GRADUATE PROGRAM IN ANATOMY & CELL BIOLOGY

RESPONSE TO THE TASK FORCE

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Task Force on Graduate Education regarding the “good” rating that was given to the Graduate Program in Anatomy and Cell Biology. The major concern of the Task Force was that the student to faculty ratio was “quite low”. However, it should be emphasized that the number of students (13 PhD students and 1 MS student in F08) divided by the number of research active faculty in the department during the same period (11 faculty in F08) is greater than 1:1. This ratio is much higher than that of larger interdisciplinary programs, such as Molecular & Cellular Biology (38 students: 76 faculty) or Genetics (45 students: 65 faculty). The Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology has an extremely large health science service teaching load with over 2000 contact hours in gross anatomy. This function is primarily carried out by faculty who no longer do research (6 in total). As these faculty retire over the next five years, we will slowly recruit more research active tenure track faculty and lecturers to carry out the service teaching. At this point we would expect the overall size of our graduate program to grow. We are already in transition toward this goal with four new tenure track faculty less than 2 year in rank. An additional reason for our small size is that we recruit students exclusively through the Biosciences admissions umbrella. In this effort, the ACB graduate program has been very successful. Most years we garner “more than our share” of lab rotations and frequently have ~25% or more of the entering Biosciences students matriculate into our program. It is disingenuous to encourage programs to adopt a common recruitment mechanism, and then criticize those programs that successfully conform to the Biosciences model for not boosting their numbers by continuing to directly admit additional students.

Furthermore, there are advantages to having a small, focused graduate program. Faculty and students in the ACB program benefit from the flexibility our program affords. Because we do not have to achieve large consensus opinions to adopt changes to our curriculum, we are better poised to adapt to the evolving needs of students in the current academic environment. The students that enter the ACB program have the same first year curriculum that all Biosciences students have, and take advanced topical electives in their second year. Although our curriculum overlaps that of certain other programs, we offer our own topical elective courses. We are continually developing new modular electives that expose our students to state-of-the art techniques and concepts in cell and developmental biology and cancer biology, and stress the improvement of critical thinking and analytical skills by the students. The students also benefit from being part of an small cohort that are trained in an intimate setting, where all of the labs are in close proximity and contact with all of the departmental faculty is frequent and unfettered. Far from being a detriment, we would argue that our relatively small size is an asset to our program.

It is also important to reiterate that the ACB program has a long track record of success in training students who have gone on to do post-doctoral research at some of the world’s premier universities or who have obtained anatomy teaching positions in Anatomy departments around the country. Our completion rate (64%) and TTD (5.3 yrs) are commendable as well.

“The Task Force felt that there is overlap of this program with other biomedical science programs and that it might make sense to merge the program with other similar graduate programs”. It should be noted that we are engaged in discussion with other programs about combining certain aspects of our training to provide synergy if it is in the students’ interest to do so. In fact, we offer a career development discussion series that was merged with that of the Molecular & Cellular Biology program, because in this effort it was felt that more student participation was necessary to create a critical mass for a successful discussion. However, in our opinion it would be a mistake to completely merge programs, as there is currently no mechanism to ensure that the best features of each program would be preserved.