

Statement on the Procedures to Decide the Fate of the Division of Biological Sciences

I wish to bring to your attention current discussions surrounding the restructuring of biological sciences at Cornell and the proper role of the faculty and University Senate in these deliberations.

You may know that a Task Force appointed by the Provost has recommended the dissolution of the Division of Biological Sciences into separate departments. On two evenings in February, members of the Division of Biological Sciences discussed the draft Task Force Report, a document they had had in their hands for only a few days prior to the meetings. I think it is fair to say that the recommendations did not find favor with the majority of the Division faculty, although no vote was taken.

At the last meeting of the Senate on March 11th, I asked the Provost: "...what procedures will now be used to decide the fate of the Division of Biological Sciences?" and his reply, abstracted from the minutes of that meeting, was, in essence, that he would want to meet with the Task Force, that the President was very interested in the matter, that it would be considered by the Academic Cabinet, and that he and the President would attempt to resolve the matter by the end of the spring [Rough Draft of Senate Minutes: http://www.cornell.edu/Faculty_senate/FCR1997-8/FCR98-311.html].

Some of our older members may recall that the Division of Biological Sciences was created in response to reports of three separate committees. The first was an internal committee of biologists who recommended to President Malott in 1961 that a Division of Biological Sciences be created at Cornell. President Malott rejected these recommendations, as well as the recommendations of two other committees, and left the task of reorganizing biology to his successor, President Perkins. In October of 1963, President Perkins appointed an outside committee of distinguished biologists, chaired by Robert Morison. Their "Biology at Cornell: Report of the Special Committee", recommending the creation of a Division of Biological Sciences, was circulated to the entire faculty of the University. President Perkins accepted the recommendations of the Morison Report, then appointed another internal committee, chaired by Provost Dale Corson, to plan for the creation of the Division. Their report, submitted to the President in March of 1964, was distributed to the entire University Faculty and discussed extensively. According to the report's appendix, "Finally the University Faculty was called to a meeting and by formal vote approved the report of the Corson Committee."

Contrast these very deliberative proceedings with the procedures underway today, which may result in the Division's demise this spring.

The Task Force Report, one which astonished the vast majority of the Division's members, was hastily discussed by a largely disapproving audience. Two large groups organized written responses recommending the retention and strengthening of the Division. These together with similar responses from numerous individual Division members are now in the hands of the Administration.

The Division of Biological Sciences is a structure that was created at great expense of time and money after long deliberation by several committees--a structure that is now in danger of being hastily dissolved with comparatively little consideration and consultation of faculty or outside experts.

I submit that if the biological sciences were important enough to demand the attention of the President, the entire faculty, and an outside committee at the creation of the Division in 1964, they require equal attention today when the reorganization or abandonment of the Division is contemplated. Consequently, at the next meeting of the University Senate, I will introduce the following resolution. I would greatly appreciate your advice in perfecting it and your support in passing it.

Resolved: The Senate urges the University Administration not to disband the Division of Biological Sciences without further and full consultation with the faculty of the Division and the University, with the Faculty Senate and with outside experts, and without the same thorough and careful deliberation used in the creation of the Division in 1964.

