

Response to Comments of Professor Brian Chabot

by H. Howland, NBB

Professor Brian Chabot has advanced a number of new and interesting arguments concerning the best organizational solution for the Division of Biological Sciences. As a former Chairman of the Section of Ecology and Systematics and a current Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, he brings considerable administrative experience to the discussion.

Professor Chabot, who originally supported a statement encouraging the formation of a strong Division, now supports option A, or a modification of it. Below I respond to his comments which I have abstracted and either paraphrased, or included in quotation marks.

Chabot writes "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".

I agree that the Task Force recommendation is not supported by the majority of the faculty of the Division. (Option A, which Chabot now supports embodies the recommendations of the Task Force.) I agree that this is not a "healthy" situation. The fact that the then Director of the Division was not included in the Task Force attests to the "unhealthy" problem the Division faced. However, I think to call it "not a healthy sign that the Division faculty have been unable to negotiate a solution within our organization", misses several points. To wit:

- It was the lack of a strong Directorship of the Division that initiated the crisis.
- By the time Prof. Walcott was appointed Director it was made clear to him that the fate of the Division was going to be decided at a higher administrative level.
- Almost immediately after the issuance of the Task Force Report there was no possibility to negotiate a solution within the Division. It will be recalled that in response to a question in the Senate meeting of 11 March, 1998 asking how the fate of the Division would be decided, Provost Randel stated "But we will, let's say the President and I, some of our colleagues in the central administration, after having heard all and sundry, try to move to a resolution of this this Spring."
- The faculty, by petition, by making an organized response to the Task Force Report and by introducing and arguing successfully a motion in the Senate, managed to delay an immediate decision on the fate of the Division, and to cause the University Administration to solicit outside advice.

These appear to me to indicate a very healthy concern for the fate of the Division.

Chabot writes, "A second concern is the strong message of the Division wishing to distance itself from the colleges from which it currently receives support. ... 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."

Recalling that all of options A,B, and C were formulated by Vice Provost Garza, and not the members of the Division, it still does not seem correct to say that Option C carries a clear message of wishing to be in a more privileged state than the present. Unless of course, that wishing to have a strong rather than a powerless administrator for the Division is wishing for privilege.

To put it another way, Chabot's argument would seem to say that the biological sciences must be broken up into departments in the several colleges because putting them together in a functional Division would put them in a privileged position. Following that logic, there never would have been a Division of Biological Sciences in the first place.

After voicing support for the need and value of basic biology units, Prof. Chabot writes: "to erect anything more than the normal departmental barriers to faculty cooperation seems paradoxical and foolish". To which one might respond, "to erect normal departmental barriers to faculty cooperation between the units of the Division would be paradoxical and foolish". This is exactly why Option C is the most logical solution for the units of the Division.

Chabot's argument contains the hidden assumptions that a) sections of the Division did not collaborate with colleagues outside of the Division, and b) breaking the Division into departments would firstly not hinder the collaboration that went on inside the Division (for example on the undergraduate curriculum) and secondly it would enhance collaborations among the former units of the Division and other departments. To my knowledge, no real evidence has been offered for any of these (in my view implausible) assumptions.

Chabot then raises a number of additional concerns with option C which are worth examining. He notes that Option D (an option presented by the Section of Cellular and Molecular biology which would make them a department outside of the Division) indicates that "cooperation seems to be in short supply". But one must ask oneself: is it more likely that cooperation between the current Sections of the Division will occur inside a Division or among separate Departments?

Chabot wonders whether the Provost really will be able to pay much attention to the Division given the extent of his responsibilities for the University. Since there are colleges that are smaller than the Division, as well as a successful Division of Nutritional Sciences, it seems a safe presumption that the Division would get its fair share of attention.

Chabot notes that the "operating relationships between the Director, Provost, and Advisory Committee would require a lot more detailing before I would be comfortable with this arrangement." It is just this lack of detail which we are attempting to fill in. (See link to "A Strengthened Division: Option C Revised and Explained").

He also notes that "it may, depending how this is implemented, eliminate those sections which have achieved excellence", and also, "It makes no sense to destroy units that have achieved leadership and excellence in their disciplines". This is indeed a serious problem with Option B, and one which we have addressed in our revised Option C.

Lastly, Chabot states "there should be some structure that encourages cooperation among biological science units". I totally agree, and I think that such as structure is a strengthened Division embodied in a revised Option C.

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