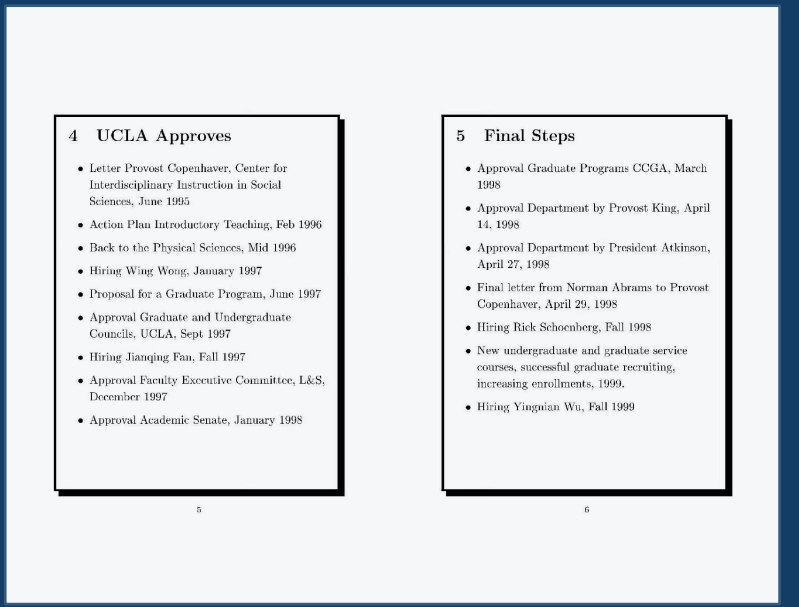
The History of the UCLA Department of Statistics

Program milestones, 1984-2026

by

Mark S. Handcock



4 UCLA Approves

- Letter Provost Copenhaver, Center for Interdisciplinary Instruction in Social Sciences, June 1995
- Action Plan Introductory Teaching, Feb 1996
- Back to the Physical Sciences, Mid 1996
- Hiring Wing Wong, January 1997
- Proposal for a Graduate Program, June 1997
- Approval Graduate and Undergraduate Councils, UCLA, Sept 1997
- Hiring Jianqing Fan, Fall 1997
- Approval Faculty Executive Committee, L&S, December 1997
- Approval Academic Senate, January 1998

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5 Final Steps

- Approval Graduate Programs CCGA, March 1998
- Approval Department by Provost King, April 14, 1998
- Approval Department by President Atkinson, April 27, 1998
- Final letter from Norman Abrams to Provost Copenhaver, April 29, 1998
- Hiring Rick Schoenberg, Fall 1998
- New undergraduate and graduate service courses, successful graduate recruiting, increasing enrollments, 1999.
- Hiring Yingnian Wu, Fall 1999

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Department approved in April 1998;
major approved in 2003;
Stat 10 enters GE in 2004-05.

Built from Jan DeLeeuw's and Don Ylvisaker's historical presentations and senate review reports.

Prehistory

1984-1993 | Building a case for statistics at UCLA

The mid-1980s brought visibility, council approvals, and the first institutional groundwork.

1984 Committee for Advanced Quantitative Methods proposes a Interdepartmental Graduate Program, but no department yet.

1986 Division of Statistics forms within Mathematics; statisticians begin to advocate more forcefully for a separate unit.

1987 Jan de Leeuw is hired to chair The Advisory Committee for the Program in Social Statistics. Four years of support provided.

1990-91 NSF grant to support statistics. The Introductory Statistics Committee, and the UCLA Statistical Consulting Center strengthen the case for a campus statistics program.

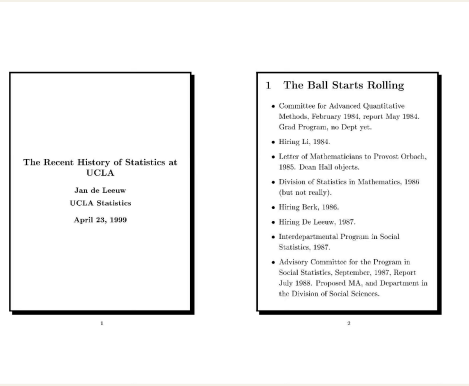
1993 Interdivisional Program in Statistics is established, giving teaching, consulting, and graduate students a working home. Statistical Consulting Center starts.

Significant early hires

- 1939 Paul Hoel
- 1955 Will Dixon (Biostatistics)
- 1968 Don Ylvisaker
- 1957 Tom Ferguson
- 1984 Ker-Chau Li
- 1986 Richard Berk
- 1987 Jan de Leeuw

What changed

- Statistics moved from an idea to an organized campus effort.
- Consulting, introductory teaching, and graduate planning created the practical basis for a future department.


