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Dr Harold Weger, Associate Professor and Head
Department of Biology
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Dear Harold,

Per the Academic Unit Review policy, I am pleased to provide my response to the external reviewers' report following the recent Academic Unit Review (AUR) of the Department of Biology.

First, I wish to thank you – I understand you did the lion's share of the drafting – and your colleagues in Biology for undertaking the preparation of the self-study, and for hosting the review team. I also want to thank the external reviewers, Dr Sean Rogers of the University of Calgary and Dr Judy Anderson of the University of Manitoba, as well as the internal reviewer, Dr Richard MacLennan, Head of our Department of Psychology, for their helpful and very thorough report.

At the outset, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the reviewers' praise for Biology's "high-quality" undergraduate programming (9) and for graduate programming that provides "excellent research opportunities" (12). I was glad to see the reviewers' recognition that the Department's "programs, passions, and infrastructure for research are impressive" (18), their further description of the Department's "amazing infrastructure ... with lots of space and remarkable equipment" (15d), and especially their strong endorsement of the Department's earlier strategic decision to focus on several areas (molecular and cell biology, ecology, microbiology) rather than attempt to be all things to all people (4).

This echoes last year's endorsement by the Physics external reviewers of that Department's decision to focus sharply on a small number of areas – a decision that, in the reviewers' eyes, has been one of the chief reasons for Physics' research success. Biology has chosen a similar path; it is good to see it affirmed in the review, particularly as the reviewers also note the Department's "very strong research productivity" (15) and "very high" degree of collegiality (7).

I was also heartened to see the reviewers' praise of your "very enthusiastic" undergraduate students (9), and their observation that these students "find professors accessible and faculty know students' names" (9). These point not only to the Department's role in fulfilling the Strategic Plan objective of student success, but, even more importantly, show the Department takes its commitment to its students very seriously. The literature suggests that the single most determinative factor in student retention is a faculty member taking the time to know students, and to spend time with them out of class, whether on field trips, in the coffee shop, or even in brief hallway conversations. I applaud this aspect of the Department's ethos.

Let me turn now to some brief comments on several observations in the reviewers' report.

- **Planning and the next review:** As did the reviewers for the Department of Geography, the Biology reviewers recommend that the Department "regularly review their vision of programming priorities" (6), and "involve every member of the Department in considering priorities and help build lines of communication ... into the next decade and beyond" (6). I support this. Similarly, they recommend another unit review in the next 5-7 years (18), something that is built into CCAM's planning for a regular rota of campus AURs.

- **Programming, collaboration, and curriculum design:** The reviewers commend the 2014-15 major overhaul of the undergraduate curriculum (they call it "a great process" (7)). At several points (7, 10) they suggest doing more via a curriculum mapping exercise and identification of specific learning outcomes for Biology graduates. They recommend (5) more co-ordination between departments in Science so that there is a better "sharing of resources" at a time of growing fiscal constraints. They further recommend more [inter] institutional collaboration, pointing especially to the possibilities (8) for further collaboration with the Royal Saskatchewan Museum and the Saskatchewan Centre for Disease Control, as well as for collaboration with the University of Saskatchewan at the graduate level (8). To these I would add further research collaboration with the health region. Such collaborations will assume greater importance as we make the best possible use of limited resources.

  Similarly, I find their suggestion (14m) that we look at ways to fast-track very promising graduate students into the PhD without defending the MSc one that deserves discussion, not just in the Department but across the University.

- **Indigenization:** At several points in the report (3, 6d, 10) the reviewers note potential for the Department to do more with regard to Indigenization. They note that the Department's "vision of promoting Indigenous knowledge in Biology/Science is not identified, and could be much more overt" (6), especially given the presence of First Nations University of Canada on our campus, and indeed the presence within FNUniv of a biologist (5, 7a).

  Part of that vision needs to be the Indigenization of curricula as appropriate. Another part needs to be a concerted effort by all of us to increase the admission and retention of Indigenous students into STEM disciplines, including Biology. Fourteen per cent of our campus student population is Indigenous. This number will grow in coming years. To serve the communities that surround and support our University, we need to ensure that Indigenous students are retained and supported to graduation in the full range of disciplines, including STEM disciplines. They are a key part of this province's future – and of the future of science in the province.

- **Budget and staffing:** Though I would very much like to anticipate the next three to five years as a period of increasing public financial support of the University, I applaud the reviewers' realism regarding the fiscal situation in this province, and its implications for staffing. They note, for example, that "evaluation of whether expectations and goals are attainable with currently available resources will help make effective allocations of budget and positions as the Department responds to change" (18). Earlier in the document, they are more blunt, saying that a five-year plan "would be particularly useful in developing different scenarios related to 'no new recruitment' and 'no new money'" (6).

