



# Biological Sciences Graduate Caucus

**March 26, 2018 – 4:45 – 5:30**

## 1. Welcome

### a. In Attendance

Elana Varner (secretary), Heather Coatsworth (member), Pauline Deschodt (DSC), Mason King (Events Committee officer), Melissa Orobko (Events Committee coordinator), Kristen Walters (Co-chair), Asim Renyard (TSSU), Yonathan Uriel (DGSC Rep), Kari Zurowski (GSS/Treasurer), Rylee Murray (Chair)

Absent: Rachel Canham (events committee officer), Colin Bailey (Faculty Mole), Vanessa Guerra (GSS C.), Marinde Out (TSSU), Jayme Lewthwaite (DGSC)

### b. Additions to Agenda

#### i. Debrief Spring Grad Hosted Speaker –

**MOTION:** Reimburse exactly \$92.00 to Mason King for grad hosted speaker lunch time workshop - Pizza and refreshments were provided for grad students to attend. Put forward by Rylee. Seconded by Pauline. Passed unanimously. Kari and Mason abstain.

#### ii. 5-year academic planning: update from March 9<sup>th</sup> meeting with faculty

- SFU wants all the departments to create a 5-year plan. This is a common occurrence. However, this year's challenge is for the department to "come up with a big new idea" and engage all level of students in doing so.
- Engagement happens through various meetings: some with undergrads present, others with faculty and grad students. Asking people to contribute ideas about grad academics and engagement.
  - If you have an idea: Go directly to a department chair and talk to them about it! THERE IS MONEY for this – if your idea fits! If not, they'll help find money.
- Lots of talk about reengaging grad students. Noted the current structural barriers: different labs in different buildings add to this problem. Proposed ideas: new events, socializing spaces, poster sessions. Grad symposium reinvigorated, and possibly speed talks during open seminar spots. More opportunities for professional development. Not just academic based speakers.

- Faculty does not seem to be interested in spending more money on more student events until current events are better attended. An argument against that rationale, on the flip side: if these old things aren't working, then maybe NEED something new.

Workshop run by Grad students for Grad Students Idea (See further discussion below):

- Heather proposed paying students to hold grad student workshops etc. Workshops were initially not well received because P.I.s would not want to put the effort into them.
- If you like this idea: COMPLETE THE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY to have a voice!

Lowering completion time:

- Average completion date for masters is currently 3.5 years. A lot of the funding from SFU as a whole to the department is based on completion dates. 1-year masters would get much more funding but is infeasible. The department wants to move it down to 2.5 years though.
- There's also talk of paying students more. Increasing funding to pay for student's tuition which would reduce the number of students the department can take on. Brings into factor where the department wants to go: fewer, high quality students or many students.

Proposed Tuition Hike:

- Have a voice through the engagement survey! Not included in survey but can speak your voice there
- Thoughts on raising tuition for MPM students even though they can't offer the required courses in the 2 years required.
- Students thoughts: An increase of tuition could make the MPM program take a nose dive
- Department is also interested in finding industrial sponsors or partnering with other schools that have this program for more resources.
  - Sponsors to provide the funding to the department – they get our highly qualified graduates, so they should pay
- Someone suggested not having as many grad courses as there are. There currently isn't great enrollment in the current classes. Maybe reduce required credits from 12.

- MPM graduation rates are likely longer because they have to take more courses AND produce a thesis.

### **Workshop run by Grad Students Idea (Continued discussion):**

- Have PI or Grad lead small workshops – 2-3 days or 1-day workshops.
- Goal: sharing of practical knowledge
  - Especially what student's often have to learn on their own, wasting much time and effort
  - Like the library workshops but within our department.
- Potential topics:
  - Statistics: How to send samples to US: Basic but widely applicable and helpful.
- Given small amount of money for leading:
  - Attaching money to this would be key for rewarding large effort put in.
  - Maybe attach credit for those attending these workshops too.
  - TSSU paying grad students to run courses as sessional might be an issue. Workshop should be different though.
  - If Grad student run, P.I. effort would not be a factor.

### **Current plan to set up workshops:**

#### Pilot:

- Idea: Grad Caucus fund one workshop as pilot. See if successful. Then bring the idea to Elizabeth
- Selling points: 1.) These are the topics identified by students as what they struggle with most. If we can pinpoint and expedite these processes, workshops will help shorten graduation times. 2.) Amazing way to bring people from different departments and have cross over

#### Content: Survey of Students to ID weaknesses in program

- Heather will construct survey with help from one person from each discipline within Biology so as to get diverse input.
- In survey have people write what useful skills they have and can offer in leading a workshop
- When survey goes out to the department ask: The top 3 ideas that everyone wants covered in a workshop.
- Couple this with a social aspect after? If the department funded it, people would be game to lead something small.

