

Biology Department Cyclical Review

March 2015

Response of Department

The Biology Department welcomes the report of the Cyclical Review Committee. We note with pleasure that the report concludes that the Biology Department is “an excellent department in almost all, if not all, respects” (p 4 para 1) and that the committee “did not identify any major weaknesses” (p 5 para 3). The report nevertheless criticizes some aspects of the Department’s programs. The main points made by the review committee, and our response to them, are as follows.

“The training of graduate students, which focuses almost exclusively on engagement with a dissertation research project and requires almost no course work, carries a risk that students may be too narrowly competent to succeed in obtaining a teaching position or in being flexible enough to change their research emphasis later in their career.” (p 5 para 4).

Response: This is correct, insofar as we follow an apprentice model in our graduate program. This is leavened, however, by two other features of the program. The first is the Qualifying Examination, which although not a comprehensive is substantially broader than the research project. The second is the opportunity to engage in teaching via Teaching Assistantships. The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of many graduate research projects will further help to broaden graduate training in coming years.

“With respect to the representation of biological subjects and approaches within the department, some members of the Committee were concerned that access to taxonomic expertise and training may be limited.” (p 5 para 5).

Response: It is true that the taxon-based courses that were the basis of the program when the Department was founded, almost fifty years ago, have largely disappeared. Some are still offered (the broadest is Biol 304 Animal Diversity), and taxonomic expertise has been retained at the Redpath Museum, which has recently developed a Minor in Natural History, and on the Macdonald Campus, where the Lyman Museum and the Herbarium are major national collections.

“Relatively few students enter the Honours program compared to other biology programs in Canada.” (p 6 para 3)

Response: The Department has instead encouraged enrolment in Independent Studies courses, through which more than half of our undergraduates obtain research experience as part of their program. We shall, however, review the Honours program in the light of this report. As a first step, the Department will substantially defray the expenses involved in supervising research projects by Honours students, starting in Fall 2015.

“Teaching lab facilities show their age and clearly fall below what is expected in a top U15 University.” (p 6 para 4)

Response: We completely agree and have worked hard to bring this situation to the notice of the University.

“The [undergraduate] students’ major concern was that many students do not feel comfortable about requesting advice and conversation with professors.” (p 8 para 3)

Response: Professors have tried hard to make themselves accessible to students and were surprised and concerned by this perception. We are reviewing how we might better signal our willingness to interact directly with undergraduate students.

“[Graduate] Students keenly feel the loss of some support staff, in particular IT support. They viewed this as a major issue that can slow them down significantly.” (p 9 para 1)

Response: The loss of our Graduate Secretary and our chief IT manager, among others, is a source of great concern to us and may undoubtedly impede our graduate program. We have worked hard to minimize the impact of staff cuts on students, and will continue to do so.

Recommendations. The fourth recommendation, “Offer jointly graduate courses with other Montréal Universities”, has aroused considerable interest within the Department and we shall pursue it actively in the future. The other three recommendations can only be implemented by the University, and we look forward in particular to the overdue renovation of our building and the replacement of the support staff we have lost. We see the radical renovation of the Stewart Building as an opportunity to refresh both the physical space and the intellectual focus of the Department, based on the theme of ‘integrative biology’. We are very enthusiastic about this prospect, and are currently engaged in drawing up plans to keep the Department in the front rank of biology departments for the next thirty years.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the review committee for their careful, expert and disinterested evaluation of the Biology Department. We are grateful for the time and effort that they contributed to this essential exercise.

Graham Bell
Chair, Biology Department
13 May 2015