

## Radu's Rides: The Haves and the Have Nots



What are the factors that make some university statistics departments go

to riches... and vice versa? Contributing Editor Radu Craiu, University of Toronto, has been thinking about this:

In an election year, one hears a lot about “haves” and “have nots” and how the gap between them is getting bigger, despite everyone’s efforts to make it smaller. Politics aside, one must wonder if the phenomenon of increasing separation is encountered in other contexts, for instance, in academic departments. Having witnessed a couple of decades in which famously strong statistics departments got stronger, I am tempted to unequivocally agree, although some exceptions are in the line of sight.

It should be said up front that it is relatively easy for a strong department with a distinguished reputation to get even stronger and, frankly, cards have to be very poorly played for this not to happen. The more interesting narrative belongs to the “rags-to-riches” departments, and here I can see several trends.

The most impressive success stories belong to those who have been able to foresee, or react quickly to, the data science revolution and, following their noses they have convinced their colleagues, perhaps against some internal resistance, to get on with the modernization program. There are important lessons to be learned from such departments and they have to do with senior leadership being in touch with the discipline’s zeitgeist; having an elastic internal organisation that can adapt quickly to

significant changes; and being on excellent terms with their Deans (who must also be aware of the overall trends in science, but that’s a different “*Ride*”). Other departmental phase transitions involve serendipitous hires, synergistic research developments that happen to be in step with the fashion of the day, and the occasional star faculty who refuses to accept moves to the aggressive richer suitors for personal or political reasons.

However, as anyone who survived a hot air balloon trip can attest, what goes up must come down. The path followed by a department’s reputation is less deterministic, but still, there is always the risk that rapid buoyancy can be followed by whatever the opposite of that is. For one, rapid growth means having to fill multiple positions in one year. Alas, research in statistics comes in waves of excitement for this or that topic so that having multiple positions in one year can be both exciting (as one can hope that several gaps in the department’s research portfolio will be filled) and frustrating (as it turns out that said hope is often misplaced). The latter sentiment is due to the fact that the majority of applicants tends to follow the flavour of the year, which would be lovely if we were heavily invested in the synchronized swimming business.

This is perhaps a good time to pause and ponder, shed a tear or raise a glass for the academic scouts who can make or break a department’s hiring season. I am obviously talking about the search committees whose tasks have multiplied in recent years from scrutinizing applications to advertising on social media, to using personal contacts to disseminate the hiring positions and, last but not least, to impersonating the pure happiness that presumably comes from working in whatever department you’re daydreaming right about now.

Even successful campaigns do not

spell the end of the effort, since the young talent that ripens into full stardom must be kept happy and local. This is where things become complicated for the “have nots” and fortuitous for the “haves”. Just like a small and ambitious sports team can have their talented scouts recruit the gems in the rough, only to see them poached a few years later by bigger and more famous clubs, so goes the story in our line of work too.

Since we’re all adults in this virtual room, we can come to terms with the fact that the first year in a job brings a weird mix of pride, frustration and panic, though hopefully not all in the same minute. This is to say that reality is way more complex than our wishful expectation that everyone emerges from a successful hiring campaign as a happy puppy. I would argue, with realism as my guiding light, that all parties involved must settle for less than they dreamed for, and this leads in time to some form of ambition-driven itchiness that generates both progress and sleeplessness. And, cynicism be damned, that’s a good thing because it triggers an individual’s desire to evolve or move which is, as Darwin may have said, the reason fish developed lungs or legs.

Upward mobility at an individual level is something the world trusted to be a major vehicle in the search for better times. I will argue here that the Statistical powers that be must allow for this time-honored principle to extend to departments. Can this be the time where statistics departments grow together, boosting each other’s success? Perhaps not, since pole position is viewed by competitors as a thorn, not a feature. Or perhaps yes, as a larger number of more successful departments implies that more talent is being discovered and employed. Depending on what you choose to believe, your friends can tell how you voted.