2014 Graduate Student contribution to Cyclical Review Self-Study

Purpose: To inform the BGSA’s contribution for the department Self-Study for the upcoming Departmental Cyclical Review, requested by the Chair of the McGill Bilogy Department, Professor Graham Bell.

Overview: Questions about the graduate program in the Biology department were asked to current or recent students in the BGSA. Questions could be answered anonymously online or emailed to Sarah Baldwin (November 14 – 21, 2014). The questions were organized into the following seven categories: 1) Application process, 2) Advisory support, 3) Teaching Opportunities, 4) Finances, 5) Departmental staff support, 6) Career preparation, 7) Quality and effectiveness of the graduate program. A summary of what we think the department does well and what we think could be improved upon is given in this document. A complete list of the questions asked and the responses can be found in the raw data document, which can be provided on request (email sarah.baldwin@mail.mcgill.ca).

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| Category | Pros | Cons |
| 1) Application process | All respondents indicated that direct application and admission to the lab of a single PI is an asset to the program. Direct entry to a lab allows for early development of project and quick progression into research.  The admission process results in clear funding responsibilities for the department and the PI. The online application system is efficient. Generally, there is an ease of transfer between MSc and PhD programs. | In this department there is less exposure to other labs compared to other departments.  One respondent suggested that it would be beneficial if students were encouraged to do some work in done in another lab at some point.  Some aspects of the U-Apply system could be simplified, specifically how to process the reference letters. |
| 2) Advisory support | Students generally find their advisors extremely knowledgeable and often helpful.  Students find their advisory committee meetings extremely valuable. Some claim that they are the most helpful part of their program.  Many expressed that they liked that we have a QE instead of a comprehensive exam. It prepares students well for their research.  Many find the informal support from their supervisor and peers was very helpful while preparing for their QEs. | Students find that they are not able to use their advisory committee to the degree that they would like to. They wish for more frequent interaction with their committees, more encouragement to go to their committee members, and for the regularity of meetings to be enforced.  Several students commented that there is less of a culture for going to their advisory committee for support compared with other institutions. A general desire is for faculty to be more approachable.  Some students have trouble finding supervisors for their committee with appropriate expertise. Some students find that their committee members do not have enough time to read their work or offer meaningful constructive criticism. This perceived busyness also contributes to many students not approaching their committee members for extra support.  Most students find the QE to be stressful. Students also find the QE process to be poorly explained to them, with unclear requirements, and experiences vary across students. One suggestion is for a clearly defined rubric for assessing students at the QE. |
| 3) Teaching Opportunities | Most students who have TAed have found it a very positive experience.  They find it rewarding, contributes to valuable skills, and it sometimes provides additional funds.  It allows graduate students learn basic biological knowledge and skills at a deeper level by teaching.  It also helps students with their presentation and public speaking skills.  Students who are not required to TA like the opportunity to earn more. | Teaching takes a lot of time away from research. Many respondents find that the amount of work that they do is over the number of hours that they are paid for. Many also think that it is unrealistic to expect students to stand up to their supervisors on this point.  Some have found that since the recent cuts in TA positions, the amount of work that they are asked to do has increased further, even though the number of hours stays constant.  Many Students do not have the opportunity to TA appropriate courses: Some students dislike that your chances of teaching decrease as your PhD progresses. The priority pool leaves the most qualified TAs with the least challenging courses. Unfortunately, some students have never been given the opportunity to TA any higher-level courses but wish that they had. Some students wish to TA but their supervisors are be reluctant to let them.  A major criticism is that funding arrangements are inconsistent for students who are not required to TA but do. Sometimes they are not given the extra money. This should be clearly communicated to students before they accept a TA position. |
| 4) Finances | Students are generally happy that that there is a minimum stipend. We recognize that many other departments do not have this. About half of respondents find their funding to be satisfactory, particularly those who have external funding.  In general, there is satisfacotry funding for travel to conferences, field and lab work. | International students feel that the he minimum stipend is not enough to cover costs without external funding.  Also, some students have additional costs that make this minimum stipend inadequate. Common additional costs include supporting their families (some of us have children) and transportation costs to visit partners/family living far away. Many find even without these additional burdens that funding is too far below a living wage. In addition, the guaranteed funding package has not increased recently (a respondent claimed that it has been the same for the past 5 years). |
| 5) Departmental staff support | We find the staff very helpful and a pleasure to work with. We have several very qualified and competent staff in this department.  Ancil is very helpful!  We are very happy to have the Redpath staff, the greenhouse staff, and the administrative staff to help us when they can.  Also, Frank is a huge asset to the department and a great person to help with tasks here and there. This is not a position some of us have seen in other departments.  The facilities are always clean. | Many wish that they had more interactions with staff.  Some have noticed the increase in workloads on staff since the Sept 2013 reductions that may cause delays and occasional errors.  Some have had better staff support in other university departments, with help scheduling committee meetings, exams, defences, and more help staying on track in the program with reminders and warnings about deadlines and scholarships. Many attribute this lower level of service to the lower number of administrators working directly with graduate students. The more time students spend on administrative activities the less time they have for research.  IT support has been inadequate since the reductions in 2013.  It is sometimes unclear who to go to for help. |
| 6) Career preparation | We are confident that the skills that we are developing are valuable and that our research experiences are excellent.  Some prefer the strictly academic approach at McGill because it is the strength of the institution.  Many appreciate the high quality networking opportunities provided by conferences and collaborations. | We would like more access to knowing what previous students are now doing so that we can reach out to them for advice or inspiration.  Many students will not end up as academics, so more exposure to networking and how to market our skills would be an asset.  Other groups on campus provide career-related services that are good but not tailored to Biologists. |
| 7) Quality and effectiveness  of the graduate program  I have only included comments that do not relate to the above categories. | Many respondents feel that the quality and effectiveness of the program is good to excellent and that they have had overall positive experiences.  The lab in which a student works largely determines the quality of the graduate experience.  The quality of research that we are involved in is very high as is the quality of supervision (when available) and the quality of interactions with other students.  The programs offered are very flexible, allowing for different needs, experiences, and research plans. | Some would like a full upper-level statistics course offered every year in the department. Also, some students would prefer fewer course requirements for PhD students who have already completed an MSc as found at other Canadian institutions. In general, students have found that the quality of training, courses, and support is weaker than the quality of research.  Many students commented that they are disappointed by what they see as a fragmented departmental structure with very little interaction across roles (students, staff, and faculty do not integrate generally). This problem also extends into the student population and BGSA. To some, everyone is so busy that they have little time for anyone not directly involved in their research. This leads to some students feeling that they do not belong to a community and others feeling that they do not get the professional or social support that they need. |