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To: David Thorud
Acting Provost

From: Gail L. Dubrow
Associate Dean for Academic Programs

Re: Department of Immunology Program Review

Summary and Recommended Action

At its meeting of January 13, 2005, the Graduate School Council met with members of the team reviewing the Department of Immunology; with the Chair and Administrators from the Department; and with the Vice Dean for Research and Graduate Education in the School of Medicine. The Council recommended continuation of the Department of Immunology Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Science degree programs, with the next review in 10 years (2013-2014 academic year). This strong and collegial department enjoys recognition as a national leader in Immunology research and education. The Council encourages continued efforts to increase minority enrollment and to place more students with junior faculty. The review found some dissatisfaction with conjoint courses required as part of the Cell and Molecular Biology Training Grant program. The Council recommends that the Medical School examine the structural challenges these courses may impose on students and faculty who operate at the intersection of disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs.

I concur with the Council's recommendations and comments.

Background

The Department of Immunology offers Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy degrees. The Department was established in 1986 by the Board of Regents, with the Ph.D. program approved by the Graduate School in 1991. There are currently 15 faculty with primary or joint appointments, along with 20 adjunct or affiliate faculty. 34 students were enrolled in the program at the time of the review, with student enrollment between 25 and 30 during the previous five years and up to nine degrees awarded annually during the same period (2-8 Ph.D. and 0-1 M.S.).

Review Process

The review committee included five members, three internal and two from peer institutions. The committee was chaired by Nelson Fausto, Professor and Chair of Pathology, and included as the other internal members Samuel Miller, Professor of Medicine and Microbiology, and Deborah Nickerson, Professor of Genome Sciences. The external members of the committee were Rafi Ahmed, Professor and Director, Emory Vaccine Research Center, and James Allison, Professor of Immunology and Chair, Molecular and Cell Biology, University of California, Berkeley. The review committee carried out the review during winter quarter 2004, including a review of the self-study and a two day site visit on February 25-26, 2004, when they met with faculty, students, and staff.

Review Findings

The review team found the Department of Immunology to be one of the leading departments in the country, having gained national prominence despite its relatively young age and small size. The faculty are productive and well-funded. The Chair was lauded for creating a collegial environment where primary faculty, as well as affiliate and adjunct members, are highly involved in departmental activities. Faculty participate in both departmental governance and in the rigorous graduate program through teaching, exams, and curriculum development. While the number of faculty mentors has grown, the student pool has not increased proportionally. The Committee recommended increasing enrollment to maintain a better balance between faculty and students. Students uniformly feel well prepared and appropriately mentored through the qualifying and general exams, which are perceived as rigorous, but fair. The Committee recommended that the Department administer the general exam by the end of the second year, and that students receive earlier, more formal performance evaluations. Since the review, the Department has established a formal plan to provide verbal and written feedback to students at an earlier stage. Two challenges the Department faces are the placement of students in the labs of junior faculty and attracting minority students. The reviewers also voiced concern over the inconsistent quality of conjoint courses in the School, although such courses offered by the Department are perceived as being of high quality. As the Department looks towards future faculty hires, the Committee recommended that the unit formulate a clearer vision of its direction in order to move forward more strategically.

Council Recommendations

The Council commends the Department for the strength of its program and its engaged response to the Review Committee recommendations. The Council recommends departmental discretion regarding the timing of the qualifying and general exams. The current system adds a level of rigor early on in students' academic careers, while students' time to degree remains within the norm for the Medical School, in spite of the later general exam. Plans the Department has put in place since the review to offer formal feedback after the first year should improve the already positive student experience. The Council supports the Review Committee's recommendation to increase the number of students in the program, as appropriate in light of resource constraints and the competitive applicant pool, although it is the opinion of the Graduate School that the unit itself is in the best position to assess optimum enrollment. More concerted efforts should be made to match new students with junior faculty. In its efforts to increase minority enrollment, the Department is encouraged to formulate a comprehensive strategy when working with the Office of Minority Affairs and GO-MAP, including consideration of recruitment strategies, departmental climate, mentoring, and student-to-student interaction. Associate Dean Johnnella Butler would be delighted to consult with the Department of Immunology on this matter.

The frustration expressed by students about the inconsistent quality of conjoint courses points to a larger issue in the Biomedical Sciences. These courses reside at the intersection between department-based and umbrella programs. Since no single unit owns these courses, they may not meet the specific needs of students in any given program. They do, however, offer beginning students a breadth of academic experience and represent an integral part of the Cell and Molecular Biology Training Grant program, in which Immunology participates. The Council recommends that the Medical School further examine the effects of these courses on students who function at the intersection of disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs.

cc: Mark A. Emmert, President
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