

November 17, 1998

**Reorganization of the Division of Biological Sciences  
at Cornell University**

President Hunter R. Rawlings

After many months of deliberation, I have decided to implement the primary recommendations of the Task Force on the Future of the Division of Biological Sciences. The current office of the Director of the Division in the Biotechnology Building will be phased out during the remainder of the 1998-99 academic year. The undergraduate program, which will continue to be administered from the biology complex in Stimson, will be converted into a joint program of the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Arts and Sciences; the primary reporting relationship of the director of this program will be to the Dean of Agriculture and Life Sciences, who will confer regularly with the Dean of Arts and Sciences and a designated vice-provost about its needs, problems, and initiatives. The present sections of the division will be variously folded or converted into departments. The arrangements for Microbiology and Physiology remain to be worked out in consultations among the faculty of those units and the deans of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Arts and Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine. The remaining faculty members now in the division will belong to one of four units, a plant science department wholly in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, a Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, a Department of Neurobiology and Behavioral Science, and a Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics. While the latter three departments will have biology faculty from both the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Arts and Sciences, administrative responsibility for them will be assumed by a "lead" dean. The dean of Agriculture and Life Sciences will assume this role for Ecology and Evolutionary Biology; the dean of Arts and Sciences will do so for the other two. Under this structure, the current understandings on tuition for both undergraduates and graduate students will remain in force.

This re-organization takes into account a *fait accompli*, namely that the large sections of the division have already been functioning as departments and providing for a large share of the undergraduate curriculum. It also assumes that sizeable departments of 20-40 faculty are optimal for building strong faculties and programs. Finally, it assumes that the resources now supporting the division director's office will be diverted to the support of programs and faculty in basic biology, especially in the sphere of molecular and cell biology. A crucially important strategic factor in our planning for the future of biology at Cornell is the urgent need to build strength in this central, enabling area of the field. Thus, in addition to shifting some existing resources into the new department that will have a key responsibility in this area, the university and the College of Arts and Sciences will undertake to raise special funds to assist with the cost of recruitment and start-up of new faculty in biochemistry, genetics, and chemical biology. Oversight for the near-term redistribution of resources derived from closing the division will be provided by a vice-provost who will work with the deans of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Arts and Sciences to coordinate teaching and research in biology and to ensure an appropriate flow of resources to the undergraduate program.

Among the faculty reservations about the task force recommendation to dismantle the Division, one that I have considered with particular care is the concern about the long-term welfare of the undergraduate biology major. I agree with the widely held consensus that Cornell should retain a single, well coordinated biology major. In subscribing to this view, the task force report offers a well elaborated definition of the director's role and an incisive account of the major's structure and operations; with no more than slight modifications, we can appropriate these recommendations and implement them expeditiously. It is clearly

necessary for the director of the undergraduate biology program to have the authority and influence required to maintain the current commitments of faculty, teaching assistants and material support. Just as the cooperating colleges will be required to articulate ongoing commitments of faculty positions, space, teaching assistants, staff and general expense appropriations for an initial five-year period under the new arrangements, the various biology departments will be required to make ongoing commitments of courses, advising, and research opportunities for undergraduates. Beyond this, however, the mission of the undergraduate director, the newly formed departments, and a revamped biology curriculum committee will be continually to upgrade both the major and biology instruction for non-majors. The means for enhancing the undergraduate program should include curricular initiatives, improvements in advising, and participation in teaching and advising by biology faculty from departments other than the new basic biology departments formed out of the division. The curriculum committee will be reorganized under the supervision of the Director of Undergraduate Biology along the lines suggested by the task force. The committee will report on its work each spring to the concerned deans and vice-provost. It should place particular emphasis in the years immediately ahead on improving the education of biology majors during their junior and senior years.

Another important reservation expressed by faculty advocates of maintaining the Division has to do with the way the principal undergraduate colleges, Agriculture and Life Sciences and Arts and Sciences, will administer the biology departments and support research in basic biology. To address these concerns, the university administration will require the deans of these two colleges to draw up a substantial agreement of cooperation. In it the two deans will spell out in detail both (1) the resource commitments to the departments and to the undergraduate biology program that their respective colleges will maintain, and (2) the procedures they will employ in order to guarantee day-to-day cooperation and prompt response to changing circumstances. The agreement will cover the standards and procedures applicable to hiring and promotion decisions and to shifts of resources from one department to another. It will also include an account of each college's current contributions and continuing commitments to the undergraduate biology program and of the procedures to be used in assessing and responding to new needs that may arise. Final approval of this agreement, which will be subject to review every five years, will be the prerogative of the provost.

In light of the enormous breadth of the field of biology and its extension into a host of interdisciplinary enterprises, there is clearly a need for attention to the overall direction and cohesion of the field on our campus that only a group of experienced, high-caliber biologists can provide. It makes sense to have formal mechanisms for ensuring both evaluation of our efforts and advice on initiatives we should be exploring. A vice-provost will represent the university administration in the sphere of biology and will be charged with constituting an advisory council for basic biology that will have two components. A local board of distinguished biologists and scientists who collaborate with biologists will meet regularly with the vice-provost and the deans, at least once per semester, to review ongoing developments and discuss matters of concern to our biology programs. This group will be supplemented by an external board of distinguished biologists from other institutions who will be kept informed of developments via annual reports and who will come to campus every 2-3 years for discussions with the local board and the administration. During the initial five-year period under the new arrangements, we shall call on these advisory bodies to pay particular attention to our attempts to strengthen molecular and cell biology.

Implementation of the reorganization of basic biology will begin immediately. I want to stress the importance of moving ahead with the transition in a humane and collegial spirit. The colleges and the university will cooperate in making every effort to provide appropriate positions for staff members affected by the new arrangements. I am calling on the deans of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Arts and Sciences to disseminate before the December vacation a schedule for the period of transition that will run from

January through June. I am also asking them to begin drafting the required agreement of cooperation during the winter break; thereafter, working with the provost as needed, they will be ready to finalize the agreement by mid-March. The deans' plans for next semester's transition will address the need to set up the new departments so that they can begin operations on July 1, 1999 and the need to maintain the undergraduate program so that the standard deadlines for publishing the curriculum and staffing courses will be respected. While the implications of the changes to be carried out are significant, we should not lose sight of the fact that a great deal of what now constitutes our biology program can simply be carried forward into the post-division era.