To: Lucia Vazquez, Chair, Department of Biology

From: CLAS Curriculum Committee,  
Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson, Chair

Re: Biology Department Graduate Program Review

Date: May 25, 2010

Thank you for preparing a thorough program review for the Biology Department’s Graduate program. The curriculum committee (CC) has reviewed and discussed the program review, and the chair of the curriculum committee met with the Biology Department chair regarding some revisions. After subsequent review of the revisions, our commendations and recommendations are as follows.

The program objectives for the graduate degree are solid and clear. The program encourages high standards for their students, and the CC appreciates the academic rigor of the program. The program maintains high standards for grade requirements, and also has recently made efforts to become more selective with the entrance requirements. The CC recognizes that more selectivity can mean fewer students, however, perhaps this will assist with retention.

The CC recognizes that student funding through the Graduate Assistantships and GPSI program is beneficial for enrollment and retention, and that recent budget cuts in these areas could negatively impact enrollment and retention.

The CC also appreciates the efforts of the department to address low retention by adding the non-thesis option for the closure requirement. The CC encourages the department to track the participation of students in this option, to determine its viability.

The CC acknowledges the program’s sensitivity to student needs in course planning, and recognizes the department’s ongoing look at curricular needs with regard to enrollment levels. In particular, they have incorporated more on-line offerings of courses to aid enrollment.

With regard to assessment, the CC praises the department for a detailed and measurable rubric of student performance, and encourages the department to collect and maintain data with regard to the learning outcomes and assessment.

The CC agrees with the department’s goal to work with the Alumni office to incorporate graduate surveys, as this will provide valuable feedback for the program. Continued and more detailed assessment of student satisfaction would be beneficial for future reviews.

A strength of the Biology MS program is the impressive student achievements with students presenting their research at regional conferences, receiving various grants and awards for their work.
Requiring students to meet with their advisors each semester ("Special Approvals" on every course demands this) is a good way to guide the graduate students’ progress through the program, and is also helpful for retention.

Another strength of the program is the quality of the faculty. One faculty member recently received a large NIH grant, which is the first of its kind for the UIS campus. Faculty have obtained an impressive amount of grant funding from state, federal and private sources to support their research, as well as the ongoing work of the graduate students. The high number and quality of peer-reviewed publications is impressive, especially since one-half of the department has only been with UIS for four years.

The Biology graduate program faculty invest a great deal of time in training their graduate students. The CC acknowledges the unique needs and demands with this particular graduate program. The nature of the work of the graduate students is integral to the function of the department.

In summation, the curriculum committee makes the following recommendations with regard to the Biology department regarding the MS program:

Regarding the various curricular changes that have been made, the CC recommends that the program continue to review and monitor the curriculum, and maintain data regarding the effectiveness of these adjustments. This information can be helpful with regard to student enrollment and retention. The CC also suggests the faculty use this data to determine the long-term feasibility of the Biology Master’s Program.

Given the increasing costs of necessary supplies, reagents and equipment for the program, the CC recognizes that budget concerns can impact the productivity of the program. Clearly, a budget that keeps up with these increasing costs is necessary.

The CC agrees that greater access to on-line journals needs to be added to the library resources for the program. Specifically, on-line access to Science and Nature is crucial in keeping abreast of recent developments in the field.

The CC encourages the Biology graduate program to continue to examine the proposed “accelerated MS program.” This initiative has the potential to aid in enrollment, and should be reviewed through appropriate campus governance channels.

c. Jim Ermatinger
   Karen Moranski
   Sharron LaFollette