”

By 1986, when Roy Ax, PhD, of the Department of Dairy Sciences, became director, the ERP program was well established as a leader in the reproductive sciences, with many illustrious faculty members on its roster.

Program directors Lewis Sheffield, PhD, also from dairy sciences, and Barry Bavister, PhD, of the veterinary sciences department, followed Ax. When Bird assumed the directorship in 2000, he sought to reinvigorate the program, refocusing on the original mission and values that had been outlined in the letter to Willard in 1959.

“The interdepartmental alliances forged back in 1959 not only have endured but have grown and now place us in a very strong position to take on

the challenges of the next 50 years,” Bird says. “I find it ironic that I have been commended recently for following this path that is considered on ‘the cutting edge,’ yet I am, in fact, just continuing a theme that the program founders realized well ahead of their time.”

The innovative spark remains alive and well within the ERP program.

In response to the NIH vision to train more physician-scientists for careers in academic medicine, the ERP under Bird’s direction was the first degree program to partner with a UW clinical department (obstetrics and gynecology) to provide structured graduate degree training for MDs entering their fellowship years.

“With this we have created a fully integrated training environment that connects both ‘bench to bedside’ and ‘bedside to bench’ type 1 translational research for our graduate students and MD fellows,” says Bird.

One maternal-fetal medicine fellow has already earned his ERP master’s

degree during his three-year fellowship period.

By all measurable standards of excellence in graduate education, the ERP program is among the national leaders on an annual basis. It has seen an increase in the quality of applications for admission, a rise in participants’ scholarly productivity—including both peer-reviewed publications and presentations at national scientific meetings—and placement in prestigious postdoctoral positions at Ivy League institutions.

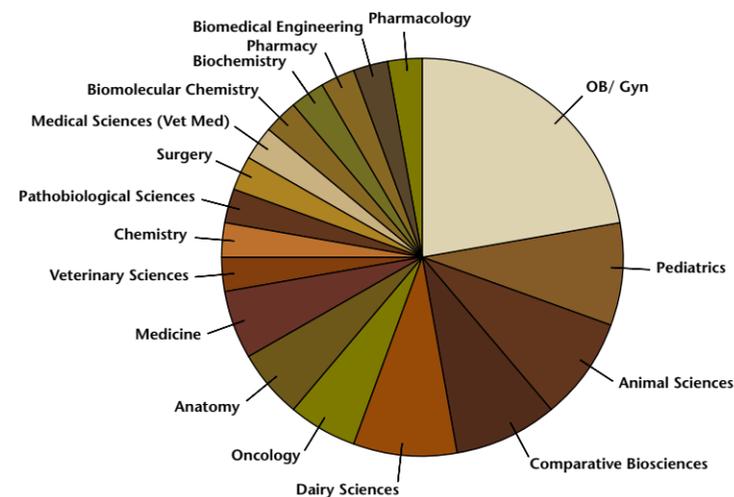
These accomplishments would not be possible without the dedication of faculty members committed to providing and maintaining a truly interdisciplinary degree program, says Bird.

He is confident about the future.

“I have every reason to believe that ERP will continue to be a vibrant program that is well positioned to handle the challenges of the future,” Bird says. “This is a great position from which to look forward to our next 50 years.”



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