So Many Departments, So Many Misleading Names…

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In January of our final year, as graduation from undergrad drew near, some of us began to contemplate where our Bachelor’s degree in science would take us. The next most logical step was graduate school. But what kind of graduate degree did we really want? Surely it would have to be something in line with our research interest. Faced with numerous graduate departments, it seemed really overwhelming to choose where we would like to begin our next level of higher learning. I was instantly repelled by many programs. The problem was not because I did not think these were excellent programs, but because I thought the names of these programs were rather vague and did not specify the myriad of research interests these departments were supposed to represent.

Let’s begin with the Department of Medical Biophysics, as I was rather confused by the title of it. What exactly does it suggest? Answering biological questions with physics? Face it, the reason we turned to biology was because some of us just could not grasp the physical sciences, due to certain limitations in thinking in abstract terms. But as I did more research about this program, I found a large number of research areas from the genetics of cancer to protein folding. I also found out there were many other basic sciences as well, such as molecular and cellular biology, which is really what I wanted to do.

Then I went on to explore other departments just to see how they name themselves. It turned out that the distinction between Biochemistry and Medical Genetics was rather blurry. These two departments have many programs in common. Heck, I had no idea there was even a structural biology component in the Department of Medical Genetics. Well, to an average person browsing through their options at one of the top medical research universities in the country, Medical Genetics sounded a bit like hmm…Medical Genetics? I wondered how the structural biology part would fit in. To me, it leaned toward Medical Biophysics. Other examples of such fuzzy distinction are signal transduction and regulation of gene expression, both of which seem central to each department. Oh, and did I mention I found a couple of labs in the Medical Genetics department that conduct immunology research? Anyway, I think the only difference between the Departments of Immunology and Medical Genetics is probably the degree to which they use model organisms. What is the point of naming yourself Biochemistry or Medical Genetics if the two departments study almost the same things, using basically the same biotechniques?

I think it is time to establish a unified school, which I like would like to call “Graduate School of Biological Sciences”. Seeing as these departments have more in common than some of us like to admit, it could make the admission process a bit easier by using a centralized system. Under this umbrella title, students of biology would be able to look through a list of programs offered and decide which area of life science they would like to study. Those interested in molecular and cellular biology would no longer be under the impression that they are here to study physics because they can take comfort in knowing they are here to study biological sciences. What’s more, people interested in structural biology would no longer have to choose between seemingly different departments such as biochemistry and medical genetics because only one place offers structural biology - the School of Biological Sciences.

I don’t see why our school has to make things complicated for everybody. I believe my idea is feasible because many American universities have done so. Another advantage of a centralized process is that there is only one application fee. Having different departments integrated into one system would also bring the scientific community closer together.