  We don't know what our operating budgets will look like between now and 2020, but at present we see little reason to believe they will differ substantially from the last few. We therefore need to plan and prepare for several more lean years, as the reviewers suggest. In this regard, it would be good to have a meeting between the VPR, one of the Financial Services specialists, and the Department to talk about how proceeds from Indirect Costs of Research funding (15) are currently allocated. I believe there remains some confusion on this point, and it would be good to clear it up.

  We indeed need to be competitive in graduate student funding. In the last two or three budget cycles we've substantially increased graduate student funding. Further increases to it will require cuts elsewhere in the institution, or higher tuition and fees for all students (undergraduate students contribute approximately 88% of our total tuition and fee revenue, and parts of this revenue are used to subsidize the costs of graduate programming). In this regard, the reviewers' recommendation (13f) on creative approaches to graduate student funding is worth serious consideration. It mirrors a similar recommendation made by the Computer Science reviewers (see page 9 of their report, which is available from the Computer Science AUR webpage at https://www.uregina.ca/president/executive-team/provost-vp-academic/academic-unit-reviews/computer%20science.html .

As I noted in the response to the Computer Science review, the main financial challenge facing this University is the steadily declining percentage of operating expenditures covered by the annual operating grant from government. Less money from government means that each year we need to raise more tuition and fee revenue from students simply to pay the bills. Given that salaries and benefits across the institution increase annually by several million dollars, and given that more colleagues are choosing to work past the normal age of retirement, our capacity to provide net new resources, including new faculty positions or graduate student funding, is severely constrained.

With regard to the institution's obligation to fund tenured professors after their CRC terms end, we will meet it. As the Dean of Science noted recently, part of the problem is that arrangements made five, six, and ten years ago to "mortgage" existing tenure-track positions in Science against the expiration of externally-funded chairs were not always well documented, and could be lost sight of as administrative personnel change. That shortcoming has been remedied. For example, the arrangements for an externally-funded chair in another Science department contain an explicit commitment by the Faculty of Science to reserve for this individual an existing position vacated by retirement or resignation once the external funding has ended.

Similarly, though there is mention of them (11) in the context of technical and logistical challenges in the teaching of anatomy and physiology, we need to remember that two academic positions in Biology were established, and continue to be funded, to meet the needs of Nursing students. Without the Nursing program, we would not have these positions in Biology.

- **Lab Instructors:** A recurring concern expressed by the reviewers involves the perception among Lab Instructors that they are "marginalized" (5, 12), that they "feel excluded from some of the requests for input to and decision-making in the Department" (7), and that, generally, their work and contributions to the Department are insufficiently recognized (7).

  This is something that needs to be addressed quickly. There is no doubt that the Lab Instructors are crucial to the functioning of the Department, and to the success of its students. The reviewers, moreover, characterize the Lab Instructors as "invaluable" and a "strong team" (12) who need to be seen, and treated, as "full citizens of the Department" (12). I endorse the reviewers' recommendations at 12L, and urge the Department to implement them without delay, both in terms of overall collegiality in the Department and in terms of the University's commitment to valuing the contributions of all employees.

- **General comments from reviewers on process:** It is good to see the reviewers describe the University's AUR process as "very transparent" (17), and register their approval of the way logistics and the site visit were co-ordinated by this office and the Department.

  As was the case with the Philosophy and Classics review last year, however, the Biology reviewers felt that we "omitted to include the expectations of reviewers for this report" (17). This is something that needs to be discussed at CCAM. I believe the terms of reference developed by CCAM are clear, but we can perhaps do a better job of articulating our expectations for the review report itself. They also identified several pieces of "documentation received during or after the site visit ... [that] would have been valuable to reviewers in preparing for the site-visit discussions on curriculum, course content, and program structure" (17).

  The report recommends (18c) consideration of group meetings on key issues, which is something that can be built into a unit review schedule at the request of any unit. They also recommend (17a, b) a more structured self-study (this is, I believe, the first such recommendation we've received since resuming AURs last year) and having my office design a self-study working group to "ensure that all members of the Department are asked for input" (17). Though my office is willing to do this, I am not convinced that it's appropriate. Different departments have different structures, programs, needs, and cultures. Within the

context of CCAM guidelines for AURs, I believe the best place to make decisions about the form and authorship of the self-study is in the unit itself, in consultation with the relevant Dean's Office as required.

Conclusion

The Biology review report is highly detailed, thorough, and reflects the investment of much time and thought on the part of Drs Anderson, Rogers, and MacLennan. I thank them again for their collegial service to the Department, the Faculty, and the University. In the context of the fiscal reality we face, I find the great majority of their recommendations worthy of serious consideration.

I would be happy to discuss my responses with you and your Biology colleagues at any time that is convenient.

The next steps in the review process, as approved by CCAM, are set out in the Academic Unit Review policy, available online at https://www.uregina.ca/policy/browse-policy/policy-OPS-130-005.html .

CCAM will be in touch with you regarding these.

Sincerely yours,

Thomas Chase
Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

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