

University of Arkansas
Department of Biological Sciences
BISC Undergraduate Program Assessment (BIOL BA, BIOL BS)
Report: Academic Year 2023-2024

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A. General Background:

Recognizing that the combined BIOL-BA and BIOL-BS programs constitute 1191 undergraduate majors (2023 enrollment report: BA=164 and BS=1027) based on data from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment and approximately 188 (Range from 2013-2023: 158-253) graduating seniors per academic year, sub-sampling our students seemed the most effective way to assess our program. Our assessment utilizes a sub-sampling of our graduating seniors that are pre-medical students taking the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). This is advantageous because the national MCAT scores are published, providing a benchmark for evaluating our program relative to others nationally. Since both the B.A. and B.S. Biology degrees requires four core courses (Cell Biology, General Genetics, Evolutionary Biology and General Ecology), our assessment considers these degrees together. We provide cumulative data to establish a longitudinal assessment of our program and our general education courses.

B. Outcome Reporting:

Program Goals:

1. Foster the scientific curiosity of students about biological sciences.
2. Communicate the current state of knowledge and technology to students.
3. Nurture critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities.
4. Enhance students' communication skills for communicating scientific ideas.
5. Prepare students to achieve academic and professional success.

Student Learning Outcomes:

The following learning outcomes mirror those proposed in several recent reviews of biology pedagogy. They apply to both the introductory biology course and to completion of the department's common core of courses, cell biology, genetics, evolutionary biology, and ecology.

1. Show that you can understand data that support the hypothesis that all organisms are genealogically related including the recognition that all organisms are cellular and that they share the same basic genetic system.
2. Show that you can understand data that support the hypothesis that all organisms need energy and a source of building blocks to maintain themselves, grow, and reproduce.
3. Show that you can understand data that support the hypothesis that all organisms use information to maintain themselves, grow, and reproduce, and that that information can both be stored genetically and be received from the environment.
4. Show that you can understand data that support the hypothesis that all organisms interact both with other organisms and with the physical components of their environment and that these interactions affect their ability to maintain themselves, grow, and reproduce.
5. Show that you can distinguish data-supported interpretations of biological systems from anecdotal information.
6. Show that you can understand and use quantitative methods for explaining how biological systems work. This will include graph interpretation, table interpretation, and basic mathematical formulas.
7. Show that you can apply the information that has been presented during the course to novel situations.

Subsampling with the MCAT:

The Department of Biological Sciences graduated students with either a BA (75) or BS (111) degree in 2022 and either a BA (80) and BS (108) in 2023. Many these students are declared premedical students and take the MCAT exam as an entry-level test for Medical School aptitude. The department has access to summary statistics for our students that participate in the MCAT and applied to medical school. Importantly, the statistical summaries of the MCAT results nationally are published for all students that applied to medical school. The scoring system for the MCAT changed in April 2015, so our assessment includes scores based on this scoring strategy. Importantly, the combined mean scores on the MCAT range from 472-528, with an average of 501.6 over all students. This provides a mechanism by which to compare UA Biology students with other Biology students nationwide that participated in the exam. Table 1 shows the data for MCAT scores from 2015 to 2023 for U.S. and U.A. students only. These data do not differentiate between Biology BA and BS degree students; however, as indicated above both degrees share identical core biology courses, so we take the data to represent the quality of performance for both degree programs regarding our biology core classes. Moreover, most of the AY2023 Biology majors are seeking a B.S. degree (~57.4%) with the B.A. (~42.5%) representing a lesser contribution to the overall result.

Table 1: Mean MCAT scores for UA Biology Majors (BIOL Majors), U.S. Biology Majors (BIOL U.S.), and Overall U.S. scores from 2015-2023. University of Arkansas student information is shaded. NA=not available.

YEAR	# BIOL Students	Accepted med schl	BIOL Majors Average	BIOL U.S.*	Overall U.S.*
2015	57		502	NA	NA
2016	71		501.8	501.6	501.8
2017	81		502.4	504.5	505.8
2018	79	41	502.8	505.5	505.6
2019	79	47	504	506	506.1
2020	93	46	503.9	506.3	506.4
2021	81	48	502.3	505.9	505.9
2022	74	47	503	506.4	506.5
2023	49	30*	502.2	NA**	NA**

*as of 5/2024

**Not yet available for this application cycle

Based on the national average, BIOL majors (BS and BA combined) performed above the MCAT 2023 median of 501.6 from 2015-2023 (Table 1). While UA BIOL majors are slightly below the national average for BIOL majors and the overall U.S. average, trends in scores over time correlate. While we do not believe there should be a major change in our current curriculum, we will continue to strive for improvement in our current course offerings. Since the new MCAT, implemented in 2015, is strongly focused on critical reasoning skills, our curriculum will continue to improve in this area.

C. Summary:

The BIOL undergraduate assessment continues to reflect positive data based on the MCAT scores, suggesting that our program is effectively serving our undergraduate students. In 2022, we had 74 BIOL majors take the MCAT with an average score of 503 compared to the U.S. BIOL majors average of 506.4. So, we have some room to improve; the goal would be to reach or exceed the national average for BIOL majors.

The slightly lower mean MCAT score for UA BIOL majors compared to US BIOL majors and US MCAT test-takers as a whole does not seem to be a barrier for UA BIOL majors' acceptance to medical school. In all years the UA BIOL acceptance number to medical school has been collected, the percent acceptance ranges from 49.4-63.5% with a mean and median of 56.7 and

59.2%, respectively, which is greater than the national average of 41%. This percentage is a strong indicator of our program's success.

Future directions: We will continue to focus on improving critical thinking skills for our Biology majors. At this time, we do not believe changing the course offerings is necessary, rather a shift in strategy to further develop the ability of our students to analyze data and reach conclusions.