Biology Major Curriculum Chair Duties

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1. The course list and its modifications

History:
We needed a list of courses to satisfy breadth in biology, as a "guide" for undergraduates, but we didn't want to list every intermediate course because many of these have multiple pre-requisites that would not be apparent to students scanning the list. So when we finally agreed on having the five categories of breadth in the Biology major, I sat down and went through three consecutive semesters of Timetables (Fall, Spring and Summer), in order to catch all commonly offered courses. My criteria for selection was that they were intermediate/advanced (based on some reasonable pre-requisites such as a couple semester of biology), yet not so advanced that most Biology students would be precluded (based on presence of pre-requisites not normally taken by biology majors). On the latter point, it is not that such courses would be inappropriate as breadth, but rather that they required taking courses that would, almost by definition, already have satisfied the very same breadth category as the course in question. As a consequence, they would not be helpful inclusions to a list for students looking of an appropriate course top satisfy a given category. I also precluded 1-cr courses, except where these were for lab courses that formed a coherent whole with a lecture course. In that case, both courses were listed as a pair, with total credits (and total lab hours) shown as well. I did not include courses that had temporary numbers or whose course number could refer to completely different sections in the same or different semesters (for example, 375 and 675 are often used as special topics numbers in departments that can refer to any of a number of different courses). It is not that these courses were inappropriate, but rather that there was no way of knowing their appropriateness for Biology from the number alone. These must therefore be considered on a case-by-case basis. Finally, I also displayed extreme prejudice against courses that didn't seem 'scientific or biological" enough for me, admittedly a subjective call. However, there are certainly fine courses, offered by fine biological science departments, that are simply not biology courses, at least in the sense of what we want from this breadth requirement. I justified my decisions to myself by arguing that egregious errors would be caught by colleagues or students. The courses actually chosen for inclusion were then placed into the different category based largely on my own world view, though occasionally appropriate adults were consulted.

This led to a draft list, which was distributed to the Biology executive committee for comment. An impressive number of duplications, deletions and misplacements were duly noted and the list modified further. Some problems were because the courses in question happened not to be offered in the window I examined, but many were simply dumb mistakes. In any event, that modified list because the first Appendix I. Note that some of these courses are offered by multiple departments as asterisked in the Appendix, though taking them from any offering department is of course fine.

The present
We now get several sorts of queries about the acceptability of other courses for this list. These requests typically come into the Biology office from students or their advisors and are forwarded

to the chair of Curriculum. It is most helpful if these requests provide the course number, name and semester, so I can be sure we are all talking about the same course.

The first thing I do is check my list of previous decisions, since about half the time, it is a matter that has already come up and no one remembers it (especially if the decision was negative). I will forward this pack of WordPerfect files to the next chair to continue the process.

Assuming the course is not on the list, then I examine the Timetable for the issue of pre-requisites for the reasons stated above, and determine an instructor that I can call. I telephone the instructor - I prefer this to email given the slightly sensitive nature of the discussion - and explain who I am and why I am calling. If I have a concern about the having restrictive pre-requisites, I ask the person if they allow students with the typical biology major background - i.e. do they routinely waive the pre-requisites? If the answer is "yes', then I note that they might change the pre-requisites formally in the future at some point, but don't press this matter. The more delicate problem is when the course simply looks (to me) to be too wimpy, and I need to ask something like "would the instructor be comfortable with this course serving as a breadth requirement in the Biology major - one of only 3-4 such courses" and I have found that people are extremely conscientious on this point. There is another matter of whether they can afford (or want) the potential influx of students if it does appear in the Appendix. This is especially true if it is a lab course that already fills up. On occasion we have agreed to automatically accept the course, but that we will not give it the high profile on the Appendix I that might lead to disappointed students.

When all this is sorted out to my satisfaction, I write it all up briefly and ship it off by email to the other 1-2 members of the Curriculum committee (was two fort a year or so, but one of those never seemed to be available), so it has effectively been one for some time. If it seems controversial, I have been known to CC one or both chairs of the major, but this is the exception. When I get some consensus, I save the emails to the file of decisions referred to above and forward the decision to the biology office and to whoever initiated the inquiry (though if that's a students, then they simply receive the decision).

I have NOT grappled with curriculum matters for the neurobiology option and, not coincidentally, the other active member of the curriculum committee has been in that group (Tom Yin or Peter Lipton) and has taken care of that. I believe it is imperative that this and any other topic areas within the major continue to ave this role on the committee.

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2. Honors theses

To avoid the creation of another committee, the Curriculum committee agreed to also serve as the Honors committee at some point. The primary (sole) function of this committee is to consider honors requirements, which should currently be up-to-date, and to approve Honors theses. The following three sections cover the actual protocol for that, and then the CALS and L&S requirements. I am concerned that some of these might not be the final versions, but they were the best I could do, so part of this is a request to alert me to newer versions of these. Note too

that the tone of the following sections is a bit more serious as they serve as more formal guidelines.

Actual protocol for handling honors theses:
1. The student must submit a 2-3 page proposal to the Biology office. That is given to the Chair of the Honors Committee (currently identical to the Curriculum Committee), who will either approve the proposal or note defects that must be corrected. That decision will be transmitted to both the Biology office, the student and their faculty mentor by the Honors Chair. If the Chair is not available, the decision can be made by another member of the Curriculum committee or a chair of the Biology program, who will have the same responsibility for notifying all parties. Obviously the proposal should be submitted early enough to allow time for approval and correction, if need be, so a reasonable target date might be "before the conclusion of the previous academic semester."

2. Any proposal resubmission should be made directly to the Biology faculty who made the initial decision, if they are available, or to the Biology office, if they are not. As above, the Biology office, student and mentor must be notified of final approval.

3. Copies of the final thesis - signed by the faculty mentor - should be turned into the Biology office, but need not be approved by the Biology Program. We will assume that the faculty mentor's grade for the senior thesis course will be analysis enough. For CALS, of course, additional signed copies must go to the Associate Dean's office (one for Steenbock library) the student must present their work orally at the Spring CALS Research Forum. The CALS copies will also need to be certified by the Academic Affairs office before honors can be awarded at graduation. I assume that CALS will monitor that last two items above. I suppose we should maintain copies of the theses in our office at least for a few years.