Biochemistry and Biophysics Graduate Program Introduction

Wednesday, February 17, 9:00-10:00 am
• Welcome
• Professor Kristen Johansen – the Roy J. Carver Department of Biochemistry, Biophysics and Molecular Biology (BBMB)
• Professor Richard Honzatko – the graduate programs in Biochemistry and Biophysics
• Collin O’Leary – the BBMB Graduate Learning Community (GLC)
• Connie Garnett – what the program and ISU offers graduate students

Meeting Notes
This meeting was not recorded as planned, as I forgot to hit the record button (a human not technology failure). What follows are my notes for your information. Thank you, Connie Garnett

Connie Garnett: Welcome. This meeting will give you an introduction to the program and, along with the other events planned over the next two days, should give you the information you need to know about our graduate programs.

Presenters:

Professor Kristen Johansen is the Chair of the Department (Roy J. Carver Professor and Department Chair of Biochemistry, Biophysics and Molecular Biology - BBMB.) She has been the department chair for over five years and is also a researcher. (She corrected me that it has been more than five years, coming up on six years - CG.)

Professor Johansen talked about the BBMB labs and facilities housed in the Molecular Biology Building, and the award to BBMB in 2012 from the Carver Trust that helps support research, including graduate education. Outside of research, students have opportunities for their professional development at ISU, including the Future Faculty program offered by the Center for Excellence in Teaching (CELT). She talked about the active undergraduate and graduate student learning communities, and about the upcoming Stupka Symposium in April. This event is organized by the undergraduate students and graduate students also participate in the event.

Professor Richard Honzatko is the Director of the graduate programs in Biochemistry and Biophysics and the Chair of the Recruitment and Selections Committees - so everyone should be extra nice to him.

Professor Honzatko talked about plans for this year’s pool of applicants and final offers. The program received over 150 applications, and from those applications, 45 applicants were invited to the recruitment event. Everyone invited to the recruitment has the potential to be considered for an offer. However, the program has funding to make offers to around 15 people, with the assumption that 50% will accept, which would mean a total class of about 8 who may accept. Eight is also the minimum class size for a graduate level course.
The fall semester begins in August and ends in December. Offers to the first group of recruits will go out next week, and based on who accepts, more offers will be made if needed to try to have a cohort of 8 students for the fall. Those receiving an offer have until April 15 to respond (a date agreed to by all universities), but if a student is ready to make their decision, the sooner we receive notification the better. This is important especially for international students, as the visa process can take time. Some offers may go out after the April 15 deadline if necessary. All applicants will receive a letter by the first week in May on the status of their application.

There are a number of opportunities to pursue interests outside of your studies. ISU has a large number of student organizations for all special interest groups. Professor Honzatko was once in a curling club, where he competed with his wife and a couple of graduate students, he roped into joining with him, and their team played against a Canadian team.

Collin O’Leary is a Ph.D. candidate in Biochemistry in the Walter Moss lab. He has been a peer leader in the BBMB Graduate Learning Community (GLC) and was the BBMB senator for the Graduate and Professional Scholar Senate (GPSS).

Collin talked about the BBMB Graduate Learning Community (GLC), which began in 2013 and is run by the students, with the help of a faculty, Professor Reuben Peters and Connie. The basis of the GLC is to help students for professional development explore careers options outside academia. With the help of the GLC, students complete their Individual Development Plan (IDP), a self-assessment tool developed by the National Science Foundation and AAAS, when they first start the program. The results are meant to guide the student’s professional and career development and interest topics are used by the GLC to plan seminars and workshops.

Collin was also a senator in the GPSS for a few years, having passed that role on to another graduate student, Phil Dershwitz, this year. The GPSS is a student run senate that advocates for students on campus, and he invites anyone interested to consider becoming a senator. The GPSS has a significant budget to help support student travel to meetings and for other things. Each department must have a GPSS senator to have access to travel grants.

Connie Garnett, the Graduate Program Coordinator for BBMB.

Connie gave an overview of the graduate program: Admitted PhD rotations students start in the fall semester (which starts mid-August) and have three program-funded lab rotations and are expected to be placed in a research group for spring semester (which starts in January). During the first year, students complete their core courses in biochemistry and molecular biophysics, and attend weekly department seminars during the fall and spring, along with doing research for credit. In addition, students will take 8 credits (around 3-4 courses) of specialty courses, which can be completed by the end of the second year. There is also an advanced seminar course every year after the first year, where students review and present recent publications, or do what the course instructor has designed for the class.
There are three exams each Ph.D. must pass to earn the degree, and the program helps students remain on track to complete these milestones in a timely manner. The first exam is a Department exam, called the ORPE (Oral Research Proposal Exam), given after the first year, followed by The Graduate College’s preliminary oral exam after the second year, and, when the student is ready to graduate, the final oral exam. The program has an annual review of student progress, which is the basis for renewing support, to ensure students remain on track and are doing well in their research and academics.

Funding provided in the form of an assistantship that pays a monthly stipend, provides free individual health insurance, and 100% tuition scholarship (MS students receive 50% tuition scholarship).

Attendees had a couple of questions:
How are rotations chosen? They are selected by the student two weeks after arrival in the fall, and are based on which faculty are looking for a new student and have the funding to support them. We don’t often know until the summer which faculty has the funding and will take a new student, so students who are admitted for the fall are given the list of available faculty for their rotations just prior to arrival. Following the rotation period, both the student and rotation faculty decide which student is a good match for their lab placement.

Does funding support me for the entire program to degree? Yes, faculty that take new students, can provide support through to their degree. If funded becomes limited, students can also have a teaching assistantship in BBMB. In fact, teaching is a requirement of the program. Professor Honzatko said that in his 39 years in BBMB, they have never had difficulty finding a way to support a student in good standing pursuing their degree.

What the program and ISU offers graduate students:

• World class faculty and research facilities
• Financial support and benefits
• Diverse and active student community
• Student resources, including student wellness program and recreation services
• Lively and enriching entertainment and cultural life
• Job placement. Graduates highly sought after in academia and industry