

December 2008

EEOB Graduate Student Association
Department of Biology
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521

Dr. Daphne Fairbairn, Graduate Student Affairs Officer, EEOB
Department of Biology
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521

Dear Dr. Fairbairn,

The EEOBGSA would like to communicate to the EEOB faculty some concerns we have about the graduate program and offer suggestions for ways the program could be improved. We address four subjects in this letter: 1) Offers and availability of funding for EEOB students, 2) Timely progress through the graduate program, 3) Requirement for new graduate students to make up undergraduate deficiencies, and 4) EEOB core courses. Many of the issues raised are serious threats to graduate student morale and have important implications for the quality of our graduate program. We have tried to suggest concrete ways in which these problems could be addressed wherever possible. We hope this letter will initiate a constructive discussion between students and faculty about how the quality of the program can be enhanced.

Thank you for your interest in our opinions and your willingness to make them known to the rest of the EEOB faculty. We would be grateful if you could circulate this letter to other faculty members.

1. Offers and availability of funding for EEOB students

Graduate students in the EEOB program are concerned about the current shortage of funding and consider uncertainty about funding to be a serious shortcoming of the EEOB program. It is our belief that the funding offer for the bulk of our degree programs, included in our letters of admission, represents a guarantee from CNAS and the EEOB program towards the students. Consequently, it has been an unpleasant surprise to find that the university does not appear to view these funding offers as binding. The funding offer and the problem of graduate student support in general are discussed in more detail below, along with a few other concerns about funding.

The funding offer. We believe the offer sent to us with our admission letter (see attached example) expresses a binding commitment by the university to provide us with funding for the first five years of our graduate program (or, for master's students, a commitment for a shorter period). The letter to PhD students includes a table listing five years of support (which in itself strongly suggests that students can expect five years of funding), with a footnote to the column "Value TA/GSR salary \$\$" that says "**Dependent upon departmental needs, titles of academic appointments may vary. However, the salary commitment would not be less than indicated**" (Figure 1). We find it puzzling how this statement can be interpreted so as to allow the possibility that funding might be denied to the student during some part of the indicated time. Nonetheless, we have been told on a number of occasions that neither the department nor the

university view this offer as binding, and that although PhD students in their first five years will receive priority for funding, any student may be left without funding if there are not enough TAs and GSRs available. We consider this a very serious problem.

First, we believe that any graduate student for whom a funding offer was made using the words quoted above is entitled to that amount and length of funding so long as that student remains in good standing and meets reasonable and clearly-communicated requirements, such as submitting TA applications on time. It is our opinion that denying funding to a student who accepted an offer made on those terms, even if it is not a violation of the law, would be unethical and would have serious consequences for the credibility of any offers made by the program to future students.

Second, if the faculty feel that making a binding offer of funding to graduate students upon acceptance is not possible, then the funding offers need to be restated accordingly. We believe that, regardless of the language of the offer, a table listing support for a specific number of years and a specific amount in dollars is misleading. Any language suggesting that the salary or funding will not be less than that indicated certainly should not be included in the admission letter. Funding offers should be simple so that potential students will know how much support has been guaranteed to them and how much additional support the department expects to be available for them.

