FFL Meeting  
February 21, 2014  

Lunch was served at 12:10pm with Samir convening the meeting at 12:30pm.

Although Jeff Hollingsworth was on travel and could not provide the overview anticipated, Samir summarized the discussion he had with Jeanine and Jeff Hollingsworth. There is a physical restriction in the “computer room” on the first floor of the building. The space needs to be cleaned up so that additional equipment can be added. A wall which was built several years ago needs to be removed so that the space is enlarged and provides better air circulation for equipment. In addition, there is a need to upgrade the power for the space. When major renovations were made a few years ago, a power box was added but the needed equipment to upgrade the power delivery was not purchased by the computer staff. Current equipment is old with one model going back to the 1980’s and the upgrade is now critical. Several years ago an engineer in Physics was electrocuted using the same equipment which is in the computer room. This work has been estimated at over $100K.

Samir reminded faculty of the survey conducted in 2012 asking graduate students about the level of computer support received and what was needed. Students at that time felt they did not have sufficient computing support. Last year the dept provided $500 to each incoming graduate student who indicated a need for a laptop with a small number of existing graduate students also requesting support. These laptops are owned by the students and are used while in the graduate program. No additional desk-top support is provided.

Samir asked by a show of hands how many faculty members felt that additional computer support is needed for graduate students. Several professors said that not only new equipment is needed, but more knowledgeable support must be provided via help desks in CS and UMIACS so that students’ questions are answered and training to show graduate students how new equipment can be used. The need for having software that allows Virtual Machines to be installed was mentioned, as was Amazon’s elastic cloud. It may be possible to arrange a deal with Amazon to provide a certain amount of access for a more reasonable dollar amount (this service is expensive but it is a job skill which would be good for CS graduate students to have). Care should be taken before equipment is selected/purchased by the department since training for the use of the equipment will also need to be provided. If the support cannot be provided, the equipment will not be used.

Some professors may have purchased equipment with research funds whose use is infrequent throughout the year. It would be helpful if the department could provide space for such equipment and give access to graduate students with the understanding that when specific machines are needed, the professor who purchased the equipment would have priority. This would be helpful to everyone.
Samir mentioned that the intent was to create a lab which could operate in such a manner and this was the arrangement that had been discussed with Prof. Tandy Warnow and could be the model for the future.

Undergraduate student enrollment continues to increase and the estimated numbers for next year are approximately 218-220 new incoming undergraduate students (based on a 520 acceptance number with a 45% yield). This means there will be a need for more instructors/professorial faculty to teach class sections as well as an increase in TA numbers, both graduate and undergraduate TAs. Professors are asked to let Brandi know of strong undergraduate students who might then agree to become undergraduate TAs.

The campus admissions office admits students based on numbers set by the campus and those students are free to declare their majors. CS is not a limited enrollment program and although the department has tried for years to get this designation, the campus will not approve it. This is partially a political decision.

The largest budget problem for the department is covering the cost of TAs. Budget funding will provide approximate 40 graduate TAs with the remaining cost to come from DRIF funding. It was suggested that the department should use this student increase as a way to argue for additional funds from the college, not only for TA funding, but also to cover lecturer positions and new professorial slots. Samir stated that he consistently has raised the need for additional funding with the dean but CS is not in as bad shape as other departments. We have received some additional funding this year but it is not permanent budget funding. A proposal was submitted 4-5 months ago for additional TA funds and although we were told some money would follow, it still has not been released.

The meeting was adjourned at 1pm.