#### Organization:

- Subcommittee to organize (elect people in), with a survey being sent out

- This can be part of the caucus structure → make it obligatory part of the caucus. Payable caucus position is an option, it's been done in the past.
- April is elections. Put workshop position on google sheet for sign up.

iii. Start planning grad symposium – for the end of the semester (end of April)

- In past: bring labs together to present on what they do, but this is short notice
- Caucus money for going to bowling alley (30-35 people)
  - Last year: Grandview lanes on Commercial and Broadway – easy to set up with a month's notice too
  - Last year rented lanes for an hour or so – but rented a lot of them

**MOTION:** for the biology department to give a \$400 cash advance to events committee Melissa Orobko and caucus will reimburse Biology Department once cash advance has been used: Put forth by Rylee, Asim seconds, All in favor. Passed unanimously. Abstain: Kari, and Rylee, and Asim, and Melissa.

iv. Rylee - propose more picnic tables for outside area 7000 level between Bio. and Chem. to create more space for Bio grad students to interact -

c. Motion to approve minutes from February 2018 meeting

**MOTION:** Include Kate Mill instead of the Biology department for \$200 for tox talks reimbursement. Put forth by Rylee, seconded by Heather. Passed unanimously. Kari abstains.

**Rylee's idea:** Improve communal outdoor lunch area

- Picnic table kit costs \$400 for a wooden one
  - Need to look into costs more.
  - Faculties Surplus has a bunch of surplus furniture.
  - Craigslist for picnic tables seems great and cheap. This is the time of year to do it too. People are in spring cleaning mode.
  - Ruth seems all for improved seating: facilities in chemistry is for it too. Elizabeth says to spend department money before caucus money on that front.

**Mental health workshop for students** – coffee/tea/snacks/etc. and have people from this department come and talk to people. Elizabeth is organizing.

- Thursday, April 19<sup>th</sup> at 12:30 – Room B9242

- Last year Adrian hosted a talk about sexual violence. How to personally be better able to help colleagues.

## 2. Treasury update

1051.41 core

1221.26 trust

## 3. Committee updates

- a. DGSC – Jayme – engagement survey. A motion at the next senate meeting likely to go through for the thesis completion fellowship. For support in 16<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> semester. Relieve them of TAing for thesis writing. \$6500 for that last semester.
- b. DSC – Yonathan – no updates – GFs are now open and close April 16th
- c. GSS – No one was able to attend the last meeting
- d. TSSU – Asim – not many updates. Talked last time about instance of overpaying students: Department will just retract that money without telling people. Need a new plan. Complaint that paystubs are indecipherable in general.
- e. Faculty Mole – Colin– Academic planning: 5-year plan, weaknesses in the department, wanting to rebrand it as NOT biology, REM, BBK, are stealing undergrads – resulting a lot in our loss of funding. Curriculum will have to change since high schools changed a lot and they won't have a good base coming in. More detailed noted below:

## **BISC DEPT MEETING**

- BMSC (Bamfield) looking for a new director

## Academic Planning

- Biology has a problem with quality but not quantity of space
- Declining availability of research funding
- BISC worried about attracting excellent grad students
- Every dept. charged with developing an academic plan (due in April)
- Next meeting talking about the draft of the BISC academic plan
  - Aiming to have more bottom-up development of this plan than the previous one
  - 10 page limit on the plan
  - Focus on what BISC hopes to accomplish in the next 5 years
  - Our grad program has shrunk from 150 -> 120 students in order to pay students more

- Elizabeth wants to make sure our department gets more credit for community outreach and “engagement”

#### Department Weaknesses

- Margo Moore taking early retirement
- Undergrad program shrinking
- Cells/molecules/physiology stream needs re-thinking/re-branding and needs to be more cohesive/unique
- \*\*\*undergrads graduating without the strong technique, writing, or quantitative skills that are listed in course requirements
  - This is identified as a major problem
  - Our students appear to be good memorizers, but not necessarily good thinkers
- Looks like BPK is competing with BISC and so is MBB for undergrads
  - We have a branding problem – people like programs with titles that provide a path to a job
  - “Biological sciences” old-fashioned
  - “Molecules to ecosystems” requires more breadth in faculty subdisciplines than in other life-science units
- Other institutions that traditionally never offered upper-level courses have begun offering those courses, so BISC is losing transfer-students
- Cost of living is hurting recruitment
- New K-12 curriculum does not look good for incoming students (new students may start coming in at lower than previous knowledge levels)
- REM will start teaching undergrad w/out some BISC courses required
- More base funding may or may not be lost (at the time of the meeting they were going to find out the following day)

#### Opportunities

- Possible shift in faculty structure at SFU – talk about trying to collaborate with competing programs
- Re-thinking life science at SFU: sounds like the life-sciences chairs are amenable to this
- Things to do a better job of selling to the upper administration:
  - Can improve undergrad program reputation by increasing the use of flexible/alternative instructional styles
  - Advertise our community engagement – indigenous and other
  - Try some interdisciplinary routes
  - Maximize brand recognition of MPM/MET
  - Set ourselves apart by focusing on science communication

#### Some Other Notes

- Peter Keller wants big hairy audacious goals in the academic plan
- Provide a way for grad students to directly post volunteer jobs for undergrads that want experience
- Set-up something where honour theses transition directly to a masters student – capture “high-flying” students
- Talk to students to figure out what changes they would like to see in the program (focus groups)
- Discussion of reducing the calc., chem., and phys. requirements for biology
- Looking at harmonizing the courses taken in the 1st 2 years of the life-sciences

#### 4. Adjournment

MOTION: Put forth by Rylee. Yonathan seconds. Passed unanimously.