Memorial
University of Newfoundland

Office of the Vice-President (Academic) and Pro Vice-Chancellor

September 19, 2003

Dr. Wolfgang Banzhaf
Head, Department of Computer Science
Memorial University

Dear Wolfgang,

In July, Jane Foltz as Interim Head of Computer Science, provided an Action Plan for the Department to the University Planning and Budget Committee. After a summer hiatus, PBC has now considered this plan and wishes to express its appreciation to the Department for its participation in the regular Academic Program Review of the unit and its activities from which the plan derives.

The primary purpose of formal Academic Program Reviews is to give units of the University an opportunity to engage in formative self-assessment and to obtain the advantages of commentary and advice from experts from the discipline in question. An anticipated outcome is planning that clarifies how best to achieve the unit's objectives with the resources available to it. From the standpoint of the University, the process also provides a measure of accountability to the whole institution and the public that supports us.

The role of PBC is to monitor the process and develop a body of knowledge that is useful in making broad strategic recommendations and providing sound budgetary advice to the University. It is not the role of the committee to determine allocations to individual units, but we can sometimes offer advice or make potentially useful observations.

The committee was appropriately concerned by the review panel's characterization of the Department as "on the brink." Clearly, the next few years will be critical in determining the capacity of Computer Science to move forward. However, the committee wishes to congratulate the Department upon presenting an action plan that conveys a much more positive approach to its circumstances than was evident in an earlier submission and welcomes your arrival as Head. Given the collegial preparations that appear to be leading to a successful celebration of a quarter century of Computer Science at Memorial, conditions seem propitious for enabling you to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to the Head in the action plan devised by the Department and the Dean.

It is clear from the report of the review team and the action plan, that curricular revision is the keystone for the most fundamental of the proposed developments. The target of introducing major revisions to the undergraduate programs no later than Fall 2004 is obviously one that must be met (cf. Recommendation 2-4). For this reason we encourage you to make the action emanating from Recommendation 3-14 more robust, so that it includes a clear plan leading to programs that students can complete successfully. Currently the second-year program is unattractive and very difficult to get through, so that we advise you to do everything possible to make it student-friendly. You may be aided in achieving this goal by the immediate Departmental retreat proposed in the Action Plan, bearing in mind the caution expressed in Recommendation 2-2. Please bear in mind as well that program changes must be approved no later than the February meeting of Senate to be implemented

for the 2004-05 academic year, making it necessary to reach final departmental decisions by the end of this calendar year.

Relevant to the goal of developing an appealing and effective undergraduate program, we note the proposal to have some of your programs accredited. Clearly, knowing what accreditation you want will interact with your curricular review, so that the Department must proceed very deliberately. Knowing how many other Canadian programs are accredited by the Computer Science Accreditation Council or other organizations would be useful information for you.

We also note the Department's apparent agreement with Recommendation 3-4 but observe that that recommendation does not advise against making plans for introducing a co-op program. Rather, it is to proceed only in the light of placement possibilities for the students in such a program. The University encourages departments to develop co-op options, and given the stated preference of your students for such a program we encourage you to conduct the evaluation called for.

The concluding point in the Action Plan is that the Department must define its goals this Fall. Given a history of difficulties in achieving consensus on fundamental issues this may be difficult, but it is also essential. Before the action associated with Recommendation 2-8 can be pursued with any conviction, that recommendation must itself be satisfied. A plan for expanding the undergraduate program, renewing the graduate program, increasing levels of externally funded research and achieving faculty renewal should be an immediate priority.

The Action Plan deals appropriately with the main elements of this plan, so that we again congratulate the Department on the progress it represents without commenting specifically upon the remaining actions beyond supporting you in your authority to monitor "language-based communication difficulties," adherence to approved course content, and compliance with General Academic Regulation 6.2.

Our silence with respect to research and graduate studies on this occasion does not reflect disinterest but rather the conviction that these elements of the Department's responsibilities will come along with the improvements discussed above. We would, however, like to offer the strong advice that your actions pursuant to Recommendation 4-2 be significantly expanded to recognize that there are many opportunities for external research funding beyond NSERC. There are no inherent limits on support for research and graduate students if appropriate connections with industry are pursued, for example.

I wish you good luck and offer my support and that of the committee as you begin the important work of making Computer Science capable of all it should be.

Sincerely yours,

Evan Simpson
Vice-President (Academic)

c: R. Lucas, Dean of Science
        A. Ross, Acting Director of Cooperative Education
        Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies