Dean’s Response to the Program Review Committee’s Final Report  
Department of Physics and Astronomy  
January 16, 2001

The Physics Department makes important contributions to the College and the University in teaching, research, and service. At the undergraduate level, a small faculty offers courses that play an important role in general education and serve a small number of Physics majors as well as students in a variety of other majors. Through the Planetarium, the Department operates a successful outreach program to students in the public schools and the general public. During the past decade, external funding and research productivity have increased, although the successes in these areas have been concentrated among too few faculty members.

The Program Review Committee’s Final Report calls attention to these accomplishments. However, it also finds opportunities for improvement. These include designing a more distinctive major and publicizing it to prospective students, using assessment data to guide changes in pedagogy and curriculum, devoting careful attention to the Department’s research foci, and developing an attractive MAT that serves the needs of in-service teachers.

The document prepared by the Chair of the Physics Department offers a critical yet constructive response to the PRC’s Final Report. The points he makes are important to have on the record and relevant to discussions of the Program’s future.

I concur with the findings and recommendations of the Program Review Committee, subject to the following stipulations:

● I understand the PRC’s recommendation to develop an applied physics focus to be illustrative rather than prescriptive. What is essential is that the Department take a careful look at its undergraduate major, make it more distinctive, and redouble its efforts to recruit a critical mass of majors. In order to focus its discussions, I ask the Department to prepare—in consultation with the College Office—a coherent plan for the major by September 15, 2001. As it proceeds, the Department should not work in isolation, but consider ways it can collaborate with other science departments as well as with non-science departments to create options and promotional events and materials that will be attractive to prospective undergraduates.

● With respect to differential workloads within the Department, I ask that the Chair provide a clear, brief statement of current faculty workload policies, elaborating briefly on the statement with respect to the work loads of tenure track faculty included in his response to the PRC’s Final Report (p. 5). This statement can form the basis for discussions between the Department and the College Office about teaching loads within the Department.
The PRC is concerned that the Department may be attempting to support too many research emphases, asked that it reconsider its current research foci, and report a plan for future research directions to the Vice Provost for Research by the end of the Spring semester 2001. After discussions with the Vice Provost for Research, we believe that the Department’s current research foci are appropriate. However, we believe that the research focus in materials science must be more narrowly tailored to expressly support the work of the Center for Photochemical Sciences—especially its initiatives in nanometric photochemical sciences. This will focus the University’s materials science efforts in a program in which we have a proven record of success and significant opportunities for the future—especially in competing for resources made available through the Ohio Plan and OBOR Eminent Scholar and Incentive Fund competitions. It will also allow materials science faculty in Physics greater opportunities to recruit doctoral students to work in their labs.

Future faculty lines should be tied to the Department’s progress in meeting the challenges it faces, as the PRC suggests. Nevertheless, the Department need not wait three years to receive serious consideration for new lines. Indeed, the College intends to designate two new positions in materials science during the next five years—to be filled by faculty who will have their departmental homes in either Chemistry or Physics. Should plans for these positions move forward in the next three years, we must have the freedom to designate a materials science position in Physics. Moreover, since the PRC’s Final Report was written the Department has made great strides toward redesigning the MAT, opening the possibility that the College would give favorable consideration to a new line in Physics pedagogy in the near future.

While acknowledging that there is much work to be done, I am confident that the Physics faculty will embrace the challenges identified by program review. By building on their recent successes and working with the College and the Vice Provost for Research, I am confident the Department can build viable undergraduate and graduate programs and make significant contributions to the University’s research mission.

______________________________________  ___________________
Donald G. Nieman, Dean                  Date

Concurred:

______________________________________  ___________________
John W. Folkins, Provost                 Date