The Recent History of Statistics at UCLA

Jan de Leeuw
UCLA Statistics
April 23, 1999

1 The Ball Starts Rolling

- Committee for Advanced Quantitative Methods, February 1984, report May 1984. Grad Program, no Dept yet.
- Hiring Li, 1984.
- Letter of Mathematicians to Provost Orbach, 1985. Dean Hall objects.
- Division of Statistics in Mathematics, 1986 (but not really).
- Hiring Berk, 1986.
- Hiring De Leeuw, 1987.
- Interdepartmental Program in Social Statistics, 1987.
- Advisory Committee for the Program in Social Statistics, September, 1987, Report July 1988. Proposed MA, and Department in the Division of Social Sciences.

1994-1998 | From program to department

The mid-1990s brought publicity, council approvals, and the final institutional green light.

1994 Electronic presence (consulting, preprints, mailing lists, and web) make the program visible; national NRC ranking reaches 11th/12th even before a department exists.

1995 Visiting Committee on Statistics review and improved space/support strengthen the case for a standalone department.

1996 Action plan for introductory teaching is adopted; Statistics shifts back to the Physical Sciences.

1997 Wing Wong is hired; a graduate program proposal is submitted and approved by UCLA graduate and undergraduate councils.
All senior statisticians in Math retire!

Apr 1998 Provost King approves the department on April 14, President Atkinson on April 27, and final letters are sent on April 29: UCLA now has a Department of Statistics.

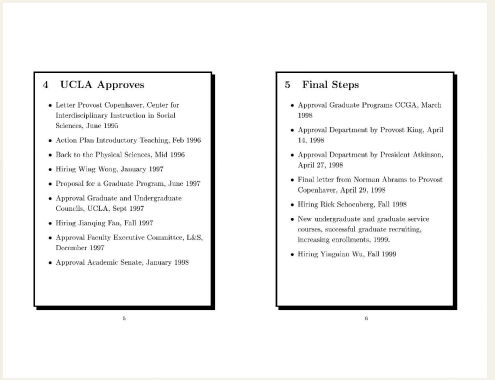
Department created

April 1998

Hires during approval phase

- 1994 Rob Gould
- Jan 1997 Wing Wong
- Fall 1997 Jianqing Fan
- Fall 1998 Rick Schoenberg

Approval



Approval pathway

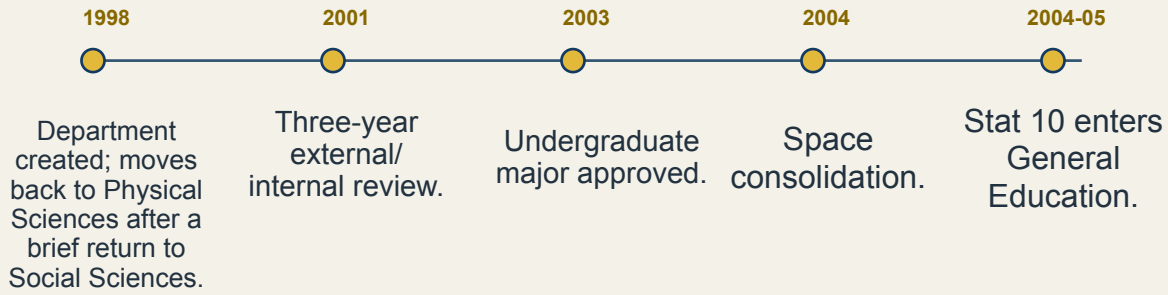
Why 1998 mattered

- Statistics gained its own governance structure.
- The department could now recruit, teach, and plan as a permanent unit rather than an interim program.

Scale-up

1998-2005 | Scaling teaching and student demand

The new department expanded service teaching, degree offerings, and campus visibility very quickly.



Lower-division teaching

- By 2005-06, lower-division enrollments had grown dramatically and Stat 10 had become the campus quantitative literacy course.
- The department explicitly built client-specific courses plus a campus-wide service course.

17→121
upper-division students
1998-99 to 2005-06

54→151
sections taught
1998-99 to 2005-06

8→19
majors
2004-05 to 2005-06

Program build-out

- 2001-02: the minor in statistics is in place.
- 2004-05: undergraduate major comes online.
- Upper-division service courses expand for Sociology and Electrical Engineering.
- The department continues to grow its professional M.S. and Ph.D. programs.

Significant hires highlighted

- 1998 Rick Schoenberg
- 1999 Ying Nian Wu

Students

Year	PhD	MS	Maj	Min	Tot
98–99	13	4	-	0	17
99–00	12	6	-	2	20
00–01	15	12	-	3	30
01–02	19	14	-	5	38
02–03	27	18	-	13	58
03–04	30	25	-	34	89
04–05	35	36	8	33	112
05-06	44	36	19	22	121
25-26	79	177	1093	153	1502

From Jan's "SCASA Keynote 2005-11-05"

Enrollments

Year	LD	UD	GD	Tot
98–99	1990	603	157	2750
99–00	2308	615	235	3158
00–01	2637	822	330	3789
01–02	2727	869	424	4020
02–03	2645	799	650	4094
03–04	2915	1006	823	4744
04-05	2794	915	911	4620
24-25	4955	4584	1000	10539

From Jan's "SCASA Keynote 2005-11-05"

Consolidation

2005-2010 | Consolidation as a research department

By 2010 the department was described as strong, interdisciplinary, and still ascending.

