

Friday, January 30, 2004

Response to the Report of the Conservation Biology Policy Graduate Certificate Program Review Committee

From: The Conservation Biology Steering Committee

To: David Thorud, Acting Provost, Office of the Provost
Ronald S. Irving, Divisional Dean for Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences
Gail Dubrow, Associate Dean, Academic Programs, The Graduate School
Members of the Review Committee

The Report of the Conservation Biology Policy Graduate Certificate Program Review Committee highlights well the shortcomings of the current effort, appreciating that the current program operates with no budget and no dedicated faculty. The Report outlines desirable features for a revised program to more fully achieve its potential with funded support.

In essence the Report recommends that funding be provided to restructure the program as:

- Two or three dedicated core courses
- Seminar series
- Sponsored events
- Capstone Course
- Electives outside home discipline

We mostly agree with these recommendations, which resemble thoughts from our Self-Study Report. We agree that faculty need to be energized to find the impetus to participate in the program. In essence, the Report accepts that conservation biology is an emerging interdisciplinary field of vital importance and makes a strong recommendation for funding. We could not agree more.

Implicit in the Report is the conclusion that the UW faculty possess the expertise to make this program one of the finest in the country. In our experience, the impetus to energize faculty to embrace and participate in the program will come and the necessary courses will be offered only if there is permanent operational funding to pay for faculty release time and the seminars and events that will draw faculty together.

The Report offers a partial list of faculty on campus with interest in Conservation Biology, and suggests that these faculty be involved with the program. We have made repeated attempts to engage many of these faculty members, and several are or have been actively involved in the program through teaching or as members of the Steering Committee. Our experience, which directly involves a number of these people, and which applies to faculty generally, is that they will not become sufficiently engaged without the funding to guarantee the sort of program that will excite interest. As the Review

Committee is probably aware, but did not mention, several prominent faculty have withdrawn from the program out of frustration over the continuing absence of institutional support.

The shortcomings of an unfunded program are underscored by the Report's comparison of the Program with other funded programs such as the Environmental Management Program and the GTTL program. The EM Program has paid directors, a staff, and a budget. By contrast with these, the Graduate School provides the Conservation Biology Program with 0.25 of a PoE staff person. This excellent staff person has been crucial to the ongoing program. Nevertheless, we do not believe the Program can be materially improved operating as it is now with no budget. Indeed without adequate funding we do not believe the Program can continue.

The Report's recommendation for funding (in attachment C) would provide a start to deliver this curriculum, although the cost estimates for faculty buyout time are optimistic and are certainly inadequate to compensate more senior faculty with higher-end salaries. We recommend that in addition to the recommendation in the Report that the Program have funding to secure at least a part time director as for example is the case with GTTL and the Environmental Management Program. While external funding may be forthcoming for a seminar series and possibly an endowed chair, our experience to date is that funding bodies generally shy away from providing continuing operational funding to support basic program needs. Shared or matching funds from programs with students who benefit from the program may be promising, but these units have all received budget cuts in recent years. In short it is doubtful that the recommended funding can fully realize the campus potential for conservation biology, although it would represent a material improvement over the current situation.

The Report's recommendation focus singularly on elements that require increased funding in order to be realized. No recommendations are given for operating the program in an environment without funding. The implication and indeed the recommendation is that without funding the program should be dropped. This is certainly an option the Graduate School may consider, although the program as it operates, despite its shortcomings, has provided some benefit to many students at a very modest cost. It is fair to say that a number of members of even the existing Steering Committee are reluctant to continue to operate in the current environment.

The reviewers have failed to evaluate the program for what it is and considering the environment in which it operates. The report does not acknowledge the efforts of the Steering Committee to keep the program afloat and viable, nor the value that the program has brought to many students. Although some students in the program do not, as the report states, "extend themselves out of their comfort zone", there are many notable exceptions of students from Departments including Anthropology, English, and Earth and Space Sciences, who have extended themselves considerably beyond their comfort zone into new areas that expand their breadth and improve their understanding both outside

their discipline and within it. We received written comments from one student in the program responding to the Review and this is attached for reference.

In conclusion, we agree that permanent funding to provide a more comprehensive and cohesive curriculum would greatly improve the program, and that this could be done at relatively modest cost. The resulting revised program would reflect more accurately and favorably the august history and continued excellence of Conservation Biology at the UW. Given the timeliness of this program and the potential for contribution by the incredible diversity of conservation biology related programs within the University of Washington, we believe that such a program would also present considerable development opportunities to the University at large.