Date: January 28, 2010

To: University Curriculum Committee

From: Gar W. Rothwell, Chair

RE: Response to recommendations of the Seven Year Review for 2000-2007

The Department is extremely pleased by the positive review of the UCC and the external reviewer, as we have been actively pursuing excellence in all areas for the past decade. We appreciate the specificity of the concerns that have been voiced, and the clarity of the recommendations to redress inadequacies. Because there were only a few concerns and close agreement between the external reviewer and the internal review, we are addressing a combination of both in the numbered items that follow:

1. Diversity of faculty and students:
   The Department of Environmental and Plant Biology (PBIO) has made concerted efforts to increase the diversity of both faculty and students over the past ten years, but those efforts have not been particularly successful for a variety of reasons that largely have been beyond our control. To increase faculty diversity we have taken care to interview minorities and women for faculty positions. During the review period we hired one additional female faculty member, who subsequently did not earn tenure. We have made offers to two other women for Group 1 faculty positions, but were turned down by both (at least in part) because of limited opportunities for spousal employment. We have successfully hired one French national of Arabic descent for a Group 1 faculty position, and Ghanaian national of African descent for a Group 4 position. The latter was encouraged to pursue a research program that would make him competitive for the Group 1 faculty position that we have just filled (one of the positions that was turned down by our female first choice), but he chose not to do so.

   At the present time, approximately 40% of our graduate students are female and 45 % of our undergraduates are female. We have been less successful in attracting minorities for both graduate and undergraduate work, primarily because the number of Latino- and African-Americans who choose careers in plant biology is extremely small. To help overcome this difficulty, we have pursued several strategies. We have made contacts with and actively recruited students from traditionally black colleges. We also have developed an initiative to increase diversity and capacity (attached) that we have shared with the President's office and have been pursuing for the past five years. We are continuing our efforts to recruit larger numbers of ethnic minorities.
2. Inadequate secretarial/clerical support, substandard greenhouse space, and inadequate housing for the Paleobotanical collection:

All three of these items are of great concern to PBIO, but are beyond our control. We have repeatedly stressed the inadequacy of our clerical staff to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and presented several proposals to overcome the problem, but no solution has yet been developed. In 2007 PBIO developed an initiative in collaboration with the Vice President for Research and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to develop a new “controlled environment facility” on West Sate Street to replace the current inadequate greenhouse facilities, to provide research space for faculty beyond PBIO, and to provide space for Buildings and Grounds to grow landscaping plants. However, that initiative was shelved when the budgetary situation deteriorated dramatically. The situation with the Ohio University Paleobotanical Herbarium is even more tenuous. Ohio University closed the Natural History Museum in the late 1960s and dispersed the collections. As a result, Ohio University has no institutional commitment to natural history collections. As a reflection of this situation, the Vice President for Research has given the Curator of the Ohio University Paleobotanical Herbarium permission to move the collections to a recognized repository such as the Museum of Paleontology at the University of Kansas if/when that becomes necessary or advantageous for the long-term preservation of the fossils.

3. The Department should consider restructuring the Cell Biology and Biotechnology Major:

In the redevelopment of the curriculum for the semester system, PBIO has eliminated the stand-alone Cell Biology and Biotechnology Major. Students wishing training in these specialties will be able to do so under the Plant Biology major.

4. PBIO needs to offer graduate students training in Responsible Conduct of Research:

PBIO has also recognized the need to develop such an offering, and has done so. As a pilot project, a graduate seminar in “Scientific Ethics & Academic Integrity” was offered in the fall of 2009, and a regular graduate/advanced undergraduate course in this area has been added to the curriculum beginning in the Fall of 2010.

5. Institute a mentoring program for junior faculty:

PBIO has developed a mentoring program to provide assistance for junior faculty to become successful, highly productive teachers and scholars. This program consists of each newly hired faculty member being encouraged to choose a mentor from among the tenured faculty with whom he/she is comfortable, and to whom she/he periodically goes when in need of assistance or council. The department has a program of teaching evaluation by other faculty, whereby each faculty member is evaluated each year by a different colleague. The colleague evaluates course materials such as the course web
site and attends one or more classes of the faculty member being critiqued. The faculty member writes up an evaluation that covers strengths and recommendations for improved teaching. That evaluation is shared and often discussed with the probationary faculty member and then placed in the probationary faculty member’s folder for inclusion in the P & T dossier. The Chair also encourages each probationary faculty member to meet periodically and discuss strategies for improving teaching, increasing research productivity, student mentoring, and grant writing. These relatively informal mentoring activities have allowed all who have taken advantage of them to become successful faculty.

We thank the external reviewer, Dr. Richard E. Triemer, Chair of the Department of Plant Biology at Michigan State University, and those members of the University Curriculum Council who evaluated the Department of Environmental and Plant Biology. We appreciate both the vote of confidence in us as “a strong, well-developed academic unit” and the recommendations, which will help us to continue advancing towards our goal of becoming the best university-level plant biology department in North America.

GWR/bms