To: Mike Quinn, President, Faculty Senate  
Thursday, April 26, 2007

From: Thomas H. Shellhammer, Chair, Budgets and Fiscal Planning Committee

RE: Responding to request to define university departments and schools

Dear Mike:

In late December, 2006, you, along with Bill Boggess and Becky Johnson, met with the Budgets and Fiscal Planning Committee (BFPC) to discuss the wave of Category I ‘School’ proposals that were passing through the Curriculum Council and hence the BFPC as well. Given the lack of a definition of a “School” in terms of an organizational structure, our committee was charged with defining “Departments” in the context of a university setting and contrasting it to “Schools”. Throughout the winter quarter we discussed this topic and examined data related to departmental FTE from Nancy Heiligman’s office (Budgets and Fiscal Planning) as well as from the Office of Institutional Research. This memo discusses our conclusions.

The executive summary from our committee can be exemplified in the adage “if it makes sense, then do it.” That is, if a convincing argument can be made by an academic unit that the formation of either a Department or School will benefit the mission of Oregon State University and fits within the context of the University’s strategic plan, then the proposing group should be allowed to proceed.

The following commentary summarizes our thoughts on the various lenses through which one might view a Department versus a School.

**Disciplinary alignment**

Departments offer a sense of a well-defined discipline, and faculty as well as students have a ‘home’ in these units. A dictionary definition congruent with this concept defines a Department as “one of the sections of a school or college dealing with a particular field of knowledge: the English department” (www.dictionary.com). We associate Departments with academic discipline homes (e.g., "where my knowledge is derived from,"my epistemological orientation," etc.) and associate Schools with their mission (e.g., "we want to do X, Y, and Z"), Profession, and/or certification entities. We also felt that as the disciplinary structure becomes broader or more diverse and embraces multiple disciplines that a Department may be considered a School or even a College. The concept of aggregation of disciplines to form a School is consistent with the pattern we are observing on the OSU campus. However, there are instances at other institutions where Schools may not necessarily be the aggregate of departments, for example the School of Packaging at Michigan State University and U.C. Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism. For graduate and professional programs, the “Schools” label is ubiquitous, such as School of Medicine and School of Law.
Budgetary alignment
Departments have a budgeted line item that is separate from the Dean, although funds travel through the College to the Department. This same principle generally applies for Programs (although there are some degree programs that are embedded with the college budget). This may or may not be the same for Interdisciplinary Programs, Centers and Institutes.

Size
There are many metrics available to define the size of a unit such as the number of faculty FTE, the number of students pursuing a degree within the unit, etc. The former is probably the most common and intuitive. In general, as the faculty number moves from a small organization to a large one, so does the transition of defining the unit as a Department, School or College. However, we have no hard borders or thresholds for faculty numbers in each of these categories. Reviewing data obtained from the Office of Institutional Research, we learned that on campus there are 48 departments with distinct ORG codes (data on Business, Education and Pharmacy were not broken down by individual departments and off-campus Statewides have been excluded from the analysis). The median department size in terms of tenure track faculty is 10 (s.d. = 7) (Figure 1). Note the average size is 11.9, but this figure is influenced by the small number of large departments. The smallest department was General Agriculture (1) followed by Ethnic Studies (4). The largest “Department” was the School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (37) followed by Horticulture (30.8).

![Figure 1. Department size](image)
(tenured/tenure track faculty only, instructors and administrators excluded)

Rationale for creating a School
We identified a broad set of reasons for creating a School and many of these have been used as justifications in the recent wave of Engineering Category I’s. Schools offer the institution:
- Greater potential for collaboration in research and teaching
- Simplified administration
- The Head of the School who can devote greater energy to fund raising
• Cost savings associated with lower division undergraduate course offerings
• Increased stature and competitiveness
• Alignment of disciplinary functions with the expectations of external stakeholders

Throughout our discussions, the BFPC did not uncover any consistent definition of a School, nor could we develop one of our own. Similarly, when we attempted to define a Department in terms of size or discipline we were unable to convincingly establish a rationale for minimum or maximum size or limits of disciplinary breadth/ focus. The general conclusion was that if the formation of a School ultimately benefited the University then OSU should pursue the endeavor.

That being said, we did come away from the process with one chief concern. Does the increase in efficiencies gained by the creation of Schools undermine the undergraduate experience via increased class sizes? We raise this concern because the Category I proposals to create Schools submitted to this committee thus far each indicated "increased efficiencies" in undergraduate education that were required to offset increased expenses at the administrative or graduate level, thereby resulting in a net zero budget impact. In other words, in order to create a School that resulted in a long term advantage or increased efficiency there would necessarily be a decreased emphasis on quality of undergraduate instruction as measured by increasing class sizes. While this prioritization might be intended to be temporary, or trivially minor in magnitude, it was an attribute we noted in the proposals. Certainly, this speculative outcome is not a driver for the formation of a School, but we suggest that appropriate concern be placed on this potential consequence.

Sincerely,

Thomas H. Shellhammer
Chair, Budgets and Fiscal Planning Committee
Associate Professor
Food Science and Technology