The Graduate Council (GC) discussed the Biology Program Review documents at its meetings on Oct. 25, Nov. 1, and Jan. 24, and continued discussions on BlackBoard during this period. We met with representatives of the Biology program and with Dean Ermatinger of CLAS on Dec. 6. Biology Program faculty were well prepared for that meeting, despite a short deadline, and were frank in addressing questions.

The Biology Department is involved in the ongoing delivery of many different facets of the campus curriculum, including general education, honors, ECCE, an undergraduate major, and a master’s program. These multiple commitments at various levels present ongoing challenges to the faculty, particularly in a period of budgetary constraints, and have a significant impact upon the delivery of the MS in Biology.

The program review provides a clearly articulated rationale for the design of the MS degree and emphasizes what the department identifies as its unique features. The review illustrates that the Biology faculty members are active teacher/scholars who are working to involve their students in their research. The program offers unique opportunities for graduate students to become directly involved in ongoing research through grants that faculty members have secured, as well as through opportunities available at the Emiquon Field Station. The department has given specific and sustained attention to graduate education.

After careful consideration of both the review documents and the information shared during our meeting with Biology faculty representatives, GC would like to emphasize the following points.

1. GC was impressed by the ways in which Biology faculty members work with graduate students on research and in labs. These graduate students in turn work with undergraduates. GC recommends that in the next review cycle, Biology faculty articulate more specifically the important ways in which graduate students are part of a continuum of research and mentoring within the department.
2. Recent changes implemented by the Biology faculty, as well as other changes under consideration, look promising to the department and to GC. The department has modified its curriculum and is discussing ways to make its courses more accessible to students, perhaps by offering more courses online. It has raised its admission standards to ensure greater likelihood of student success in the program. It is requiring more contact between students and advisers. It has implemented a non-thesis closure option. GC commends the program for its willingness to consider changes that might better meet the needs of students and help to ensure their success. GC recommends that the department systematically monitor these changes and reflect carefully in the next review upon whether they are having the anticipated results. We are particularly interested in seeing how the creation of a non-thesis option affects the curriculum as a whole, as well as student completion rates.

3. GC recommends that the Biology faculty continue to update the department’s course rotation schedule and make it broadly available. This will help the department and CLAS to define the curricular responsibilities of the department and will help students plan their course work in order to complete their degrees in a timely manner.

4. GC believes that access to additional data would help the Biology faculty in its planning for the future and in its efforts to meet the needs of its students. It would be helpful to the program to have more specific information about which students are selecting UIS and why, what modes of course delivery they prefer, and what career and educational goals are motivating them. GC recommends that the department use that data and work with the relevant campus resources to do the following:

   - develop a systematic plan for recruiting graduate students and marketing the MS degree. GC suggests looking for additional ways in which to reach out to area teachers.

   - determine whether students are finding courses accessible, and identify any remaining impediments to student efforts to complete their degrees in a timely manner.

   - gather data from institutions similar to UIS (COPLAC institutions and/or state universities) about their curricula, their enrollments, and their retention/completion rates in order to situate the program’s goals and methods regionally and nationally.

5. During the joint meeting between GC and Biology faculty representatives, faculty clearly articulated the ways in which the master’s degree program supports the campus strategic plan. GC recommends that the faculty include that articulation in its next program review.