2005

Research is organized around centers and themes including environmental statistics, computational biology, teaching of statistics, and image/vision sciences.

2009-10

Academic Senate review describes the department as well-established, interdisciplinary, and on an ascending path.

2010

Roster reaches 11 ladder faculty, 6 lecturers, 55 majors, 46 minors, 56 Ph.D. students, and 47 M.S. students.

2010

Mark S. Handcock is hired, with two additional joint ladder positions committed by UCLA.

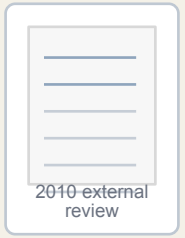
Research centers highlighted

- Vision, Cognition, Learning and Autonomy
- Computational Biology and Bioinformatics
- Environmental Statistics
- Teaching of Statistics
- Social Statistics

Significant hires highlighted

- 2001 Hongquan Xu
- 2006 Qing Zhou
- 2010 Mark S. Handcock

2010 senate review


2010 external review

Expansion

2011-2018 | Data science demand accelerates

The department entered a period of rapid growth driven by undergraduate interest, applied training, and data science.

2011 — Robert Gould founds **DataFest** at UCLA, a weekend data-analysis competition that later spreads nationally.

2012-15 — Rick Schoenberg serves as chair, marking the first planned rotation after the founding era.

2016-17 — Three new lecturers are hired to accommodate surging undergraduate enrollments.

2016-18 — The self-supporting Master of Applied Statistics (M.A.S.) program launches and becomes a significant revenue stream.

2017-18 — Review finds major/minor enrollment rose from 141 students in 2013 to 431, including 280 majors.

2017-18 review highlights

- 15 ladder faculty (12.5 FTE) and 11 lecturers.
- Programs: Ph.D., M.S., and the new M.A.S.
- Research emphasized statistical learning, computational biology, social statistics, and environmental statistics.

Significant hires

- 2012 Jessica Li
- 2014 Arash Amini
- 2014 Chad Hazlett (0.5 FTE)
- 2016 Erin Hartman (0.5 FTE)
- 2017 Tao Gao (0.5 FTE)
- 2017 Guido Montufar (0.5 FTE)
- 2018 Karen McKinnon (0.5 FTE)

DataFest

- By the 2017-18 review, ASA DataFest had spread to more than 30 sites with almost 2,000 participants in the prior year.

Leadership transition

- Schoenberg chair 2012-15.
- Handcock chair 2016-19.

Transformation

2019-2023 | New degrees, new hires, new name

This period brought formal expansion into data science, including new curricula and a sequence of ladder hires.

2019 The department and Mathematics jointly create the Data Theory major, a first-of-its-kind program focused on the foundations of data science.

2021 Guang Cheng joins the faculty; the STAND initiative is founded to strengthen community and inclusion.

2021-22 The Social Data Science minor is launched, extending the department's reach into the social sciences.

2022 Xiaowu Dai and George Michailidis are hired, strengthening core statistics and applied statistical science.

2023 The department is renamed the **Department of Statistics and Data Science**, formalizing its long-standing commitment to statistics, machine learning, and data science.

Recent ladder hires since 2019

- 2019 Oscar Madrid Padilla
- 2021 Guang Cheng
- 2022 Xiaowu Dai
- 2022 George Michailidis
- 2024 Oscar Leong and Yuhua Zhu
- 2025 Drago Plecko

Strategic direction

Hires during this period were aimed at core statistics, deep learning/data theory, and bridges to applied areas across UCLA.

Current

2024-2025 | Department profile today

By 2025 the department had become a substantially larger Statistics and Data Science unit, with multiple majors, minors, and graduate programs.

2024
Oscar Leong and Yuhua Zhu join the ladder faculty, bringing FTE back up to 16.5.

2025
The self-review reports 18 senate faculty, 13 lecturers, 7 postdocs, and 8 staff members.

2025
Academic programs now include Ph.D., M.S., MASDS, the Statistics & Data Science B.S., the Data Theory B.S., and two undergraduate minors.

2024-25
Enrollment snapshot: 138 MASDS, 79 Ph.D. students, 39 M.S. students, 536 Statistics & Data Science majors, 64 Data Theory majors, and 153 Statistics & Data Science minors.

2025
Drago Plecko hired

Next
Planned priorities include further faculty growth, formal research centers, and additional space and staff support.

2025 snapshot

- 18 senate faculty totaling 16.5 FTE
- Two distinguished professors: K.C. Li and Mark S. Handcock
- 13 lecturers and 7 postdocs
- Department highlights three pillars: research, education, and campus-wide coordination of statistics/data science teaching

Programs

- Ph.D. in Statistics
- M.S. in Statistics
- MASDS
- B.S. in Statistics & Data Science
- B.S. in Data Theory
- Minor in Statistics & Data Science
- Minor in Social Data Science

Picture from Vivian Lew