Availability of graduate student funding. Graduate students in our program perceive that the availability of funding has decreased recently and that we can no longer be confident of receiving funding for the duration of our degree programs. This uncertainty is seriously undermining student morale. We understand that adjusting admissions to the availability of future funding can be challenging, and that the allocation of TA appointments by an external body, the TAAC, likely makes that task more difficult than it has been in the past. Nonetheless, we would like to emphasize how important it is that the faculty make every effort to ensure that graduate admissions are not exceeding the numbers that can be supported. As faculty know, graduate students are in a vulnerable financial position: we are committed to remain at the university for an extended period, cannot readily earn money from sources outside of the university, and have little control over the availability of funding from within the university. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to know that the faculty (who do have control over admissions decisions and can influence the availability of TA appointments to EEOB students and the availability of funding from grants) are doing everything they can to ensure that funds are available to support us for the expected duration of our degrees. We would also like to point out that although the TAAC apparently considers students to be of lower priority for funding after their fifth year, the normative time to complete the EEOB PhD degree (listed in the 2008-2009 UCR General Catalog) is 18 quarters, or six years, and the average time to complete this degree is more than seven years (figure 2; also see figure 3). If funding becomes unavailable after the fifth year, or even in the seventh year, most students in our program will face serious difficulties late in their programs. We believe that the current uncertainty about funding needs to be resolved if our program is to retain its high quality; we cannot expect to continue to attract good students if current students are not being provided with funding for the duration of their degrees.

Flexibility to facilitate fieldwork. The current system for providing funding to graduate students in our program places barriers in the way of doing field studies. For instance, in the past students could take a double teaching load in one term to receive funding in another term without having to teach. However, students are no longer able to do this, and therefore must forego a

large proportion of their stipends if they choose to carry out field research during the academic year.

Domestic students also have sometimes taken a research leave of absence in order to carry out field studies, which at least allowed them to avoid paying tuition and fees during terms when they were carrying out research. However, this option is apparently not open to foreign students because their status during terms when they take a leave of absence invalidates their student visas. Because of non-resident tuition as well as exchange rates that favor the U.S. dollar over most foreign currencies, paying tuition and fees during the terms when a student needs to do field work may not be a viable option for many foreign students.

We understand that there are difficult hurdles to be crossed in order to facilitate field research carried out during regular academic terms. However, field research is an important part of the EEOB graduate program and efforts should be made to find ways for students to be funded or at least to avoid having to pay fees and tuition during terms when they need to be in the field.

These are also issues that prospective students need to be made aware of. We anticipate that if too many logistical and/or financial constraints exist for students to do field studies, many will be discouraged from entering the program.

Communicating funding information to faculty advisors. The topics mentioned above are our main concerns regarding funding. However, we would like to make one additional point: We find that faculty members sometimes do not fully understand the funding packages offered to their students. Because this miscommunication hampers the ability of faculty to advise students effectively, we ask that a greater effort be made to ensure that this information is readily available to faculty members. A workshop or meeting offered to incoming students (and, if they wished to participate, their advisors) to go through the funding package would also help to address this problem.

Summary:

- 1) Funding offer made to current students should be honored
- 2) If binding funding commitment is not possible, then this should be stated in the funding offer.
- 3) We urge faculty to make every effort to make sure funding is available for the duration of all students' programs.
- 4) Improved funding solutions for field research are needed.
- 5) Better communication of funding information to faculty advisors and incoming students would be appreciated.

2. Progression/Timeline through the program.

We are concerned about the length of time required to complete a PhD in the EEOB program (figure 2; also see figure 3). There are two basic timelines to be considered: for international students and for domestic students. These two are very much inter-related and solutions for facilitating better progression through the program for one group will also benefit the other. First, a point specific to international students will be discussed and then two suggestions for speeding progress of both international and domestic students will follow.

As the faculty is aware, international students are usually required to progress to candidacy and complete their degrees considerably earlier than is the norm for domestic students in order to avoid paying non-resident fees. We feel that this situation is unfair to international students and generates considerable (and justified) resentment. We understand that much of this timeline is dictated by university-wide policy; however, we believe better communication of the

requirements for advancement to candidacy to international students upon acceptance would reduce the unfairness inherent in having these two separate timelines. Specifically, we believe that international students should be informed in their acceptance letter of how the average time to achieving candidacy status and completing a degree in EEOB compares to the university requirements for international students. Understanding up front that they are expected to be well ahead of the average EEOB student would indicate just how difficult a task it will be to fulfill the international student requirements. In addition, the suggestions we offer below for speeding all students' progress would improve the situation for both international and domestic students.

