



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

ASTROBIOLOGY PROGRAM & CENTER FOR ASTROBIOLOGY AND EARLY EVOLUTION

13 February 2006
(Revised 3 March 2006)

Melissa A. Austin, Associate Dean for Academic Programs

Suzanne T. Ortega, Vice Provost and Dean, The Graduate School

Dear Deans Austin and Ortega,

This is the Astrobiology Program's formal reply to the Committee report of 13 Dec. 2005, reviewing the Program on behalf of the Graduate School and the Arts & Sciences Dean.

We can be brief for the report was extremely positive and complimentary, and we agree with all of its recommendations. We are especially pleased that on the basis of the Committee's oral report, we immediately received authorization for a search for a new Astrobiology faculty member to replace David Catling; this search is now ongoing. The recommended resources (primarily TAs, but occasionally faculty release time) for our undergraduate courses ASTBIO 115 and 350 would also be welcome, rather than having to teach these each time on an *ad hoc* basis. We emphatically agree with the comments about Professor Buick's overloaded teaching, and the more general problem of how Departments and Colleges support (or do not) the vital efforts of their faculty in sustaining the teaching and research mission of the Astrobiology Program. The report refers to "upper administration guidance and oversight" regarding these issues, say from the Provost's Office. We heartily agree and feel that we and other excellent interdisciplinary programs will only prosper in the long term if we have strong advocacy from *both* upper echelons and the grass roots (the latter already present in Astrobiology).

The only quibble I might have with the report was the impression that it left that the ending of IGERT support in 2010-11 will not have a major impact, because any given student is in fact supported for only 2 yrs on an IGERT Fellowship, and much other support must already be found. This is true, but it underappreciates how important the IGERT-type support is for a young graduate student who is exploring possibilities. Also, the IGERT Fellowships are a powerful recruiting tool. Also, the NSF grant pays for far more than just the Fellowships: administrative support, research and travel kitties for the students, workshops and seminars, and several other activities. Furthermore, we have significant matching funds from UW units based on the NSF grant. Will all of that support disappear when the NSF grant ends?

The Committee noted the absence of postdocs active in our Program, which is a situation we would like very much to correct, as postdocs often serve as excellent mentors and go-betweens for faculty and students. The situation is that our NSF IGERT grant funds (for 5 years) 50% of each of two postdocs (but not one single postdoc!), and so we are seeking funding for the other 50%. The UW could greatly aid our program, and achieve high leverage, if the Provost or

Deans were willing to contribute to funding these postdoc slots.

One correction: The School of Medicine *does* in fact support us (because of the Dept. of Microbiology's participation), to the tune of \$10K/yr.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond, and I look forward to the discussion in the Graduate School Council on 2 March.

Sincerely,

Woodruff T. Sullivan, III

Professor of Astronomy
Chair, Astrobiology Steering Group