26 August 1993

Dr. Russ Lidman
Interim Provost
Campus

Dear Russ,

Thank you for sending me the U. W. proposal for a graduate program in Molecular and Cellular Biology. It would be foolish and presumptuous of me to give this proposal anything but approval; the U. of W. has long been noted for its excellence in molecular and cellular biology, and many of the people who will be members of this program are highly respected world-wide for their research. It comes as a bit of a surprise, in fact, to see that there was not already a graduate program with this title; students have evidently been earning their degrees in the separate departments of Genetics, Microbiology, Biochemistry, and so on.

I would add only one thing. A few years ago, we were sent a similar proposal from Washington State for a program in Genetic Engineering (although it may not have borne quite that title)--that is, a program to train people in essentially the same research techniques but with the aim of applying them in agriculture, medicine, and so on. At that time, my comment was that this was clearly going to be an excellent program, except for one thing: At no time were students ever going to address the serious ethical and social problems raised by the technology they were learning. We should have learned our lessons by now; it is incredibly dangerous to allow enthusiastic scientists and engineers to play with increasingly powerful tools if they are not, at the same time, strongly aware of the possible effects of their work. Science and engineering get to be enormous fun--"funner 'n hell," as someone put it--and it is easy for investigators to get so wrapped up in the toys that they forget the dangers and fail to recognize the rational boundaries they should put on their work. The U. W. proposal, while directed toward basic research, steps onto the same moral ground. I therefore propose that if Evergreen is to have any critical role in evaluating this new proposal we should raise this question: Where will students in this program address these ethical and social issues? I would propose that this program conduct an annual Seminar in Ethical and Social Issues of Biological Research, that it should be conducted on a rotating basis by all members of the faculty in small teams, and that every student in the program should be required to take this seminar.

Sincerely,

Burton S. Guttman
Member of the Faculty (Biology)