

## Comments from Brian Chabot on the Future of the Division of Biological Sciences

I have enjoyed being a faculty member in the Division of Biological Sciences and I fundamentally like the concept of a large group of faculty working together toward common goals. I have seen first hand for a number of years how the Division was represented to the College of Agriculture & Life Sciences and the response to that representation. I have seen four Division Directors effectively advocate the interests of basic biology at Cornell and of the faculty in the Sections to sustain a favored position. For these reasons I supported the alternative proposal to the Task Force Report that would maintain a Division structure.

Among the problems which I feel need resolution are:

- The desire of Sections to have the privileges of departments and the unwillingness of some Sections to cooperate under the operating principles in the Division.
- The perception within the Division that it has lacked an effective Director.
- Difficult to non-existent interactions at the department level between the Sections and biology departments outside the Division, thus an inability to effectively plan for the whole of basic biology at Cornell.

As the discussions have dragged on with an expanding community participating, I have become concerned about a series of issues underlying the situation facing us. One concern is the failure of leadership within the Division itself. It is not a healthy sign that a Task Force of all of the designated leaders in the Division produced a recommendation that was not supported by a majority of the faculty. Having discovered this gap, it is not a healthy sign that the Division faculty have been unable to negotiate a solution within our organization. There has been a strong tendency for the Division faculty to blame others for their situation as if there is nothing that the Division could have done itself to have improved things. The leadership for solution has been coming from outside the Division by default. For whatever solution is recommended by the University administration, the Division or its remnant pieces needs to pay serious attention to the effectiveness of its internal leadership.

A second concern is the strong message of the Division wishing to distance itself from the colleges from which it currently receives support. This is more a corporate message as there clearly are valued individual interactions between faculty on either side of the Division boundary. Option C and Option D even more strongly, carry clear messages of wishing to be in a separate and more privileged state than at present. Neither of these options will be encouraging to colleagues outside the Division. I unambiguously support the need for and value of basic biology units at the Section/Department level; I think the overwhelming majority of faculty and administrators outside the Division also support this view. There also is general agreement that basic biology has importance in fueling significant innovations and applications for the future. If this is the case, then to erect anything more than the normal departmental barriers to faculty cooperation seems paradoxical and foolish. For these reasons I cannot support either Option C or D.

I have other concerns with Option C:

- One is the leadership issue raised above.
- Another is the requirement for cooperation between the units included; cooperation seems to be in short supply, witness Option D.
- I wonder whether the Provost really will be able to pay much attention to the Division given the extent of his responsibilities for the University.
- The operating relationships between the Director, Provost, and Advisory Committee would require a lot more detailing before I would be comfortable with this arrangement.
- The Director remains in the uncomfortable situation of not being like either a dean or department

chair.

- I think that we would be fooling ourselves about the importance of department-like structures to disciplinary leadership.
- It may, depending how this is implemented, eliminate those sections which have achieved excellence.

As suggested above, I tend to think about what messages are sent in any proposed solution. The messages that I would prefer to see are:

- Encouragement for cooperation and interaction, that we are willing to work toward common purposes rather than divergent and separate purposes.
- Recognition of the importance of basic biology to a variety of potential applications.
- Recognition of and support for excellence.

The way these play out for me is:

- There should not be organizational barriers other than what departmental units normally provide.
- There should be easy organic connections with applied biology departments; a complicated route through provosts and deans is not good.
- There should not be a forced coalescing of departments. It makes no sense to me to destroy units that have achieved leadership and excellence in their disciplines.
- There should be some structure that encourages cooperation among biological science units.

Early in the discussion, I shared the concept that a Center could provide the vehicle required for cooperation across departments/sections. I offer this again as a friendly amendment to Option A. The Center I have in mind would have responsibility to coordinate and promote basic biology at Cornell. It would encompass both the undergraduate major, graduate fields, and research. It would operate as do other Centers to catalyze, facilitate, and remove barriers, rather than to control and establish barriers. While this Center would carry general leadership responsibilities for basic biology for the university and its constituent colleges, participation by departments and faculty would be voluntary, except in the area of the undergraduate major. We are familiar with the center structure and the roles it can play. It is a vehicle to incorporate the two advisory structures proposed by Cutberto, which are separated structurally in the current Option A.

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See also [Howard Howland's response](#) to these comments