

ONE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP REPORT: DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

Issues identified in the 5-year review that required a follow-up report:

1. The status of the Department of Biochemistry's strategic planning

As a first step towards this goal, Walid Houry, Acting Chair during the Chair's 6-month administrative leave, implemented an annual planning session at the Departmental retreat. This consisted of a 3-hour meeting at which a variety of issues were discussed, including the way the current undergraduate teaching load is distributed among faculty members. This was considered to be a good practice and so this will now become an annual event.

More recently, the idea of enlisting a professional facilitator in a formal Department-wide strategic planning session has been discussed. There is agreement that the Department needs to have a lengthy discussion around the shape of its undergraduate programs, graduate program, and graduate mentorship. This would include some of the matters identified in the 2017 review, such as creating a greater sense of mission around the Department's Majors. In general, the impression is that the Department has all the pieces necessary to cultivate an integrated sense of mission. The Advisory Committee to the Chair, moreover, feels that this would be an excellent means of further enhancing a shared sense of commitment among the core faculty and the status-only faculty in the partner research institutes.

The Chair will consult with other Department Chairs who have generated 5-year strategic plans using a consultant with a view to identifying the appropriate individual for the Department of Biochemistry. The goal is to generate a cogent 5-year plan around the most important Departmental goals, and then to use the annual planning meetings and shorter Departmental meetings to ensure their implementation.

2. The implementation of the rotation system

The Department instituted a rotating system for graduate placements in September 2017. It is too early to draw conclusions regarding the rotation system, as there is limited experience to draw on. Nevertheless, the information available strongly suggests that the rotation system has been a success. Prior to its implementation, the Department experienced "problem matches" between students and supervisors every year. Typically, these students needed to be shifted from one lab to another during their first year, losing valuable time from their funded period as graduate students. This also resulted in significant expense to the Department because part of the stipend had to be absorbed during the movement process.

Since the implementation of rotations with the September 2017 class, however, the Department has not had to reassign a single student. This suggests that the system is having the desired effect: students are finding supervisors and projects that best suit their interests and temperaments. The Department will continue to monitor factors pertaining to graduate education such as times-to-completion, student success in terms of publication, and the need to relocate students mid-stream.

3. The future of the Bioinformatics and Computation Biology (BCB) Specialist

After lengthy consideration and discussion, this program was moved to the Department of Cell and Systems Biology in 2018. Cell and Systems Biology has greater depth in this field than Biochemistry and will be a better home for it. The sole Professor from Biochemistry teaching in the program, Dr. Boris Steipe, also served as the Program Director; the rest of the faculty were in other programs. Dr. Steipe continues to teach in the program and, in the interim, will serve as Co-Director while new leadership is identified. Biochemistry is not involved in that process.

The Chair will be meeting with Vince Tropepe, Chair of Cell and Systems Biology, in the spring to formulate a plan to preserve some involvement of Dr. Steipe in the BCB program, perhaps on a cross-listed course basis. The intent of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, with the support of the Chair, is for Dr. Steipe's teaching to be more tightly integrated into Biochemistry's Major and Specialist programs. These are issues that will be fully resolved through the strategic-planning exercise.



*L. Trevor Young, MD, PhD, FRCPC
Dean, Faculty of Medicine
Vice-Provost, Relations with Health Care Institutions
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