



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Department of Biological Science

College of Natural Sciences & Mathematics

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April 28, 2025

Dan Black Dean Dr. Marie Johnson
College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics
California State University, Fullerton

Dear Dr. Johnson:

On behalf of the Department of Biological Science, I would like to extend our sincere thanks to the Program Performance Review (PPR) review committee for their thoughtful and constructive evaluation. We are grateful for the time and effort the reviewers dedicated to carefully reading our self-study and engaging in meaningful conversations with our faculty, staff, and students during their April 9, 2025 visit.

We are pleased that the review team recognized the Department's strong performance in our core mission of teaching and scholarship, as well as the notable growth in enrollment, graduation rates, and student success over the seven-year review period from AY 2017–18 through AY 2023–24. These accomplishments, especially in the context of a static FTEF level, reflect the exceptional commitment and professionalism of our instructional and support personnel.

At the same time, we share the review team's concerns regarding the sustainability of our current trajectory without commensurate investment in human and institutional resources. We fully agree with the importance of a collaborative approach involving the Department, College, and University to ensure long-term academic excellence.

We appreciate the review team's clear and actionable Recommendations 1-5. They align well with our ongoing strategic planning, advising, curriculum development, and alumni engagement efforts. In particular, Recommendations 2, 3, and 4 reflect encouragement to continue and expand initiatives already central to the Department's mission. We are also encouraged by the recognition of our need to assess and plan for faculty and staff succession.

Additionally, we understand the suggestion (Recommendation 6) to incorporate an expanded section in the PPR document focused on staff members to better reflect their perspectives. While we support the spirit of this recommendation, we note that such a structural change falls beyond our purview.

In the following sections, we provide detailed responses to each review team's observations and recommendations. These responses affirm our commitment to continuous improvement and outline the actions we plan to undertake in close collaboration with our College and University partners.

I. Department Mission, Goals, and Environment

We are grateful for the review team's recognition of the Department's close alignment with the University's mission and Strategic Plan, particularly in the areas of student engagement, academic support, and inclusive excellence. Our ongoing work in high-impact practices, implementation of evidence-based advising programs, and sustained efforts to support student achievement remain central to our departmental identity and planning.

We also appreciate the team's acknowledgment of the Department's thoughtful and intentional evolution of its mission and goals over time. These efforts have been bolstered by strong faculty participation in university-wide initiatives and a commitment to continuous reflection and assessment.

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The review team's attention to staff contributions is especially valued. As a department deeply reliant on laboratory instruction, we recognize that our staff plays a critical role in ensuring quality learning experiences for students. The increased number of lab sections, extended hours of operation, and resource constraints have placed additional demands on staff time and availability. We are committed to working with the College to identify ways to better support our staff, including regular communication and exploring mechanisms to recognize and address work outside of traditional hours. We fully agree with the recommendation to enhance communication between the College, the Chair, and departmental staff and appreciate the call for more institutional recognition of staff contributions.

II. Department/Program Description and Analysis

We appreciate the review team's thoughtful assessment of the Department's undergraduate and graduate programs, particularly recognizing our recent curricular revisions. The merger of the Cell and Molecular Biology concentrations and the development of the General Biology concentration represent intentional efforts to streamline the major while responding to student interests and advances in the field. Structural changes to key lower-division and upper-division courses, including separating lecture and laboratory components and redesigning laboratory unit requirements, have been implemented to enhance instructional flexibility and facilitate student progress toward degree completion.

We are pleased that the team acknowledged the introduction of BIOL 398, which fulfills the University's upper division writing requirement and offers an accessible, asynchronous platform for science communication training. This course also supports fulfilling requirements of externally funded training programs. The incorporation of Course-based Undergraduate Research Experiences (CUREs), along with externally funded research and internship opportunities, further underscores the Department's commitment to experiential learning and high-impact educational practices.

In response to the reviewers' statement, "Given the increasing student interest in the biology program, it will be important to continue to evaluate the efficacy of the recently implemented curricular changes. For example, it was not clear from the PPR that the student learning outcomes for the new concentrations have been developed or that some of the "overlay" curricular content, i.e. evolution or physiology, will be implemented with a set of common expectations," we are actively working to update and align program-level student learning outcomes with the restructured concentrations and to define shared expectations for the integration of "overlay" content, such as evolution and physiology, within the curriculum.

We also recognize the concern about the infrastructure and personnel necessary to support the curriculum. As enrollment has grown, the demand for laboratory space, instructional staff, and support personnel has increased. Our educational model's sustainability will require continued dialogue and strategic investment, as emphasized in Recommendation 1.

With respect to the graduate program, we are encouraged by the review team's recognition of curricular stability and the role of the Graduate Program Advisor in supporting students. While we continue to experience recruitment and financial support challenges, we are committed to addressing these through expanded funding mechanisms and clearer student communication. We fully support the recommendation to evaluate the Tuition Waiver Program (Recommendation 5) and explore expansion opportunities to enhance the recruitment and retention of graduate students.

III. Documentation of Student Academic Achievement and Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

The Department welcomes the review team's recognition of our commitment to student success and robust assessment practices. The steady rise in graduation rates across student groups underscores the impact of our ongoing efforts to align curriculum, support structures, and instructional approaches with student needs and institutional goals.

We are very pleased that the contributions of our Assessment Committee were highlighted, particularly the transition to a more distributed and sustainable model that actively engages faculty. This evolution has enhanced our ability to assess undergraduate and graduate Student Learning Outcomes in a systematic and meaningful way.

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The Department remains attentive to the changing landscape of higher education, including the pedagogical implications of online and hybrid instruction. As explained in the self-study, we continue to examine the effectiveness and limitations of remote learning, and we are committed to incorporating assessment data into decisions about instructional modality and design.

