

February 22, 2008

Professor Susan Bourque
Provost and Dean of the Faculty
College Hall
Smith College
Northampton

Dear Susie:

On the afternoon January 24 the Department of Biological held a retreat at the Deerfield Inn to discuss the future of the department in light of the five retirements (including John Burk's) that are likely to occur over the next five to seven years. Normally, retirements tend to be regularly spaced, and replacements are often addressed on a case-by-case basis. Frequently, this results in a sort of departmental stasis, as outgoing positions are filled with equivalent but younger hires. The cluster of retirements that we anticipate presents a unique opportunity to examine how our curriculum should reflect the changing landscape of the life sciences, and to reshape the department to meet the challenges of the next twenty years.

Our department is considering the five retirements and their replacements in the context of a ten-year intellectual and curricular plan. Our model acknowledges that even a relatively large department such as ours cannot do everything. Instead, we have begun the process of identifying a small number of nuclei of excellence that reflect the existing and projected strengths of our faculty, and that will give the department a distinct identity. We intend for these nuclei to echo some of the major themes that have emerged from the strategic planning process (global perspective, health, sustainability and community engagement).

We are optimistic that this approach directly responds to your call for departments to request positions in ways that reinforce existing strengths and reflect the explicit curricular goals of the College. In addition, our approach promises to vault the department forward in a short period of time. Instead of playing "catch-up" in the rapidly-changing world of the life sciences, the series of replacements we envision will put the life sciences at Smith at the vanguard of liberal arts colleges—a position that Smith should consistently claim.

We are, of course, mindful of the constraints under which the College is operating. As we plan for the next decade, we are paying particular attention to ways in which positions might be shared between departments or programs. Such shared appointments, carefully designed, could serve to strengthen ties between existing units, and increase the visibility of emergent areas

at the interface of traditional disciplines. John Burk's retirement creates our first opportunity to position our department for a future that will strengthen the plant sciences in general, and plant ecology/plant systematics in particular. Our growing awareness of the consequences of anthropogenic activity on the biosphere, increasing student interest in these issues, the anticipated emergence of a major in Environmental Science & Policy, and Smith's plans to develop a Center for the Environment all make filling this position a pressing concern. You have indicated that your approval of our request to search for John's replacement would be facilitated if the department would "mortgage" half an FTE from the remaining four retirements. While we are reluctant to sacrifice any position, and remain convinced that the life sciences will become an increasingly important part of Smith's contribution and identity, we propose that this half FTE be taken out of the my position when I retire at the end of the 2010-11 academic year. We hope that we will be able to combine the remaining half of my position with another half FTE in an affiliated department or program, since a half-time appointment would attract few qualified applicants.

The other anticipated retirements (Anderson/Olivo, Briggs, and Merritt), involve areas (animal physiology, neuroscience, biological fine structure, genetics) that will continue to be crucial to our curriculum, in particular to the training of pre-health students. We will continue to work on defining replacements for these individuals that would keep the department abreast of the most recent developments in the life sciences, but we cannot foresee circumstances that would permit us to sacrifice any of these positions. We look forward to hearing whether you will now approve our request to undertake a search for a plant ecologist/systematist, which we would like to conduct during the 2008-09 academic year. We hope that you share our excitement and anticipation about the future of our department.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen G. Tilley
Chair