Followup Report to Graduate Council  
2006 Review of Graduate Program in Genetics

In May 2006, the Graduate Council conducted a site review of the Genetics Program. The review team consisted of Alex Sanchez (chair), David Cann, and Greg Perry (all OSU faculty), along with Stanton Gelvin of Purdue University and Mary-Dell Chilton from industry (Syngenta). This followup review was conducted by Greg Perry and included Barbara Taylor (MCB Program Director), Walt Ream (former Director of Genetics), and Stella Coakley (Associate Dean, College of Agricultural Sciences).

The review prompted a number of changes within the Genetics Program. The most significant change involves the organizational structure of the program itself. In the review, the team recommended that

9a. The MCB Program should be expanded into a broader “umbrella” program, which should be re-named. The expanded umbrella program would continue to have a common graduate admissions process and administrative assistant. The MCB Program as it currently exists would remain largely intact within this umbrella, with its current curriculum and rotation system maintained.

Effective July 1, 2008, the MCB and Genetics Programs were administratively merged and placed under the leadership of the MCB Director (Barbara Taylor). Gail Millimaki now serves as the administrative assistant for both programs. The graduate admissions process has also been merged, so that one committee evaluates applications for both programs. The limited financial support available to incoming students is given to the best applicants in the overall pool, rather than allocating a minimum amount of support to each program. The fields within Genetics also have shifted some toward the MCB program, bringing both programs into closer alignment.

The review team recommended that, in conjunction with a merger, that the Genetics Program become another track within the MCB program (which already has a number of specialty tracks). This issue has yet to be resolved by the faculty involved in Genetics and MCB. They are considering maintaining the status quo, creating a track within the MCB degree name, or dropping the Genetics Program altogether. On the surface, dropping the program seems like a plausible option. Currently, there are only 4 students in the Genetics program, compared to 36-40 in the MCB program. Operating two separate programs does create more administrative costs when going through the student admission process. On the other hand, the Genetics program name does attract some good students. On the whole, Taylor, Ream and Coakley all favored keeping the current degree or making it a track within MCB. The CAS remains strongly committed to maintaining it’s financial support for Genetics.

Recommendation: The combined MCB – Genetics faculty need to formally address and resolve the status of the Genetics degree within MCB. This should be done in a timely fashion, such that whatever revisions are adopted can be put into place within the next 12 months.

Some other issues raised in the review have also been resolved. Recommendation #6 in the 2006 review raised the concern about teaching faculty who were being asked to take on Genetics
classes as an overload responsibility. This issue has largely been resolved by the recent Provost’s Initiative in Computational and Genome Biology, which provided money to hire a number of faculty in the MCB area. Some of these new faculty have specific appointments to teach the core classes in MCB, which also function as core courses in Genetics.

Recommendation #5 expressed concerns about the funding base for Genetics. Although the program remains underfunded, the merger with MCB has created some cost savings that will help Genetics and MCB. A concern in the funding area is whether the CAS will continue providing the bulk of funding for the Genetics Program, given there are no CAS students currently in the program.

Recommendations #1 and #2 reflect student concerns about the program. It appears from this review meeting that student issues about core Genetics classes have been addressed. The frustration from students about not feeling part of a “program” are more problematic. The small number of students and the fact that they are dispersed across departments and labs makes it difficult to create this sense of community. Offering a class that involves just these four students seems a poor use of university resources and would probably not be particularly effective for a number of reasons. This issue should be included when the MCB-Genetics faculty decide on the future of the Genetics degree.

Recommendations #3, #4, #10, and #14 largely relate to student numbers and quality. These issues should be central to the future meeting regarding the future of the Genetics program. It appears that the merged admissions process is going to reduce the number of weaker Genetics students coming into the program, so a recruitment plan will need to be formulated if Genetics is to continue to exist as a graduate program.

Recommendations #11, #12 and #13 stemmed from a concern that students were taking too long to complete their degree programs. One student who took particularly long to finish her program has now graduated. Her time in program apparently skewed the averages for the overall cohort of Genetics students. Barb believes that things have improved in this area.

Recommendation: If the Genetics Program is kept as a separate degree, the program director should develop a handbook of policies and procedures to guide students in the program.