

Course Focus

BIOB 160 - Principles of Living Systems - Luther Talbert



This course introduces students to basic cellular and molecular biology. In fact, that was the name of the course before the current ambiguous title was assigned in 2010. The first half of the semester focuses on Cell Biology and is typically taught by faculty external to PSPP. Genetics is the focus of the second half. Drs. Sharrock and Talbert in PSPP currently enjoy this assignment. There are typically 150-250 students in the class, some of whom have an interest in genetics and are willing to expend a certain amount of intellectual energy to become acquainted with the subject. Seriously, the introduction to cellular biology and genetics is interesting for many of the students, and they are usually fun to interact with. Teaching the class sometimes even helps the instructors remember that biology is interesting, sometimes amazing, and in fact almost unbelievable the way life works. The instructors may even be reminded why they chose biology as a career path in the first place.

Teaching a large class has its own challenges, which a retired colleague, whom we will refer to as RS, likened to fishing on a big river. Standing beside the Madison and viewing the river from bank to bank makes it hard to know where to throw your worm (or your 'fly' if you are a more sophisticated angler). However, if you look at the river as a series of creek-sized corridors, you see the same fish habitat as you would on small creek. By analogy, surveying a class of 200 as a whole also presents a challenge in focus, which can be overcome by seeing the class as a series of smaller blocks. This gives the instructor a place to focus attention – a target for the lure to see if anyone will rise to the surface. I suppose one difference is that when the fish become inattentive you can go to the cooler for a cold beer, while it is frowned upon to pack up and go to the bar when students are inattentive. Fortunately, complete absence of focus from students only sometimes happens.

The instructors for this class have an added incentive to make sure students learn something, which is that they will see many of them later in Genetics. A surprising observation is that retention time for certain subjects, such as meiosis, does not always extend much beyond the final exam! If that far! However, one hopes that the introduction received in BIOB160 makes higher level classes more sensible for those students that continue to study biology. BIOB160 may also be the last biology course for many students, who may better understand genetic and cell biology topics that arise in society and their own lives. These are the primary

reasons that the class has a high enrollment. Incidentally, BIOB160 is required for many majors.