The current set-up for the written and oral qualifying exams can be better designed to expedite students' (both domestic and international) advancement to candidacy. One improvement that we suggest would be to open the possibility for students to submit their written exam in any quarter of their second year (fall, winter, or spring). Each student arrives to this program at a different state. Some have a better grasp of what they want to do for a thesis and could be ready by the fall or winter of their second year. This would also relieve some pressure for international students who are able to take their writtens early.

Secondly, a strict and reasonable due date for the faculty to return written exams is needed. In the past, students have sometimes had to wait for more than a month for their exams to be returned, and this delay has impeded their progress. Clearly, the sooner written exams are returned, the sooner students can prepare for the next step (re-taking the written exam or preparing for their oral exam). A period of 3-4 weeks for faculty to assess the written exams seems reasonable. Allowing fall and winter submission of written exams would mean fewer papers to grade at one time, thus facilitating timely return of written exams.

Finally, uncertainty about which core courses will be offered in each quarter, as well as overlaps between related core courses, make it more difficult for many students to progress through their courses in a timely manner. We ask for better scheduling (fewer thematically overlapping courses per quarter) and more notice in advance, so that students and advisors are better able to make a reasonable and efficient timeline for student progression.

Summary:

- 1) Communicate average time to achieve candidacy and degree completion in our program in offer of admission to international students.
- 2) Accepting written exams in every quarter would speed some students' progress.
- 3) A stricter deadline for returning written exams would be appreciated (3-4 weeks from submission deadline).
- 4) More careful and earlier scheduling of core courses would be helpful in achieving advancement to candidacy on time.

3. Requirement that new students make up undergraduate deficiencies

We understand that the purpose of graduate school and the guidance committees is to personalize each student's learning experience in order to make them as well-rounded as possible. However, we have some concerns about this process, especially with regards to making up certain undergraduate deficiencies.

The initial concern begins with acceptance to the program. Currently, students do not know which undergraduate courses they will be required to take until shortly before their first quarter. We believe that if a student is going to be required to make up undergraduate coursework, this should be communicated to them in their acceptance letter. Doing this would achieve two things. First, it would make the program more transparent. Second, it would allow

students to tackle some of these deficiencies before they even begin school here. Making prospective students aware of these course requirements and giving them a window in which to take certain classes on their own (e.g. in a community college) would prevent unpleasant surprises and could speed students' progress through the program.

A second concern is that, because they are decided by a student's guidance committee, make-up coursework requirements vary from student to student. Excessive undergraduate coursework can inhibit a student's progress on their research proposal and reduce the quality of their performance in graduate core courses. If some courses are important enough to be worth the delay in student progress, such as the matching undergraduate course to a core course (e.g. Biol 105 before Biol 216), then they need to be required of all students.

We strongly urge that there be more transparency about undergraduate requirements with prospective students and that if undergraduate requirements are to be enforced, there be more consistency across the program. Most of us think that fewer undergraduate courses should be required (especially breadth courses outside of biology). Graduate school requires individual thinking and research; accepted students should be capable of learning on their own and should be expected to do so if the topic is relevant.

Summary:

- 1) Transparency of course requirements to new students in acceptance letter.
- 2) Greater consistency in enforcing requirements.
- 3) Undergraduate requirements may be unnecessary if they slow graduate achievement.

4. Core Courses for PhD and Masters Students in EEOB.

Overall, we feel that the EEOB core courses offer us many benefits in our development as scientists. However, we would like to suggest some changes that would make them even better. These suggestions have to do with: faculty feedback, final paper content, and the Physiology track course offerings.

Faculty feedback. Most, if not all, core courses require students to write at least one paper, give a presentation, and lead a discussion. These components provide a great opportunity for students to receive faculty feedback, which would offer us the chance to become better critical thinkers and writers, better discussion leaders, more lucid presenters, and more articulate scientists. However, this very important feedback is often not provided for papers, and it is almost never given on presentations or student-led discussions. We ask that professors take the time to provide us with critiques of our final papers, presentations, and any discussions we lead. The main point of being a graduate student is to learn how to improve on our weaknesses and learn how to be respected and sound scientists. We will be best able to do this if our mentors let us know where we need improvement.

