

Biological Sciences - A Shared Decision-Making Model

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At the University Faculty Senate meeting on October 14, Dean Phil Lewis presented the troika (abolish the division, strengthen the division director, centralize control of biology) of options currently under consideration. I believe that at least one further solution could be constructed incorporating the best features of the "abolish", "strengthen", and "centralize" options.

It is possible that we are at last witnessing the first example of a fundamental shift in the familiar hierarchical paradigm of Provost to Dean to Chair to Faculty Member. In its purest form, the paradigm is that each person provides resources to the next person in line, who in turn has freedom to distribute those resources, but may not direct those farther down the line. The depth of our faith in this paradigm is underscored by the observation that the three above alternatives all focus on control of resources to the exclusion of other modalities of academic leadership. The paradigm rests squarely on the assumption that intellectual endeavors can, in the main, be contained within colleges and departments. To the extent that the assumption fails, as it does in biology, new paradigms for academic administration are required.

No matter what administrative structure is eventually chosen, we will not succeed until we first formulate a coherent strategy for biology for all of Cornell (at least as a first step, I exclude the Medical College). This cannot be done by edict from Day Hall; nor is it likely that it can be done by the 500 biologists on the faculty in a town meeting in Bailey Hall. What is needed is a small, yet broad enough, group to be representative that includes those that have the ultimate responsibility for our programs in biology. A reasonable venue for this critical step is a Biology Secretariat (the name "cabinet" might have been chosen if it had not been already taken) composed of the deans of Arts & Sciences, CALS, Engineering, Human Ecology, Veterinary Medicine, the director of Nutrition, a biologist from the central administration, and someone else (I will choose the neutral title of Secretary General). The full time responsibility of the Secretary General would be planning and advocating for the entire scope of research, education, and extension in biology.

In this model, the President would insist that the Secretariat make decisions (by a vote that was set at some level between majority and unanimity, and perhaps was tailored in some way as to reflect the differing resources contributed by the deans) that carried the force of the President's authority and bound all members of the Secretariat. The Secretary General would advocate for biology and ensure that policy decisions of the Secretariat were carried out. The Secretariat probably should have control over the procedures for allocation of resources (e.g., the faculty search and hiring process) and perhaps some say in the allocation decisions themselves.

The Secretary General probably should not have personal power over individual decisions, although to maintain respectability, s/he should have some non-trivial budgetary authority. One possibility might be to have faculty start-up funds would flow through that office.

Once the Secretariat was established, the need for the Division as a structure should largely wither away. Since there seems to be general agreement that a department that reports to one person is a more efficient model than a section that reports to three, the sorts of realignments proposed by the Task Force that developed the "abolish" option makes perfect sense. The advocacy function entrusted to the Division Director in the "strengthen" option is maintained, but with broader scope (all of biology) than in that option. Presumably the Secretariat would maintain responsibility for supporting the unified program of undergraduate education in biology, with the Secretary General providing whatever support is necessary for coordination of efforts of the various colleges. The centralized direction and authority provided by the Vice Provost in the external committee's "centralize" option would become the collective province of the

Secretariat, whose members would also have the responsibility of carrying it out. The deans would trade some of their area of autonomous decision-making for the ability to affect the course of biology as a whole.

While the Division structure would probably largely disappear, a unified faculty representation in the Secretariat's decision-making procedure needs institutional recognition. One could imagine a formal membership in the "biology faculty", and the Secretariat having formal elected faculty committees to advise them and participate in decision-making, similar to the roles of the colleges' EPCs, the Advisory Committee on Tenure in Arts and Sciences, or the Policy Committee in CALS.

This proposal corrects substantial weaknesses in the three options listed by Phil Lewis. Neither the "abolish" nor the "strengthen" options provide for a mechanism for establishing a unified and coherent biology strategy. The "centralize" option provides such a mechanism, but separates the responsibilities for articulating and carrying out the strategy, puts the deans in an uncomfortable position that is neither line nor staff, vests an unusual degree of academic responsibility in a single individual, and has no recognized place for faculty participation in decision-making. The novel feature of the "Secretariat" option is a formal group policy-making, as opposed to an advisory, role. While it is unusual in our setting, it is not unheard of, and could be thought as analogous to the newly established role of the academic cabinet.