Dr. Belle S. Wheelan  
President  
Commission on Colleges  
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
1866 Southern Lane  
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097

Dear Dr. Wheelan:

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi continues to expand its academic programs. Following appropriate approvals, the university plans to implement joint M.S. and Ph.D. degree programs in Marine Biology with Texas A&M University and Texas A&M University at Galveston. These interdisciplinary degree programs will link faculty members in related fields at the three campuses and will enable students to take courses offered by the different campuses. A significant strength of the proposed programs is the faculty’s international reputation, scholarly productivity, and external research funding. Additionally, the location of two campuses on the Gulf of Mexico provides excellent opportunities for research. Prospective students have expressed strong interest in the marine biology programs on these campuses.

In 2006, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi requested preliminary authority to participate in the joint programs. This request was approved by the Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) Board of Regents that year and by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in April 2007. THECB and TAMUS administrators then scheduled a site visit by external consultants to assess the capabilities of the three institutions to deliver a high-quality doctoral program. The consultants issued a favorable report. In March 2008, the TAMUS Board of Regents will formally consider approval of the joint MS and PhD degree programs involving the three campuses. Following consideration and approval by the TAMUS Board of Regents, THECB approval is required. Upon receipt of these approvals, the proposed implementation date for the programs is fall 2008.

We have reviewed the policy statement on Substantive Change for Accredited Institutions of the Commission on Colleges (January 2007) and have concluded that adding the Ph.D. in Marine Biology (a fifth doctoral degree) is not the “initiation of a program at a more advanced level than currently approved.” Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi is already accredited at Level VI, the category for institutions offering four or more doctoral degrees.

We do not believe that establishing the new doctorate represents “expanding at current degree level (significant departure from current programs).” Instead, the proposed PhD in Marine Biology and the existing PhD in Coastal and Marine System Science will complement each other. Both programs will be housed in the same college and will share certain faculty members, course offerings, and resources. Like the existing program, the marine biology doctorate will be associated with campus research units such as the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies and the Center for Coastal Studies.
Establishing the new joint Ph.D. and M.S. degree programs in Marine Biology, however, may qualify as a substantive change under the category of “initiating programs/courses offered through contractual agreement or consortium.” The degrees will be awarded by Texas A&M University and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Several colleges and departments on three campuses will participate in the interdisciplinary program:

Texas A&M University
  College of Science, Department of Biology
  College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Science
  College of Geosciences, Department of Oceanography
Texas A&M University at Galveston
  Departments of Marine Biology and Marine Science
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
  College of Science and Technology, Department of Life Sciences

The program will be administered and governed under Texas A&M University’s Administrative Framework for Interdisciplinary Programs. Oversight will be provided by an Administrative Council composed of a Council of Participating Deans, plus the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Vice President for Research. The Administrative Council will meet annually to ensure that adequate personnel and resources are available to the program.

An internal advisory board, composed of participating department heads (or designees), will meet annually, or as needed, to provide departmental input to the Administrative Council, the Interdisciplinary Program Chair and Co-Chairs, and participating graduate faculty.

The participating Interdisciplinary Marine Biology graduate faculty will form a Faculty Executive Committee, including one faculty member from each of the participating departments. Additionally, all participating graduate faculty members will elect a Chair from one of the campuses and two Co-Chairs, representing the other two campuses, with approval of the Council of Participating Deans. The Chair and the Co-Chairs will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the program, but will be responsible to the Council of Participating Deans.

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi will maintain control of the degrees that it awards. As stated in the degree proposal, students enrolling through our campus “will follow the well-established rules and guidelines for graduate education at TAMUCC.” They will have to meet the graduate degree requirements as published in the university’s graduate catalog.

If the arrangements described above constitute the initiation of “programs offered through contractual agreement or consortium,” please consider this letter to be notification of a substantive change prior to implementation. We look forward to hearing from you regarding this and to working with the Commission in submitting any further necessary documentation regarding this exciting program.

At this time we would also like to inform you that a future substantive change may be associated with the non-thesis option for the M.S. in Marine Biology. Initially both the M.S. and Ph.D. programs will be implemented without a significant distance education component. In the future, however, students in the non-thesis option may have the option of pursuing a majority of degree requirements through distance learning.
Should these changes to the M.S. in Marine Biology be considered for implementation, they will be the subject of a future letter of notification.

Sincerely,

\[Signature\]

Flavius C. Killebrew
President

/icc

cc: Dr. Anantha Babbili
Dr. David Billeaux
Dr. Harvey Knoll
Dr. Frank Pezold
Ms. Christine Shupala
Dr. Greg Stunz