January 25, 2013

Response to ENTX Graduate Program Review

We want to thank the review committee for a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of our graduate program in Environmental Toxicology. This document represents a formal response to the review. Rather than respond to all comments in the review document, we have confined our response to comments in the “Areas for Improvement” section of the Executive Summary (indicated by italics).

• Department/Institute. Committee members were confused as to the distinctions and overlap of ENTX and TIEHH and desired increased clarification in this area.

Response: The confusion experienced by the review committee has been a problem for a long time for people not affiliated with TIEHH. Internally, we know the relationship between the 2 entities. Essentially, the Department (ENTX) is the academic home for the students and the core Institute faculty. We have redesigned the web page to try to help clarify the relationship between the department and institute for those who are not familiar. Recent interactions with the university administration indicate that they would prefer that the department increase in significance relative to the institute. We generally agree with the administration on this issue.

• Instrumentation. Problems arise due to students and faculty sharing instrumentation for research as well as coursework purposes. The committee members recommend separate instrumentation to avoid competing needs for the same instruments as well as to reduce unnecessary wear-and-tear.

Response: This is a great comment, but one that cannot be resolved without a significant amount of funding. Funding programs related to the acquisition of instruments (such as the NSF MRI program), do not support the purchase of basic chromatography/spectroscopy instruments at a university like Texas Tech (large research university). Even if the analytical equipment could be acquired, there would still be significant obstacles with regard to space to house the equipment. We continue to maintain and upgrade our instrumentation, but this is clearly a constant challenge.

• Faculty Turnover. Committee members recommend the Department increase efforts to retain current faculty and establish continuity. Suggestions were made about a less centralized
leadership structure, potentially improving transparency and improving faculty members’ sense of contribution.

Response: The loss of faculty and poor faculty morale is always a concern. The department is undergoing a change in leadership which provides an opportunity to improve transparency. It is hoped that some of these changes will also help with faculty retention. The college (A&S) administration has been willing to help with recent faculty retention issues. It is the role of the chair to champion faculty that are flight risks in order to retain them. In the end, this is much less expensive than conducting a search for their replacement.

• Student stipends/admission rates. Recent increases in student enrollment in the M.S. and Ph.D. program were viewed as potentially problematic by committee members. Members feel that lower enrollment rates (particularly for M.S. students) with higher stipends would lead to increased quality of admitted students. Furthermore, increased stipends would reduce the need for students to engage in grant writing (for grants to support their own studies) from the outset of their program experiences.

Response: This issue of student stipends is a constant at all universities. We have attempted to keep our stipends competitive. The university administration (Graduate School) is well aware of this issue. We are committed to keeping our stipends competitive, but see no reason to increase them unless we are losing students specifically because of low stipends.

Admission rates are also a significant challenge. We all know how important growth is to the university. We all know how much state funding comes to the university based on graduate student credit hours. We have a graduate only program and relatively low teaching loads compared to some faculty in other departments with graduate and undergraduate programs. All of these factors create a tremendous amount of pressure to admit students (grow programs). Any time you increase admission rates and admit students who are less prepared or don’t enforce the course pre-requisites there are going to be issues. Like all problems, this could be solved with money. If the university and our department are well funded, admission rate problems go away. We don’t anticipate a sudden surge in funding, so we have to be aware of the financial challenges we and the university face and act accordingly.

• Parking. Students expressed to the committee members that they frequently have difficulty accessing resources on the main Texas Tech campus because of parking issues. The distance between the ENTX facilities and the main campus leads to a sense of isolation.
Response: The department has several research trucks and vehicles which students can drive. Those vehicles can park anywhere on campus. There are also temporary parking passes issued by campus that we can purchase for students.

The isolation issue is one that is felt by students and faculty. We would all like to be on (closer to) campus. In the electronic age, some of the issues with being off campus have been solved. However, from a quality of life standpoint, being on campus avails students and faculty to more of the universities resources and facilitates scientific collaboration.

• Publishing and Grant writing. Committee members viewed that grant writing within the department seemed to be focused on quantity over quality, leading to lower success rates. Members recommended spending more time and effort applying for fewer (but more beneficial) sources of funding. Similarly, the committee recommended that faculty members strive for publications in higher tier journals.

Response: These are fair comments, but are driven largely by 2 issues: historically low grant funding rates and faculty demographics. With regard to the former, low federal funding rates dictate that more proposals have to be written in order to be successful in acquiring funding. Proposal writing is also a measure of productivity, so junior faculty can illustrate effort by writing proposals. Because most of our faculty are junior, we write more proposals. This also drives publication, in that early in one’s career, there is a tendency to lean towards quantity of publications rather than publication in higher tier journals. Until changes are made to the way faculty are evaluated (impact (H-index) vs. numbers), faculty shouldn’t be penalized for playing within the system.

Again, we want to thank the review committee for a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of our graduate program. If you have any questions about this response, please don’t hesitate to contact me. We look forward to implementing some of the suggestions from the review committee in order to improve our graduate program.

Respectfully submitted,

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