Paper Content—Writtens Overlap. For several of the core courses we are required to submit papers that focus on material that is entirely different from the subject of our research interests or focus. As great as that approach is for broadening our horizons, we believe that it impedes our progress towards clarifying our research goals and achieving candidacy. Because of the large demands on our time made by broad graduate core courses, undergraduate course requirements, teaching, and laboratory or field work, many students find it difficult to make adequate time for preparation of the written and oral examinations. Allowing students to have papers or parts of papers overlap with the writtens requirement would allow students to have more thought-out, well-planned written reviews and proposals and ultimately higher-quality research. Faculty feedback on these papers could strengthen our arguments for certain items and

open our eyes to new avenues within the same research realm. This process is not altogether different from sitting down and talking at length (and taking copious notes) with faculty about a students' writtens, which is currently encouraged.

Physiology Track: For students in the more recently developed physiology track, finding core courses that are appropriate for our interests can be challenging. While current courses are of high caliber, they are usually framed in a context other than physiology (Ecology or Evolution) or are focused on statistical methods (e.g. BIOL 220). We would like to extend our strong support towards the formation of a graduate level course in general physiology that can embrace and represent the diversity of research topics in our program. Overall, a general graduate-level course in physiology would be very beneficial for students in all tracks.

Summary:

- 1) More constructive feedback
- 2) Overlap between core course papers and writtens is okay
- 3) Yes to the creation of a new core physiology course


Conclusion

We would like to thank you again for your attention to our opinions. We believe that we have a strong graduate program and would like to see it continue to attract good students and foster high-quality graduate research. Although some of the concerns raised in this letter are serious, we are confident that all of them can be resolved, and we look forward to working with the faculty to address them.

Sincerely,

The EEOB Graduate Student Association

Figure 1. Sample funding offer included with acceptance letter (from 2008)



Fellowship Award Summary Chart

UCR Student ID [REDACTED]

PhD Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology

Provisional residency classification = California Non-resident

The following chart is a summary of the fellowship support offered by the University of California, Riverside. All funding is subject to change and availability.

Begin Fall 2008	Stipend	*ValueTA/GSR salary \$\$	**Fees Paid by Award (Includes Health Insurance)	NRT Paid by Award	Misc Campus Fees to be paid by student	NRT to be paid by student	Total Value of Award
Summer 2008							
Academic Yr. 2008-09	\$17,500	\$5,464	\$9,510.00	\$14,694	\$597.50	\$0.00	\$47,168.00
Summer 2009							
Academic Yr. 2009-10		\$14,240	\$9,216.00	N/A	\$597.50	California residency established	\$23,456.00
Summer 2010							
Academic Yr. 2010-11		\$15,382	\$9,216.00	N/A	\$597.50	N/A	\$24,598.00
Summer 2011							
Academic Yr. 2011-12		\$15,382	\$9,216.00	N/A	\$597.50	N/A	\$24,598.00
Summer 2012							
Academic Yr. 2012-13		\$15,382	\$9,216.00	N/A	\$597.50	N/A	\$24,598.00
Summer 2013							

Total Value of Award = \$144,418.00

*Dependent upon departmental needs, titles of academic appointments may vary. However, the salary commitment would not be less than indicated.

** Fees paid by the academic award (Teaching Assistantship or Graduate Student Researcher) are a benefit of employment. Should you decline the academic appointment there is no guarantee that your fees will be paid from another source.