In alignment with Recommendation 3, we are exploring ways to expand our participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning, particularly in relation to assessment and instructional innovation. Given the Department's size, disciplinary diversity, and commitment to student-centered pedagogy, we are well positioned to contribute to university-wide and national conversations about evidence-based teaching practices.

These efforts will not only impact our internal practices but also help position the Department as a leader in shaping future approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment within and beyond CSUF.

IV. Faculty

We celebrate the review team's recognition of the faculty's deep commitment to teaching and research across the Department's curricular concentrations. The strong culture of student-centered instruction, scholarly productivity, and external grant activity is central to our departmental identity and has enabled us to provide meaningful research and training opportunities for our undergraduate and graduate students.

We acknowledge the review team's observations regarding faculty demographics and succession planning. The Department is aware of the significant proportion of tenured faculty at the rank of full professor, many of whom are currently participating in or approaching eligibility for the Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP). We recognize this as both a challenge and an opportunity: it will require careful planning but also will allow us to thoughtfully reshape our faculty profile over the next five to seven years. Strategic hiring will be critical, particularly in light of our recent curricular restructuring and the increasing interdisciplinary nature of the biological sciences.

We agree with the review team's recommendation that future recruitment efforts should focus not only on disciplinary needs but also on broader departmental goals. The recent addition of a tenure-track faculty member was a welcome step. Still, we understand the concern raised by faculty groups that additional tenure-line hires are necessary to support rising enrollments and ensure sustained excellence in teaching, advising, and research.

We also support the call for stronger institutional emphasis on the faculty's research mission. Sustaining a vibrant academic program requires investment in faculty scholarship and infrastructure.

V. Student Support and Advising

The Department appreciates the review team's recognition of our comprehensive, multi-stage advising model, which has been designed to support students throughout their academic journey. This tiered approach, involving the NSM Student Success Team, departmental advising faculty, and individual faculty mentors, illustrates our commitment to student engagement and academic planning. These are hallmarks of our advising culture, especially as they connect students to research-active faculty and externally funded opportunities that broaden career readiness and deepen disciplinary learning.

At the same time, we share the review team's concern regarding the potential loss of federal funding for programs like U-RISE, which previously provided critical access to undergraduate research. The termination of this program is a significant loss, and we agree that identifying new avenues of support must be a shared responsibility among the Department, the College, the University, and ideally, the CSU system. We are actively exploring ways to preserve these high-impact opportunities through institutional support, grant diversification, and philanthropic partnerships.

We also acknowledge the concerns raised about advising-related registration holds. While mandatory advising plays a vital role in student retention and timely graduation, we recognize that some students may experience registration delays caused by difficulty in securing appointments. Despite multiple opportunities for setting appointments, we acknowledge the team's recommendation and will make efforts to mitigate this issue. We will explore mechanisms to improve advising access and insure flexibility in our approach to releasing advising holds in cases where students have made a good-faith effort to schedule an appointment.

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These steps align with Recommendation 2 and reflect our commitment to maintaining advising as a proactive, student-centered tool that supports academic progress without becoming a barrier to enrollment.

VI. Resources and Facilities

The review team thoughtfully evaluated our facilities and acknowledged the recent renovations in McCarthy Hall. The updated instructional labs, department office, conference rooms, and faculty spaces on the second floor have significantly improved the learning and working environment for our students, faculty, and staff. We are pleased that the impact of these improvements was evident during the site visit.

We agree with the committee's assessment that critical needs remain, particularly in areas that have not yet been renovated. Probably because of the extended time spent touring the greenhouse, the review team stressed a need for renovation of this facility. We also appreciate the committee's attention to aging equipment's challenges and maintenance contract's prohibitive cost. While the Department's annual laboratory budget supports various instructional needs, it is insufficient to cover large-scale equipment replacement or recurring service contracts for high-cost instruments. As we continue to prioritize hands-on instruction and faculty-led research, reliable equipment becomes increasingly essential to maintaining program quality and safety. We welcome the committee's call for significant institutional attention to these issues.

VII. Long-Term Plans

We appreciate the review team's recognition of the Department's thoughtful engagement with long-term planning, despite significant external challenges. Like many academic units, we have had to respond quickly to shifting realities brought on by the pandemic, enrollment fluctuations, and evolving funding environment. Nonetheless, we remain committed to proactive and strategic planning, and we are encouraged that this commitment was evident in the conversations held during the review visit.

We acknowledge that many factors shaping our future are beyond our immediate control; however, we agree with the committee's suggestion to focus on those areas where we have agency. Our goal to expand the graduate program to 70–75 students aligns with departmental aspirations and institutional needs, particularly in staffing lower-division laboratory sections. As the review team noted, financial support remains a key barrier. We fully support the recommendation to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the Tuition Waiver Program (Recommendation 5) and believe it holds the potential to attract and retain qualified graduate students while meeting instructional needs cost-effectively.

We also appreciate the emphasis on alumni engagement as a long-term priority. The scale of our undergraduate program makes post-graduation tracking essential and challenging. We recognize that cultivating an informed and connected alumni base is critical for academic improvement, student mentoring, and potential fundraising efforts. In line with Recommendation 4, we intend to explore structured approaches to reach alumni and collect relevant data.

The review team's suggestions offer practical and forward-thinking guidance, and we view them as an invitation to move from a reactive posture toward a more proactive planning model.

To conclude, we again thank the review team for their time, hard work, careful evaluation, and constructive recommendations. The insights provided in the report confirm many of the Department's ongoing priorities and offers valuable guidance for future planning. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with the College and University leadership to address the challenges and opportunities ahead. We remain dedicated to advancing the academic mission of the Department of Biological Science and supporting the success of our students, faculty, and staff.

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