To Benoit, Ewart, and other Faculty,

Psych 252 has a problem: there are now several generations of Psychology students who have had mixed experiences in the class. As the first class that all incoming students are required to take it seems like there might be considerable value in having a challenging but positive initial experience as a part of the department. As it stands, this has not been my (our?) experience. I am aware that previous students have also been dissatisfied and the class has benefited hugely from their contributions, in particular their efforts at making R an approachable and valuable statistics toolbox for students. Nevertheless, I am writing this letter to say that the class has more fundamental issues and that patching a programming language on top has not solved the problems. I hope that you will take the time to consider my (our) concerns and open a discussion about how the class can be improved for future generations of students.

In brief, the major issues with the class are as follows:

The class structure does not develop in an easy to follow format. By introducing complex topics early in the class without background and then developing them more completely the class reverses the logic used in 95% of other classes.

The assignments and lectures sometimes do not connect.

The class takes a disproportionate amount of time in relation to the content. Two examples of this are the use of lecture time to discuss homework problems and homework three (was it four?) which took two to three times as long as any of the other assignments.

The use of verbatim R code in class is unnecessarily confusing. Often the assignments and lecture content discuss R without addressing the underlying statistical concepts. One example of this is the consistent display of pasted R code in lecture. Programmers often use “pseudocode”, human-readable versions of actual code, because of the difficulty of quickly parsing code written by other people.

From the perspective of a student each of these issues seems to stem from the evolution of Psych 252 over the last decade. From brief mentions by the instructors we know how much the class has changed, from ANOVA (by hand), to SPSS, to R. As a student though, we aren’t interested in these changes and they are difficult to understand in the context of already complex topics in statistics. Psych 252 could benefit from a careful re-design emphasizing the understanding of statistics

Thank you for taking the time to consider these issues,

Dan Birman (1st Year PhD Student)