

Department of Plant Science Response to the Cyclical Review committee's Advice and Recommendations

March 21, 2019

- Change the structure of the HUB and significantly increase staff for administration, technical and teaching support. This one important change would have a positive and significant impact on all aspects in the Department.

Response: The HUB structure is decided by the faculty and not the department, however staff has increased and the structure has changed in 2018. After years of being severely understaffed, Plant Science has finally a new Admin Assistant (shared with the School of Human Nutrition) and a coordinator (shared with the whole faculty) to help with financial management, in addition to the department coordinator (shared with School of Human Nutrition).

- Provide a suitable transition between old and new technical staff to maintain continuity of knowledge and service in the Department.

Response: This is underway as best as the department can within the hiring and budget constraints of the University.

- Encourage more faculty to apply for promotion to the rank of Full Professor. The support for this needs to come from the Chair and Dean.

Response: This has already been addressed by the current Chair and Dean. As was pointed out in the document, three new Full professors were promoted in January 2018 – the first ones in 16 years.

- Clearly define processes for administration and management of the Department (e.g. more and/or longer faculty meetings to improve the flow of information). This will improve morale and rebuild a sense of belonging in the Department. More Department wide social events would bring all Department members together to start to build the social fabric of the Department.

Response: The department will hold meetings with fewer topics to go more in depth in each topic. The Chair arranged a retreat in September 2018 moderated by behavior psychologists specializing in team building to start rebuilding a sense of belonging. Social events have already taken place (e.g. a 5 à 7) and more are planned. A communications and outreach committee is planned whose mandate it will also be to help facilitate social events.

- Provide support for training of each new Chair. It may be valuable to appoint a Vice-Chair who could be part of a succession plan for the next Chair.

Response: This will be valuable.

- New faculty need an opportunity to develop their research program before starting to teach. Some faculty believe that this policy already exists in the Department but it is not being followed. This is a common practice at many institutions and is often part of the hiring package used to attract highly qualified young faculty.

Response: Newly hired faculty have only two years before reappointment, at which point they need to show that they are or have the capacity to become superior teachers. Most often the first time young faculty teach a course it is not a grand success, and they will need the second year before reappointment to show that their teaching has improved. This is the reason they are asked to teach the first year – we need superior teachers as well as superior researchers.

- Review undergraduate program to streamline courses and reduce overlap. Develop a plan to replace the teaching of faculty who retire or take sabbatical. Add a logical set of prerequisites to all courses so students are better able to take a sequence of courses that build on prior experiences and knowledge. This would also help to reduce the strain on teaching support when resources are low. More open communications between the faculty advisors and the specialization coordinators would be beneficial and the two groups need to work together to make joint recommendations.

Response: A curriculum committee has been struck and its terms of reference are currently under review. The committee will help lead the work to identify overlap and streamline courses. The department has had a meeting to identify which areas of teaching are needed and are making plans accordingly.

- Strongly encourage the establishment of a working group to develop a core curriculum of graduate-level courses and revisit the already existing graduate and undergraduate courses. Students are hungry for additional and more traditional courses at the undergraduate level and more advanced methods courses in a graduate course and suggest that the program would be improved by having new courses in new areas of research. The professors could better promote research participation by undergraduate students. Graduate students and faculty members should be strongly encouraged to attend seminars and provide constructive criticism and promote lively discussion. Postdoctoral trainees would benefit from teaching assignments to provide instructional experience and build their resume, improving their competitiveness in the job market for academic positions. Professional mentorship recommended for collegial, consensus-based style of leadership, working toward obtaining consensus on all issues.

Response: A curriculum committee has been struck and its terms of reference are currently under review.

- Undertake a coordinated review the course offerings in the Graduate Programs to ensure that

they align with and provide a critical mass of courses to support the Department's fields of study and research.

Response: This is underway and is continually revised.

- Some undergraduate courses now offered in winter would be better offered in the Fall for pedagogical reasons and to take full advantage of campus facilities.

Response: The newly established curriculum committee will address this and propose changes if deemed proper.

- The policy on six-month progress tracking is excellent, and hopefully, these kinds of regular collaborative meetings might help resolve some of the tensions in the department. It is recommended to reduce the intake of international students at the graduate level. Ideally, the number of unfunded students should be zero, and it is recommended that overall funding for students increase, ideally with Federal and Provincial scholarships.

Response: The department will take this advice into consideration.

- Better coordination of midterm/exam scheduling to spread exams over several days rather than concentrate them on single days.

Response: Students take courses given by several departments simultaneously. Coordination of midterm/exams would need to be done at the faculty level by program directors and specialization coordinators.

- Establish a minimum stipend for all graduate students and more effectively communicate the timing of the DFW. Examine the use of the DFW to support students in the later semesters and ease the burden of losing the DFW.

Response: Unfortunately it is out of the department's hands to use DFW in later semesters as this is determined by the government/university. The department will make efforts to establish a minimum stipend and even out the funding over the duration of the program.

- Invest further in the renewal and upgrading of current facilities such as greenhouses.

Response: This is underway with for example our major CFI award (ECP3 PI: Anja Geitmann), the project to renovate the Research Greenhouse, the project to replace the Teaching Greenhouse and the project to create the Macdonald Natural History collections by joining the McGill Herbarium with the Lyman Entomological museum.

- The treatment of Teaching Assistants needs to improve by providing proper guidance and sufficient resources to allow them to be effective teachers. This includes making sure that they work no more than their allotted hours and the Department adheres to the rules established by the Union and University.

Response: There is currently no structure or general capacity in place within the department for teaching Teaching Assistants to be effective teachers. The department will work with the group of Teaching Assistants to identify problems and will act accordingly.