Comments on PSM Name for University Council

Greg Lang, speaking with the voice of Council Member Haddish Melakeberhan (away in Kenya) and as a member of the University Committee on Graduate Studies

Faculty in the Department of Horticulture, including several Distinguished faculty and a member of the National Academy of Sciences, have raised a number of concerns regarding the name proposed for the merged departments of Crop & Soil Sciences with Plant Pathology.

Within CANR, Horticulture was not consulted by the merged department during the name consideration process, hence the concerns I will raise here were not addressed by the merged department faculties during their consideration of appropriate names.

Obviously, nor were these concerns raised prior to that department’s recommendation to Dean Buhler nor consequently, prior to his recommendation to Provost Wilcox.

While I am in the awkward position of now raising these concerns at this stage of the process, we believe that they merit significant consideration given the potential impacts across CANR as well as possibly the College of Natural Sciences.

The overriding concern is the proposed adoption of a new name that is overly broad and infringes on several other departments, specifically the implications of the term Plant Sciences in Plant, Soil, and Microbial Sciences.

For a merger of Crop and Soil Sciences with Plant Pathology, one of the various alternative logical names might have been Crop, Soil, and Microbial Sciences, rather than Plant SMS.

For those of you thinking Plant Science, Crop Science, aren’t they similar? Only if you would accept that Michigan State University could just as easily be called the East Lansing campus of University of Michigan! Differentiation does matter!

Crop Science is a specific area of the plant sciences that is professionally recognized around the world: there are Crop Science Societies of America, of Australia, of Asia, of Africa, International Crop Science Society, Journal of Crop Science, Journal of Crop Science and Biotechnology.

Our peer land grant institutions with Crop Science in their departmental names include: Cornell, Penn State, Ohio State, North Carolina State, Illinois, Washington State, Oregon State, Georgia, Texas A&M, Colorado State, Virginia Tech.

Other peer land grants with similar departments have retained the alternative professional agricultural science name Agronomy, including: Wisconsin, Purdue, Nebraska, Kansas State, Iowa State, and Florida.

Institutions that have adopted variations of the broad name Plant Sciences to reflect an amalgamation of diverse faculty simply are not in our institutional peer group: Cal State
Fresno, Fort Valley State, Southern Illinois at Carbondale, Mississippi, Tennessee, Delaware, South Dakota State, Utah State, Maine. (the lone exception being University of California-Davis)

MSU identifies the Plant Sciences as a cornerstone area of excellence, as reflected by many departments across two Colleges, being comprised of many scientists with specific areas of plant science expertise: in addition to Crop & Soil Sciences, and Plant Pathology, there is Horticulture, Forestry, Plant Biology, and Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. This excellence in the multi-departmental Plant Sciences at MSU has longstanding and continuing recognition nationally and internationally.

Across these multiple departments, there is a highly successful, coordinated initiative for cross-departmental graduate recruitment in the Plant Sciences.

There is on-going work to develop a cross-departmental undergraduate curriculum in Plant Science.

The new $42 million building just opened this month to promote excellence in Plant Science research, now called the Molecular Plant Science Building, is comprised of faculty from Horticulture, Plant Biology, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, as well as from Crop and Soil Science and Plant Pathology.

While it is appropriate for a faculty within a merged department to determine an appropriate identity and name, it must be reasonable relative to other university considerations.

In Horticulture, there are faculty involved in plant breeding and genetics, organic production, natural products chemistry, marketing, international agriculture, and molecular biology. While many may not call themselves horticulturists, by and large they work in areas of science that relate to horticulture. It would be an unreasonable infringement on other units and faculty at MSU if the department proposed to change its name to:
Horticulture, Plant Genetics, and Marketing
Horticulture, Plant Breeding, and International Agriculture
or Horticulture, Natural Products Chemistry, and Organic Agriculture

In conclusion, the international strength of MSU in the Plant Sciences lies in retaining expert faculty across multiple departments appropriately identified with specific disciplinary strengths.

To approve an overly broad name implying Plant Sciences within a single department, which could lead to undergraduate student, graduate student, granting agency, and/or donor confusion about Plant Science representation on campus, would reduce MSU’s competitive position and infringe upon existing key departments within the plant sciences.

Thank you.