Key: NRT = Non-Resident Tuition
 TA = Teaching Assistantship
 GSR = Graduate Student Researcher

Student Housing/Cost of Living in Riverside:
 UCR is committed to providing housing to meet the needs of graduate students. We offer numerous types of affordable housing that include many desirable amenities and are close to campus. Riverside is one of the fastest growing communities in Southern California, but retains a cost of living index that is significantly lower than many other California metropolitan areas.

All Amounts in US Dollars
2/13/08

Figures 2 and 3 are taken from the annual report on graduate programs (fall 2007) from Graduate Division, University of California, Riverside.

Figure 2.

Average and Median Elapsed Time to Degree in Years
for Majors in Natural & Agricultural Sciences
for PhDs Awarded Summer 1998 to Spring 2007

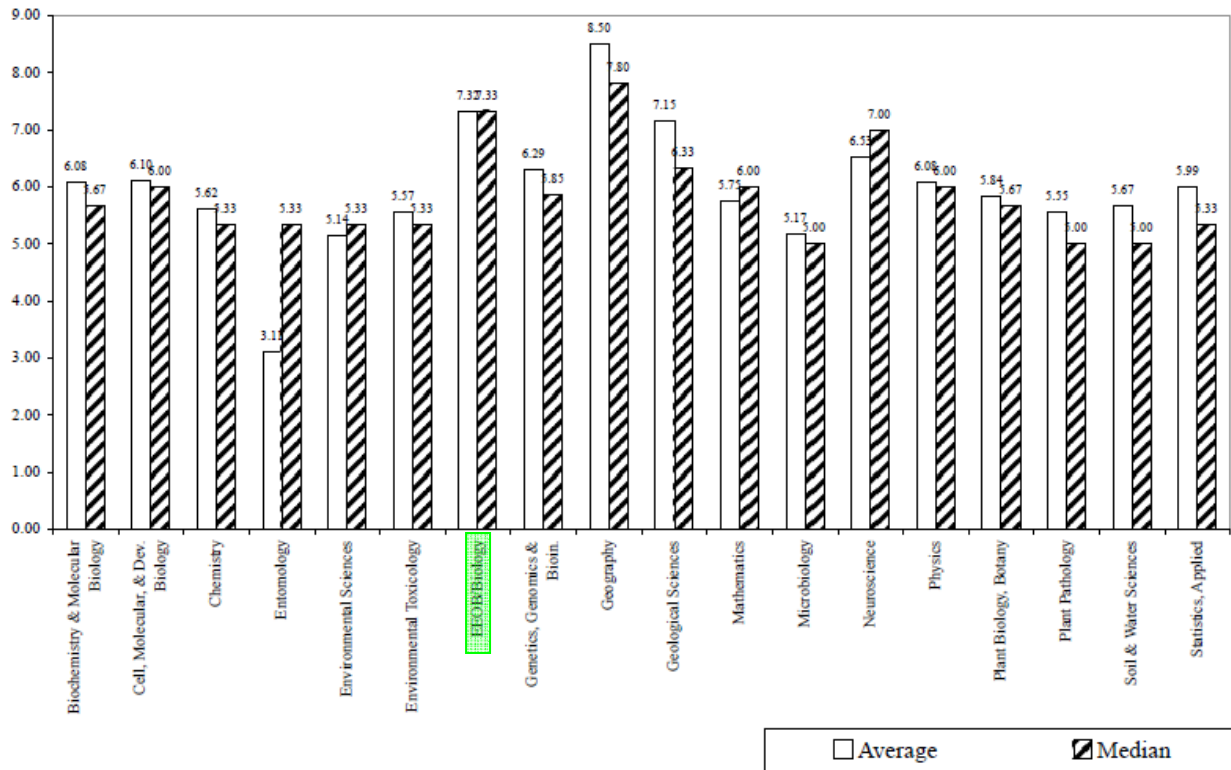


Figure 3.

Average and Median Elapsed Time to Degree in Years for Majors in the
College of Natural and Agricultural Sciences
for Master's Degrees Awarded Summer 1998 to Spring 2007

